



Issue #37 RRP \$8.95

ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine

BUMPER FICTION ISSUE!

ORIGINAL FICTION BY:

Adam Bales

Lee Battersby

Penny-Anne Beaudoin

David Conyers

Leith Daniel

Thoraiya Dyer

Jason Fischer

Dirk Flinthart

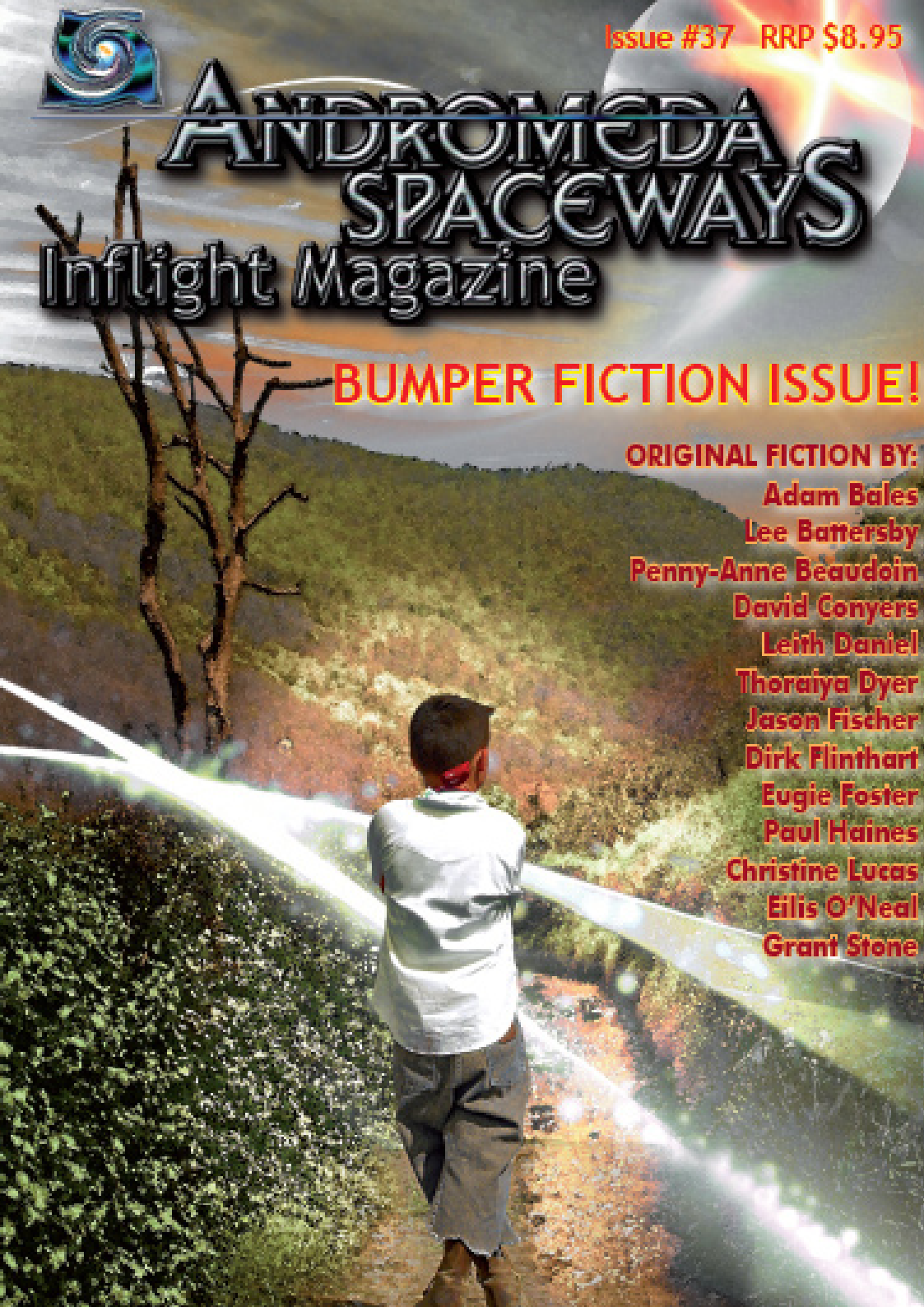
Eugie Foster

Paul Haines

Christine Lucas

Elis O'Neal

Grant Stone



Editorial

...Tehani Wessely

The first thing you'll probably notice about this issue is that it's slightly fatter than usual. That's my fault. I overindulged, yet again, and this time, we simply couldn't squash it down to the usual number of pages. I ummed and aahed over what to do, and then I decided, "To heck with it! Let's give 'em something just a little bit special!" And this IS just a little special, for a great many reasons. Not the least of them being the quality, power and sheer entertainment value of the stories within these pages.

The second thing you may notice, as you begin to read the stories, is that a great many of them deal with loss and change, in a wide variety of incarnations. This was not intentional on my part when I was selecting, but as I was pulling the issue together, I realised that it was quite appropriate, and so I was glad it turned out that way.

Why? Because this is my swansong; my final journey with Andromeda Spaceways, as part of the crew at least. I've been with this lump of space driftwood since the very first foray into the outer galaxies when — way back in 2001 — someone mentioned starting a group to create a new Australian spec fic magazine might be a good idea. I helped build her ships since Day One; procedures, policy and publications all. I've been lucky enough to take the helm on a number of occasions (#4, #16, #27, #31, three Best Of compilations and co-pilot for #36) and from playing Ensign Redshirt at our launch in 2002 through to being First Officer on this last ride in 2008, I've donned so many hats that I know this bucket of bolts back and front. And I love her dearly.

Sadly though, the time has come for me to move on. Work, family, study and new editing opportunities in other Australian small press arenas have finally gained the upper hand. I know I'll miss ASIM and her crew, and I am so grateful for the myriad friendships and author relationships I've formed in the last seven years. Through this "hobby" I've had the privilege to meet

(online and in the “real” world), work with and get to know many of Australia’s premier authors and artists and I’m extremely proud of the small part I may have played in supporting and encouraging those careers. People I’ve met through Andromeda Spaceways now number among my closest friends, and I can’t be grateful enough for those relationships.

ASIM has come a long way since her humble beginnings in 2001. We now slush more than 400 stories a month, with a massive team of folk working behind the scenes. We’ve won awards in many different forums, our stories continue to be widely reprinted, and our authors continue to showcase what really good speculative fiction looks like. It’s not easy to jump ship, but sometimes it happens.

I intend to be a passenger on this space hog for as long as she’ll have me. I hope to see her undertake many more successful journeys in the future with her shiny crew and dedicated cabin staff. Thanks for the ride, Andromeda Spaceways. I’ll miss you.

Tehani Wessely
Editor, Issue 37



**The ever evolving ASIM crew
2002 to 2008**



ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS Inflight Magazine

VOL. 7/ISSUE 1

ISSUE 37

FICTION

- 04 This Is Not My Story Dirk Flinthart
15 DominionChristine Lucas
19 Drowning in the Air Penny-Anne Beaudoin
30 Love the Tattoo Leith Daniel
33 Amygdala, My Love Lee Battersby
39 Under Waves and Over Grant Stone
49 Map. Adam Bales
52 The Unicorn in the Tower Eilis O'Neal
63 Rick Gets a Job Jason Fischer
71 The Better To... Eugie Foster
85 Terraformer David Conyers
97 Night Heron's Curse Thoraiya Dyer
114 Failed Experiments from the Frontier: The Pumpkin Paul Haines

REGULAR FEATURES

- 118 Contributor biographies
120 Acknowledgements

Editor, Issue 37	Tehani Wessely	<p>Copyright 2008 Andromeda Spaceways Publishing Co-op Ltd c/- Simon Haynes, PO Box 127 Belmont, Western Australia, 6984. http://www.andromedaspaceways.com Published bimonthly by Andromeda Spaceways Publishing Co-op. RRP A\$8.95. Subscription rates are available from the website. Andromeda Spaceways Publishing Co-op actively encourages literary and artistic contributions. Submissions should be made online by emailing: asimsubmissions@gmail.com Submission guidelines are available from the website. Please read them. ISSN 1446-781X</p>
Subeditor	Simon Petrie	
Editor-in-chief	Robbie Matthews	
Layout	Tehani Wessely	
Subscriptions	Tehani Wessely	
Advertising	Edwina Harvey	
Cover Art	Dan Skinner	

This Is Not My Story

...Dirk Flinthart

This is not my story. You don't want to hear my story. You've heard it before. It's the story of the missed opportunity, the lost moment, the chance that will never come again, and it's been told many times over by writers better than I. You don't need that story.

There's another story I'd like to offer you, but I can't. It isn't mine to tell, and anyway, it isn't finished yet.

Instead, I'll give you Janey's story, or what I know of it. Janey wouldn't mind, and some of it is my story too, and it's got a proper ending and everything, so maybe I can publish it. Or maybe not. Maybe I'll have to wait until somebody asks me the question they always ask, sooner or later. Then I'll tell them Janey's story, and laugh, and sign a book or a shirt or something, and they'll go away and tell their friends what a character I am in real life.

That's the way it works.

Janey was quick and Janey was clever and Janey was slim and sharp as the minnows that lived in the little creek which ran through the wooded gully between our houses out on the edge of town when I was seven years old and the world was still in front of me. Boys and girls didn't play together much at that age, but there was nobody else to play with, or to taunt us for playing together. Besides, she liked Batman, and she had a real Swiss Army knife from her father and she knew the names of the stars that crept out by twilight when we hid from baths and supper. Her name was Jane Clayforth, and she lived with her gram and grampa in an old house on wooden posts, with a cast iron cockerel on the roof that showed the wind which way to blow.

Janey was an inventor, like me. Or at least, like I wanted to be, back then. Didn't everyone? I used to pull apart broken radios and clocks, cassette recorders and old motors. I'd strip them down, piece by piece, and put all the parts into carefully labelled boxes under my bed, which my mother would eventually empty into the garbage. Sometimes I'd gather up the most interesting-looking components and hook them together in ways that looked cool. I was forbidden anything more powerful than a double-A battery after my Cosmo-Plasmic Pulse Signaller blew the house fuses when I plugged it into a socket in the laundry.

Janey's inventions were different. Sometimes they worked.

The first time I saw it happen, we were at school. We usually didn't have much to do with each other during school. We were in different classes. If we'd tried to spend time together there would have been all those chants of '*boyfriend, girlfriend*'. I was surprised when Janey came up to me on the back oval, near the cricket pitch.

I was waiting with a bunch of other boys. We were going to do some extra football training with Mr Fleet, the new phys ed teacher. We all liked Mr Fleet. Everyone did. He was kind and clever, and had a way of making jokes and conversation that made you feel like you were grown up and worth paying attention to.

When Janey turned up, she was wearing an outlandish pair of horn-rim glasses that made her look like some kind of insect. I recognised them at once.

"Hey! You've got my X-ray specs!"

"Shh," she said, without looking at me. "They're not yours any more. You threw them away."

"They didn't work," I said. The picture in the comic book showed a surprised kid looking at the bones of his hand. The advertisement promised you could "Look right through walls, doors, even clothing!" and there was a picture of a shocked-looking girl. I was really excited when they came in the post, but all they ever did for me was make things look blurry, and give me a headache.

"I fixed them," said Janey. "Sort of. Hold on. Let me activate the alpha-wave field." Batman had built an alpha-wave field just last issue, so I knew what she was talking about. She tweaked a knob on a little panel on her belt, and handed me the glasses. "Try them now."

At first, everything was still blurry, but as I looked around, I began to notice things. People, mostly. They were...well, the same...and different. Michael Whitby, the class bully: with the glasses on, he looked somehow bigger, and nastier. He looked the way he ought to look in real life, the way a person who likes knocking down little kids and stepping on their fingers really should look. And Shaun Browning, who could run so fast that not even the big kids in grade five could catch him: he looked swift, and lean, like a cheetah.

It wasn't much of a difference, really. If you didn't know what you were looking for, you might think it was just your imagination. Just to be sure, I took the glasses off and had another look. Everything seemed normal. Then I put them back on, and watched the people around me change.

"Wow," I said, as quietly as I could through my excitement. "These are great, Janey. Have you looked at Peter Thorpe? He looks—"

"Stupid," she said. "Like a cave-man. I know." Then she giggled. "And Miss Barwick looks like one of those swimsuit girls in the Archie comics. But that's not why I brought them here. Have another look around."

Because the effect was so subtle, it took a minute or two before I saw what Janey wanted me to see.

It was Mr Fleet. There was something *wrong* with him. Through Janey's glasses, he looked sort of disjointed, disconnected, like a marionette with tangled strings. His face seemed stretched and taut, and it moved wrong, as though it was just a latex mask pulled tight over something that wasn't really human-shaped. It was fascinating.

It was horrible.

"Are you okay?" It was Janey's voice.

I turned my head, trying to look anywhere except at Mr Fleet, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw something brilliant, blazing with white light like a captive star. As it came fully into view, I saw it had a human shape — a shape I knew. “Oh,” I said, and the glory of revelation drove everything else from my mind for an instant. “Oh, Janey! You’re *beautiful!*”

“Shut up,” she said, and snatched the glasses off my face, but I glimpsed a pleased grin as I stood blinking in confusion. Then the grin vanished, and Janey jerked her head just a tiny fraction in the direction of Mr Fleet. “Did you see?”

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get away from here.”

We fled.

Mr Fleet was gone less than six months later. Nobody said anything to us kids at the school, but there was...talk. Two of the older boys also left the school, and didn’t come back. No explanation was given.

I didn’t play football at school that year.

Where do you get all your ideas?

That’s the question they always ask. You were wondering, right?

It’s easy. There’s a place in my head where I can go. A part of me that remembers what it used to be like. Hiding under the covers, breathless with fear of the long-armed thing muttering and grumbling from within the shadow in the bedroom cupboard. Riding upon a wild unicorn beneath a snapping, soaring banner of brilliant silk while trumpets called for daring and battle and courage. Blazing between the stars on a column of searing atomic fire as the missiles and the death-rays tore the very fabric of space all around.

I remember. That’s where the ideas come from. I close my eyes and I ignore the television and the Internet and the stereo and the calendar and the bills and the letters and the cellphone, and I remember. It’s not the same as when Janey lived across the gully and we could *be* there, when we lived in those bright and glorious worlds, but at least I can remember.

So this is what I do: I gather the brightest jewels of memory, and polish them until they gleam and then I give them to you. But no matter how carefully I choose them, how diligently I polish and shape them, they’re still only broken fragments of fading memories. I’m sorry. I wish I could give you more, but I’m lucky to have anything at all.

After a while, I somehow got the trick of it, and a few of my inventions started to work as well. By that time, our roles had solidified, and the games we played had rules, of a kind. I’d developed an alternate persona named Lincoln Steele. Pretty often he was an officer: Commander Steele. He was everything a hero ought to be. He was smart, tough, courageous, superbly loyal; and he was dashing handsome too.

Link Steele wasn’t a leader, though. He was the brawny, rugged and reliable helpmeet to the indomitable Captain Janey, whose quick wit and daring got the pair of them into and out of trouble on half the worlds of the galaxy. Armed with whatever

unlikely and outlandish devices we happened to have invented lately, we vanquished evil empires and vile aliens, rescued countless prisoners and discovered priceless treasures hidden inside fiendishly booby-trapped labyrinths.

At the end of the gully between our two houses was a kind of paradise for kids like Janey and me. Nowadays it wouldn't be tolerated. An unofficial junkpile full of abandoned cars and forgotten industrial relics is no place for modern kids to play. Our headquarters proper was a kind of cave made by two granite boulders that leaned together next to the tiny creek, and we had a host of hiding places — like the roots of a giant fallen eucalypt that concealed a pit which could only be seen if you were practically on top of it — but it was the junkpile that provided us with the raw material of a thousand adventures.

Day after day, Janey and I remade the world to suit ourselves.

I think the best invention of all was mine: the Mental Telejectors that I made from two motorcycle helmets and a ferocious array of electronics from an old television set. The Mental Telejectors let Janey and I project our minds across space and time, even between the universes, into the minds of other creatures and people wherever we wanted to go. We helped Batman capture the Joker in Gotham city. We raided alongside Robin Hood with the other Merry Men. We even tried to give poor, doomed King Arthur a fighting chance at that last battle against Mordred, but the temptation to play out heroic death scenes of our own kept getting in the way.

It was brilliant.

The summer I built the Mental Telejectors, I turned ten years old, and Janey came to my birthday party. She didn't stay very long, because she never really got along with most of the kids I knew, but she gave me one of those ID bracelets that were popular back then.

"See?" she said, when I unwrapped it and put it on my wrist. "It's engraved and everything."

I turned it over. "Commander Lincoln Steele," I read. "From Captain Janey." I looked at her. "It's fantastic!"

"It's stainless," she said, tapping it with a bitten fingernail. "Solid steel. It'll never rust."

"Solid steel," I said, liking the sound of it. Then I laughed.

Janey got the joke, and giggled. "Solid Steele," she echoed, and rapped at her temple with one knuckle. It became our private salute, and a catchphrase that lasted the rest of the summer between us. It was the greatest summer of my whole life, and nothing I've ever done or been since has been as good.

It was the last summer I ever spent with Janey.

I think it must be the same with everyone who writes these stories. I think we all remember, and we all know what we've lost. Why else would you keep seeing the same story again and again; different names, different authors, but the same sad, lonely idea?

It's that story about growing up and losing the path into the magic kingdom, and maybe catching a glimpse of it again as an adult, way too late to do more than wish and wonder. It comes in many shapes and sizes, but it's always the same: a

metaphorical story about the loss of innocence, the passage into adulthood, and the end of magic.

Or maybe not so metaphorical. How would I know what others remember, after all? They're beautiful stories, in any case. Kelly Link, Harlan Ellison, Ray Bradbury, H G Wells — even J M Barrie and his Peter Pan: the same story in a thousand guises.

They're great stories. They're much better than mine. That's why I'm telling you Janey's story instead.

Janey was working on a surprise. Spurred by my success with the Mental Telejectors, she was devising a special invention, one that she said would take us farther than we'd ever gone before. She put in a lot of work on it, and dropped so many hints that giving her my bad news was almost impossible to bear.

"I have to go away on a music camp," I told her one evening, after I found my courage. We were perched in the branches of the big fallen eucalypt. "For a month."

Janey's face fell. "A whole month? But you don't even like music!"

"I do, kind of," I said. "Not a whole month's worth, but I do like playing the flute. I don't want to go, though. It's my parents." I was trying not to tell her: my parents said they were worried about me. They felt I was spending too much time playing make-believe games with "that little Clayforth girl". She was nice, they said — but they said a lot of other things too.

"When do you have to go?" She swung her bare feet back and forth, brushing against the tree while we talked. There was a smooth patch on the trunk, where countless conversations had worn the bark clean through.

"Saturday," I told her. "They're making me go Saturday."

"A whole month," she said again. Then she brightened. "Hey, Steele! I've got a better idea. If I work really hard, I can finish the new invention before Saturday. Then we can use it to get away!"

"Get away?" The thought hadn't occurred to me. Of course Janey and I had talked about running away from home. What kid didn't? We'd even half-heartedly tried it a couple of times. "How will it help us do that? Won't we just come back, the way we always do?"

She grinned at me, and shook her shaggy mane of sunstreaked blonde. "Not this time. This is way, way better than the Mental Telejectors, Steele. I wasn't going to tell you until it was ready, but this counts as an emergency. I've been building a space-ship!"

And so, of course, in the failing evening light we had to go down to where the gully opened out and led into the abandoned industrial space on the next block over, and there amidst the old cars and the mysterious, rusting hulks was the *Blazer*, for so Janey had named it.

"It's not finished yet," she warned me, as we clambered over the hull. "It's not far off, though. It runs on fusion power from the hydrogen in water. It's got a gravity drive for planet-hopping, and a null-space drive that will let it go hundreds of time faster than light."

I slid my hand admiringly over the curved metal. "What about defenses?"

“I guessed you’d ask,” she said. “If the Monoclates try anything on the *Blazer*, they’re going to get a nasty shock. Meson shields!”

The Monoclates were our arch-enemies, fiendish aliens from Algol with an impregnable battle-fortress lodged deep within the forbidding, starless wastes of the Galactic Rift. They opposed everything that we stood for, and tried to destroy us at every turn.

“What about guns?” I had to ask.

“Quark Cannons,” said Janey. “With computer targeting, like in *Star Wars*.” She touched the *Blazer* nervously. “So what do you think?”

“Pretty slick,” I said. “The Monoclates won’t know what hit them.”

“So you’ll come with me? You’ll help me finish building the *Blazer* so we can go?”

I can still see her now if I try: slim and strong, with the last of the sunset shining from her eyes as she looked at me. I knew what she wanted me to say, and part of me wanted nothing more, but there was another part of me that thought of my parents and said: *It’s only a month*.

I tried to explain it to her. It wasn’t easy, without using words like ‘strange’ and ‘make-believe’, and I floundered when I tried to tell her about my parents’ ideas.

Janey saved me the trouble. She put her hand over my mouth, and shook her head. “Yeah, okay,” she said. “I get it. Your parents are goons, but you’re going off to this camp anyhow because it will make them happy and then they’ll leave us alone. I still think you’re crazy. I still think we should just take the *Blazer* and go. But I can’t make you do it, and even if I did it wouldn’t work out right. You take that month. I’ll get the *Blazer* ready. When you get back, we’ll go for a trip you’ll never forget.”

“Solid Steele?” I said.

Janey tapped her temple with one knuckle. “Solid Steele,” she replied.

When I returned, a month later, they told me Janey was three weeks dead.

The story could end there. It doesn’t. There’s more to come, but before that, you have to make up your mind. What kind of a story are you reading? Did all these things really happen, or am I simply revisiting the imaginary realms of childhood? Did Janey’s X-Ray glasses reveal Mr Fleet’s true nature, or did they just allow me to accept the messages from my own subconscious about his behaviour? You have to choose. It’s Janey’s story, but you are reading it, recreating it in your head as you go.

If it was a story I’d made up, then Janey would be dead in the bushfire she started, playing with her ‘spaceship’ built from an abandoned industrial dryer at the bottom of the gully. In a story like that, I would come home after the music camp and discover my world shattered. There would be grief, and implications of guilt, and you would have to decide whether my storytelling was an act of love, reconstructing and honouring the lost, marvelous world of childhood — or an act of atonement, admitting my own part in Janey’s destruction, acknowledging that my breach of our loyalty to one another meant that I wasn’t there at the critical juncture, when I might have saved her life.

I didn’t make the story up. It’s not about those things. What it’s really about is for you to decide. It happened like this...

I never believed what they told me about the bushfire. Even though the gully was a blackened ruin, and Janey's house was gone — the old wooden place went up like kindling, so hot that nothing was found of Janey or her grandparents — I never for a moment believed that Janey started the fire.

I couldn't even believe she was dead. Sometimes I tried to imagine being dead. Being nothing. It didn't work. I couldn't even make myself understand the idea of not being. How could Janey *not be*?

Time passed. The gully turned green again, and the council cleaned up the junkpile, dragging away all the old machinery. Then they landscaped the whole place, and called it a 'green space'. Every now and again I used to go down to the creek. I'd walk down to our cave and look around. Sometimes I'd go to the big fallen eucalypt, and check the space under the roots. Just in case.

I never found anything. After a while, I mostly stopped looking. Soccer and music took up a lot of my time. So did riding around on my bicycle with my school friends. I started writing, too.

There was one night though, just before I turned thirteen. It was hot and still. The moon was bright as a skull, and I squirmed, itching, against my sheets. Then there was a tap at my window — just a single, sharp noise, like someone had thrown a gum-nut against the glass. I lay still, listening.

It happened again.

I got out of bed, and opened the window. Outside, someone stood in the shadow of the spreading poinciana. Someone small, and slender, with blonde hair cut ragged at her shoulders.

"Steele!" It was a stage whisper, clear and sharp. "Hey, Steele!"

"Janey?" I said, and rubbed my eyes. The idea that I might be dreaming occurred to me. "Is that you, Janey?"

"Who else? Hey, are you gonna come down?" The figure in the shadows moved. It had arms, and legs. I wasn't dreaming.

I looked back over my shoulder. The light from the TV showed under my door. My parents were still awake. "I can't," I said. "Where have you been? They said..."

"What would they know?" she answered, and stepped into the moonlight, real and solid and just the same - exactly the same, I swear - as she was when I last saw her, two years before. "It was the Monoclates. They detected my test run of the *Blazer's* space drive and launched an attack. I barely had time to get away. I came back for you, Steele. I need your help."

"My help? What can I do?" Link Steele, reporting for duty. Same as ever.

"They're too fast for the automatic weapons on the *Blazer*, Steele. I need someone to operate the Quark Cannons while I fly her through the Rift." She paused, and shifted her weight. "You could do it. You're a really good shot."

"I—" My voice seized up as I began to take in what was happening. "No," I said finally. "Once you get through the Rift, you'll still have to face them hand to hand. You need something smaller than the Quark Cannons. Why don't you come home for a while? We can work on it together."

She flashed that quicksilver smile I knew so well. “Hey, Steele, this isn’t home. You know that. Home is out there, flying among the stars. Get out of bed and come with me!”

“I can’t.” The words were out of my mouth before I knew it, and even in the uncertain moonlight, the look on her face — half disappointment, half sadness — cut me to the bone. “You could come back, though,” I said hopefully, desperately. “You could stay, just for a while.”

She turned then, as if to go, but hesitated.

“Tomorrow night, then,” I said. “Just tomorrow night. I promise if you come tomorrow night, I’ll have something better than a Quark Cannon for you.”

Janey tilted her head. The motion was so familiar that it hurt, inside, to watch. “You mean it?”

“Solid Steele,” I said, and touched my knuckle to my temple.

“Okay,” she said over her shoulder as she trotted into the dark. “I’ll come back.”

Why didn’t I go?

I’ve asked myself that question so often it’s become meaningless. Boil it down: I was afraid. After more than two years, I couldn’t find the courage, even with Janey standing there in the moonlight in front of me. I made up a thousand excuses, but the truth is that I was afraid.

Not of Janey. Never of Janey.

I wasn’t even afraid of dying. In the end, I think I was afraid that I just wasn’t big enough inside, where it counted. I might have been solid Steele, but it was Janey who glowed with the inner fires of a star. She *belonged* out there.

I was afraid to discover that I did not.

She didn’t come back the next night. I guess I never really thought she would.

Here’s another place the story could end. If it finished now, it would be maybe a wistful ghost story, of sorts, about a girl whose death was really a transfiguration, and about my own real and metaphorical fear of dying. I could end the story here and it would most likely be good enough. But I owe it to Janey to tell her story right, so bear with me a little longer.

I never saw Janey again, but a lot of other things happened. I got older. I finished school and went to college. I fell in and out of jobs. Some of my stories started to get published. I got married. We had a son. He went to school.

What you’d call a life.

In a sense, Janey never really left me. Our short time together became the wellspring of my work, the source of all my storytelling. There are many writers better than I, with more art and literary merit. I don’t care. I write what I like. I write what I remember: tales full of adventure and colour and outlandish imaginings. The *Blazer* became the sentient alien vessel that helps the hero save Earth in *Last Chance The Stars*. Rogue space-trader Jane Clayforth adventured around the rim of the galaxy in more than a dozen stories.

In this way, I remind myself who I really am — and who I will never be.

My son Damon is eight years old. This afternoon, at half past three, he charged into the house and tossed his schoolbag under a chair. Then he clattered into the kitchen and dragged a bottle of milk out of the fridge.

“You’re a bit late,” I said. “Was the bus slow?”

Damon shook his head, splashing milk. “No,” he said. “It was Janey. The time circuits on her ship haven’t been calibrated lately. I should have been here ten minutes ago.”

You might suppose I thought it an odd, eerie coincidence. But like I said: *I remember.*

Just to be certain I said: “Did you say Jaidyn?”

He shot me a withering look. “No way. Jaidyn doesn’t know how to fly a spaceship.”

“So,” I said. “Janey, then. Where does she live?”

“I can’t tell you that,” he said, biting his lip. “I promised that I wouldn’t. I can’t tell anybody except someone named—”

I took a deep breath. I wasn’t afraid, I promised myself. Not of Janey. Never of Janey. “Commander Lincoln Steele, at your service,” I said.

Damon looked at me doubtfully. “You’re not him. Janey said he was young, like me. And she said he’d say something special...”

“Solid Steele,” I whispered, and touched my knuckle to my temple.

His face cleared. “That’s it,” he said. “You’re Link Steele? That’s so cool, Dad. But—” he frowned at me. “Why are you crying?”

“It’s nothing,” I told him, though I didn’t even try to wipe my face. “Something in my eye. And you don’t have to tell me where Janey lives. Out there, flying among the stars — that’s her home, right?”

He nodded, a mixture of amazement and pure relief on his face. “I thought maybe you might not believe me.”

I shook my head. “Never happen, kid. You know me. I can believe anything. Hey, she’s not still having problems with the Monoclates, is she?”

He collapsed back onto a wicker kitchen chair, the picture of exhaustion. “Problems! She’s got me firing the Quark Cannons, but unless I use them on full power the Monoclates are so fast that they can dodge. And we still don’t know how we’ll fight them on the far side of the Rift.”

“Wait here,” I said, and I gave him some chocolate biscuits to go with his milk. Then I went upstairs and washed my face. I noticed my hands were trembling, so I took a few long, deep, shuddering breaths until they steadied — but the trembling inside me wouldn’t stop.

Under my bed was a plastic box that my sister sent to me after Mother died. Inside, underneath a lot of hand-written stories and pebbles and home-made cards and faded photographs, I found the thing I wanted, just the way I remembered. I have no idea how Mother got it, or why she kept it, but I was grateful.

I brought it to my son, in the kitchen. “Here,” I said. “This should help.”

He sat up, and touched the thing I held. “Wicked,” he said. “What is it?”

I hefted it, and sighted down the barrel at the refrigerator. “It’s a Chrono-Kinetic Blaster,” I said. Then I sat down and showed him how it worked: how the digital watch mechanism mediated the chronon stream so that the burst of hyper-velocity

Z-particles released by the meson capacitor could actually be guided through time. “It’s set to shoot exactly two seconds into the past,” I told him. “All you have to do is point it where the Monoclates *were*, and press the trigger button.”

Damon studied it carefully. “You built this, Dad? It looks pretty complicated.”

“I used to be good at this kind of thing,” I said, and put it into his hand. “Here. It’ll work when you need it.”

“Wow,” he said, turning the wooden-handled, plastic-barrelled thing over in his hands. “Thanks a million, Dad. You may just have saved the galaxy!”

I shook my head. “That’s your job, kid,” I said, and gave him a shove towards the door. “Go on. You’ve got a couple hours yet before dinner. Homework can wait tonight.”

Then he was gone, and in a rush of affection, I found that I really *wasn’t* afraid at all.

That’s the last of the story that I can tell you. There’s more, I’m sure. I’d like to tell it, but I don’t have the right. It was never mine anyway, and my small part in it is over. Now it belongs to my son, blasting away at the evil Monoclates somewhere beyond the Galactic Rift, with Captain Janey at the helm of the *Blazer*, battling to save the galaxy from destruction.

I hope he’ll tell it to me, one of these days.

Studies in
Australian
Weird Fiction
Volume 2
AVAILABLE NOW!

Diamonds & Dust
by
Malcolm Bertoni
AVAILABLE OCT. '08

Diamonds & Dust
STORIES OF A PLACE IN THE DESERT
MALCOLM BERTONI

02 Publishing Packages
POD
by Equilibrium Books™

Specialising in speculative & Equilibrium Books™
uniquely Australian fiction
publishing and book sales!

www.equilibriumbooks.com

PayPal



Dominion

...Christine Lucas

On the morning of the Seventh Day, the Garden of Eden was calm and peaceful. The Serpent stretched. She had to fix that. Perfection was very, *very* boring.

She crawled through the tall grass to the pride of lions sunning their fur in a clearing by the Euphrates' bank.

"Hey, did you know what lambs are made of? Meat. Fresh and juicy meat. Why would they be made of meat if you weren't supposed to eat them? Go on, give it a try," she whispered to a lioness, her scaly tail pointing at a herd grazing close by. She had never liked lambs.

The lioness rolled over, her amber eyes half-closed. "Too hot to run. The lambs don't bother me, so I don't bother them." She yawned and continued her nap.

Disappointed, the Serpent moved on to a brown bear eating berries by the river.

"There are fat fish swimming in the water," she told him. "Juicy, writhing salmon and carp, filled with nutrients for great fur. And they taste much better than berries."

The bear looked up, his muzzle smeared with juice. "But I like berries. Why should I get wet and harass the carp?"

By noon, the Serpent was annoyed. None of the Garden's animals had humored her. God's last creations, the furless bipeds, seemed promising, but she hadn't dared to approach them. According to the sparrows' gossip, *He* had made the male after His own image. And judging by His blatant preference for lambs, the outcome couldn't be good. Curled around the Tree of Life, the Serpent decided that Creation needed fun — mischievous — creatures. She had watched Him do it from clay with the humans. How hard could it be, especially with the aid of the forbidden fruit? Across the grove, the man scratched his crotch, watching the clouds. It couldn't get any worse than *that*.

She gathered a pile of soft soil from around the roots of the Tree of Life and curled around it, kneading and shaping to the best of her abilities. Perhaps the humans' opposable thumbs had indeed some merit. It took her the better part of the afternoon, but she finally stretched and inspected her handiwork.

The creatures looked good: one male and one female, for all creatures needed a mate in life and an accomplice in mischief. She had made the male bigger and thick-headed, with fast claws and toxic urine to leave his mark all over Creation. The female was more delicate, but faster and fierce when defending her litter. The Serpent lashed her forked tongue and hurried up the Tree of Knowledge. The full moon was ascending and she hadn't finished.

She grabbed a fruit and squeezed it over the creatures, anointing them.

“I give you knowledge of Good and Evil,” she whispered, and a sudden breeze shuffled the foliage around them. The clay animals trembled, the mud turning to fur and flesh. “I give you sight to see through the dark hours of the night and through the darkness of souls. May the moon be your ally, may the sun warm your fur. Tread fast, tread soft, and knock down all fragile objects in your path.”

She breathed in and spat at them. “I give you free will, your choice either poison or cure. Whatever divine spark lays in me, I share it with you.”

A tremor ran through the Garden. She rubbed a fruit from the Tree of Life on them, and dried clay fell off, revealing soft fur underneath.

“Cats, I give you Life. Go forth and multiply. Do it often, do it loudly, until your offspring overruns Creation.”

The kittens blinked and sniffed the air. Their eyes glowed, reflecting the moonlight. When they noticed each other, she held her breath. Their eyes grew huge, their backs arched and their tails stood rigid, upright and fluffed up. Bolder than her ginger mate, the calico kitten dared a sniff of his muzzle. A shy lick followed the sniff, and in no time they were curled together, grooming each other. Soon, they grew bored of grooming and started chasing each other’s tails.

Perfection isn’t always serious.

The kittens stalked unsuspecting fireflies, shredded leaves, and clawed their way up onto the branches of the Tree of Life. The Serpent lay belly up beneath it, laughing herself breathless. It was almost dawn when the kittens, exhausted, climbed down. They curled by the Serpent’s coiled body and fell fast asleep, their whiskers and tails twitching in dreams of hunt and mischief.

True perfection is never boring.

The next morning, the Serpent sunned her scales, watching the kittens play. She’d have to feed them soon. They’d probably manage to catch bugs or even a frog on their own, but she’d rather keep them from hunting until they were old enough to defend themselves. And, hopefully, hunt decent prey, like lambs.

A sudden movement caught her eye. Barely turning her head, she spotted the human female hidden among the thick bushes a few paces away. Wide-eyed, mouth agape, Eve watched the kittens play. The serpent lashed her forked tongue and stifled a snicker. Behold the solution to the kittens’ feeding problem.

“Come closer, Eve.”

Eve licked her lips. She walked out of the bushes, each step slow and cautious. She reached out to touch the kittens.

They fluffed up and arched their backs. The calico growled and flexed sharp little claws.

Eve pulled back her hand, her brow furrowed. “Why is it doing that?” She turned to the Serpent, her eyes moist. “Why doesn’t it like me?”

“Perhaps it’s hungry.” She tilted her head toward a nearby plain. “There’s a herd of cows grazing over there. Perhaps if you brought them some milk they’d let you pet them. They are very soft, you know. And they purr.”

Eve blinked. “What is ‘purr’?”

“Purr is bliss,” she replied and watched Eve hurry to the nearest cow. The purring had been her greatest idea. It overpowered the opposable thumb any time.

By noon, the kittens had warmed up to Eve. She brought them milk and they rubbed their backs against her legs, played with her hair and curled on her lap, purring.

Half-asleep, the Serpent lay content under the Tree. Her work was complete. She had created perfection and found a guardian for the little ones. At the threshold of a dream, a male voice somewhere close awoke her.

“Eve, where are you?”

Eve’s gaze darted from the napping kittens in her lap to the source of the voice and back. The calico stretched and curled tiny paws over her face. Eve’s shoulders slumped.

“I must go. Adam needs me.”

The Serpent stretched her neck. She couldn’t let her leave — not yet. Not for *him*.

“Why does he need you?”

“Um, to gather fruits, and comb his beard, and—”

The serpent rolled her eyes. “Can’t he do that on his own?” *What’s the point of having an opposable thumb if you don’t use it?*

“Yes, but—”

“The kittens need you more,” she hissed. “They can’t milk cows.”

Eve glanced over her shoulder. “I suppose I could stay a little longer.”

“WHAT IS THIS?”

His voice was thunder and lightning and Eve fell face down on the ground. The kittens started from their nap with a hiss and climbed up the Tree of Life. The Serpent remained calm and stretched her upper body, certain she saw Adam’s ratty face hidden in the bushes at the back.

Amidst a host of angels and seraphim, their Lord God appeared before them.

“What have you done?” He turned His fiery gaze to Eve. “Have you not a mate, woman? Go to him. He has been looking for you everywhere, sick with worry.”

Eve stood up and hurried away.

He turned to the Serpent. “Call them down.”

She snickered. “Even if I do, they won’t obey. I forgot to include obedience when I made them.”

God raised an eyebrow. “Of course you did.” He stroked His beard and then waved at one of the seraphim. “Bring them before me, so I can inspect the full extent of the Serpent’s insubordination.”

The seraph flew to the kittens perched upon a branch. “Follow me to your Lord God.”

Their eyes grew wide, fascinated by the incessant flutter of the seraph’s six wings. The calico outstretched her forepaw to catch one. She licked her whiskers, wagged her behind and lunged at the slowly retreating seraph. A heartbeat later, the ginger kitten followed her.

Amidst hisses and a cloud of torn feathers, the unfortunate seraph flew to its master’s feet. An archangel hurried to its aid and managed to detach the berserk kittens from the torn wings.

The kittens stood at God's feet, and He leaned over them. The ginger kitten was busy chasing a floating seraph feather, while the calico seemed mesmerized by God's beard. She attempted to paw one of the long white tendrils, but the feather caught her eye and she went after that instead.

"Insolent," He said.

"I call it free will."

The kittens now chased each other around God's feet, oblivious to the imminent danger.

He frowned. "I gave Man dominion over all creatures. They *should* obey him."

"Kittens didn't exist at that time. They are excluded from the deal."

"They will only disrupt peace. The fruit is forbidden for a reason."

"You said not to eat it. You never said anything about other uses."

His frown deepened. "Semantics." He waved to His host. "Lucifer, escort the creatures from Eden."

"No!" She darted forward, placing herself between kittens and archangel. "They'll never survive outside."

"They are not defenseless. You should know that, being their creator." His voice was firm but not unkind.

She hung her head. "But they are just babies..."

God signaled to Lucifer, who stood shifting his weight from one leg to another. "Well?"

Lucifer bit his lip. "My Lord God, they will not come."

The kittens cowered at the roots of the Tree, a multicolored bundle of hissing fur. God turned to the Serpent.

"They will listen to *you*." The promise of flood and fire now lurked in His tone. "See to their needs, but escort them out."

Defeated, she nodded. "But will they endure? You're omniscient. Please, tell me."

He tilted His head sideways. "So be it. This I tell you: they will be revered as deities and hunted as demons. Often my mortal servants will know them to be not of my making. They will deem them evil, drown them in water and burn them with fire."

"And you will do nothing to stop them?"

"I do not advocate their actions, and they will not go unpunished." He smirked. "What happened to your support of free will?"

"It has gone with the kittens."

The Serpent escorted the kittens through the wilder lands to a secluded oasis. They'd have fresh water there, and trees to climb on, and unsuspecting frogs and birds to hunt. But they'd be alone, easy prey to all the dangers that lurked outside Eden.

Back in Eden, she could no longer sleep in peace, her dreams now tormented by images of the kittens suffering. She had to find them a guardian, to shelter them in the eons to come. Had He not said, "*See to their needs?*"

Come morning, she climbed up the Tree of Knowledge and grabbed a fragrant fruit, then headed to the clearing where the humans dwelled.

"Eve! I have something for you."

Drowning in the Air

...Penny-Anne Beaudoin

My older brother Stuart was the finest fisherman our hometown of Venture Mills ever had. Phenomenal, people called him, unbelievable. His success put even Dad, an expert angler himself, to shame. Made no difference if we were after catfish, sunfish, calico bass, perch, pickerel, pike, in the river, on the lake, summer or winter, Stuey always went home with a stringerful.

And no one could figure out how he did it.

I tagged along whenever he and Dad went fishing, though I knew Dad would have preferred if it had been just him and Stuey. But Stuey never objected to my presence, affably plucking weeds off my line, freeing my endless snags, and even baiting my hook for me, which drove Dad wild.

“Kevin, if you’re not man enough to bait your own hook, ya shouldn’t be here in the first place!”

And Stuey would turn his back to Dad, pull long faces only I could see and work his mouth as if he were saying “Nyah, nyah, nyah,” and I’d have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing out loud.

One afternoon we were out for calico bass, late in the spring of the year. Stuey had caught half a dozen grand-looking specimens and, after tossing them into the lunch cooler, he figured he’d done his bit. He stretched himself out on the sun-warmed face of the granite shelf we fished from, pulled his cap down over his eyes and pretended to sleep. Dad had a couple calicos and a good-sized catfish cooling their heels on a stringer at the water’s edge, and was off “to anoint the bushes” as he put it, before packing everything up and heading on home for supper. I stared miserably at my red and white bobber drowsing listlessly on the calm water, and mentally willed it to live up to its name and bob already! Not that I hadn’t gotten a few bites that afternoon. The fish were biting well. I’d even hooked a couple of them, but I’d always get too excited, make a mistake and lose the damn thing.

“Don’t yank your pole to set the hook! There’s a reason they call ‘em papermouths. Sweep it. Sweep it!”

“Your drag’s too tight! Loosen it up and let ‘em take some line.”

“Keep the tip up or he’ll get off for sure. Up, I said! Pay attention now or you’re gonna lose this one too...aw Christ Kevin...!”

Dad’s ‘well-intentioned’ advice did nothing to steady my nerves or improve my technique, so I wasn’t all that disappointed when he left to answer nature’s call. While he was gone, I got Stu to fish me out a beautiful fat three inch shiner, the

biggest one in the bucket, and bait my hook with it. Once it was impaled though, Stuey eyed it sceptically.

“I dunno kid,” he said. “I think this might be too big for calico.”

But I was adamant. “Big minnow, big fish,” was my logic, and I couldn’t wait to see Dad’s face when I reeled in the biggest fish of the day. Alas, after a few half-hearted hits, there hadn’t been so much as a nibble, and my fantasy of impressing Dad began to evaporate.

I gazed over at Stuey, hands behind his head, legs crossed at the ankle, looking as comfortable as if he were stretched out on a featherbed. I decided to take advantage of Dad’s absence and confess to my brother a soul-searing secret.

“I wish I were more like you,” I said.

“Course y’do. Everybody does.”

When I didn’t reply, he asked, “And why specifically do ya wanna to be like yers truly, pray tell?”

“So Dad wouldn’t be so mad at me all the time.”

I’m amazed I spoke the words. In my day, boys never talked about their dads except to boast about them. To suggest a father might favour one child over another, or that he could, in any way, fall short of perfection, amounted to nothing less than high treason.

Stuey raised himself to his elbows and pushed back his cap to look at me.

“Dad’s not mad at you.”

“Right.”

“He’s not. He’s just sore ‘cause... ‘cause I won’t bait *his* hooks for him.”

That earned him a little smile from me.

“Look,” he said, scrambling over to me sideways across the sloping rock face like some enormous crab, “you could improve his disposition a whole lot if you’d catch a few fish.”

“Yeah, I’d kinda like that myself Stu, only I don’t seem to have your knack for it.”

“Knack-schmack,” he said. Then, looking over his shoulder to make sure Dad was still occupied, he edged even closer to me and whispered, “Call ‘em.”

“Call who?”

“The fish. Call the fish.”

“Call the fish.”

“Yeah.”

“Get outta here!”

“Look, ya wanna catch ‘em?”

“Yeah...”

“Then ya gotta call ‘em.”

I could tell he was serious. So this time I checked to make sure Dad was still out of earshot. Then, looking out into the bay to where my bobber floated peaceful and undisturbed, and feeling silly as hell, I chanted quietly,

“Here fishy, fishy, fishy, fishy!”

“Not like that you moron!” And he snatched the cap off his head and swatted me with it a few times..

“But you said...”

“I meant, call them in your mind, jackass!”

“In my...mind?”

“Yeah. Here, look, like this.” And he clambered behind me until I was sitting between his legs, my back against his chest, his hands around mine on the fishing pole.

Well!

This was another thing that was never done. Brothers didn't touch. Oh, we might pat each other on the back, you know, and we'd wrestle each other, roughhouse around, even beat the living crap out of each other from time to time, but we never touched, not like this, *never* like this.

“Uh, Stu?”

“What?”

“Well...”

“Shut up.”

“OK.”

“Now, close your eyes.”

“Aw jeez...”

“Will ya just do it?”

“OK.”

I closed them.

The very air around us began to thrum with energy the way it did in church when Mr. Legault played the organ with all the stops wide open and our mortal bodies were transformed into living resonance chambers for the music of the spheres. My discomfort melted away and a wondrous feeling stole over me, a peculiar intermingling of profound serenity and heady excitement.

“For the fish, water is their element, see? They move in it the way we do in the air. And just like we couldn't live in their element for very long without drowning, they can't live in ours without drowning neither.”

“They drown, Stuey? Fish drown?”

“That's right. They drown in the air, sure as if someone held your head under the water. But though we can't live in their world, we can still connect to it, to them, with this strand of invisible string. Think of it like a phone line. Let your thoughts travel down it, down into their world, and call 'em. They can hear you. They're waiting for you. Call 'em.”

I did what he said, sent my thoughts along the length of the fishing line and let them slip beneath the surface of the water.

And in that instant I saw what they saw, felt what they felt. And I understood — everything.

Green and gold. Green and gold. Fingers of flickering sunlight sweeping through the water. The play of light and shadow. Momentary warmth, sudden chill. Thrilling with sympathetic vibration to every pleasure, every danger, every variation. Waves of sensation passing over, around and through. Sensing the universe from within. Feeling my living deep in my marrow, deep in my blood.

The magnification of sight. Observing every second of life like God, without blinking, and meeting death the same way. Knowing the universe in a single glance — the grey-brown of the fertile ooze below, the sky above an agony of infinite blue.

The jubilation of weightlessness. To be held, suspended, like the moon in a liquid sky, and then leap recklessly into the thin air of mortals and laugh at our derring-do.

The world in flux. Sensuous rhythms. Ceaseless flow. Fluid grace. Cold-blooded ecstasy.

The commonality. The singularity. The knowing. The belonging. The peace.

“Call them.”

Hey fish! Where are ya?

And I could see, with my eyes closed, the cutaway underneath the granite shelf, and sculling there in the cool dark water, a school of at least a dozen calico bass.

Look at you! You're beautiful! Come on out, why dontcha? Come and eat.

In what looked like joyful obedience, the entire school swam out en masse from beneath the undercut and gathered around the shiner. Then singly and in pairs, they approached the bait and meticulously explored its full length with their delicate mouths, tasting its fins and nibbling at its glimmering underbelly. After a few minutes of this, the largest among them boldly swallowed the minnow's entire tail section, only to regurgitate it a second later.

Stuey was right. The minnow was too large.

My stupidity appalled me.

Wait! Please wait! I'll give you something smaller to eat! Hold on!

But before I could reel in, the bass darted away, scattering in all directions. I opened my eyes in frustration.

“Nuts! I spooked them!”

“No. *You* didn't.”

Something was coming. Something big, primordial, moving with sinister grace from its lair in the weed bed across the bay. A living mouth. Hunger on the prowl, its wake an arrow heading directly for my minnow.

And it was coming fast.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God! Don't let it strike, don't let it strike, don't let it strike!”

“Easy. It's alright.”

“Oh God, oh God, oh God!”

“It's alright Kevin! I'm here.”

“Well what the hell is that?”

“Look and see.”

I took a moment to steel my shaking body before closing my eyes again. And when my inner eyes opened, I saw it, the way I'd seen the calicos. An enormous snake, I thought at first, the way it slithered through the water, big but harmless. But then, like it knew I was watching, it slowly opened its mouth.

There were teeth everywhere. Everywhere! Along the bottom jaw, the top jaw, all over the roof of the mouth and even on patches of the tongue. Most horrifying of all, the gleaming spikes jutting down from the upper jaw like vampire fangs.

No doubt about it — this was a killer.

A waking nightmare flashed through my mind of that *thing* taking my line and pulling me in after it. As I thrashed and struggled to get out of the water it would eat me alive, slicing my flesh from my bones, staining the water with my blood, and ripping open my chest to nip at my still beating heart. This is the image that has haunted me for years, the vision that leaps into my mind whenever I'm out alone in my canoe and

something slaps the hull from below; or when I'm fishing in a stream at nightfall, and something touches my boot.

When the shiner caught sight of the open-mouthed monster zeroing in on it, my bobber finally came to life, skittering this way and that across the surface of the water in sync with the minnow's frantic attempts to manoeuvre out of harm's way.

I figured the minnow had a pretty good idea.

"I'm gonna reel up, Stu."

"No, wait!"

"Uh-uh. I don't want that thing on my hook. I'm only using six pound test. He'll snap it for sure or cut it with those teeth and I'll lose the tackle and have to listen to Dad carp at me for the next three days. I'm gettin' while the gettin's good."

"No, wait!" he said again. "We can do this, you and me, together. We can bring this beast in and show Dad the kind of fisherman you really are."

Well, what could I say to that? I settled myself back down and closed my eyes.

Alright, where are you, you mangy mongrel?

And there it was, swimming nonchalantly in wide lazy circles around the hapless shiner. Suddenly, with a lightening snap of its tail, the great fish rushed at the minnow full speed, only to angle off at the last possible second.

"I don't get it," I said to Stuey over my shoulder. "Why doesn't it just take the minnow and be done with it?"

"She's not interested in the minnow. She's interested in you."

"OK, kinda creeping me out here, Stu. She's interested in me? And hey, how do you know it's a she?"

Stuey ignored my last question in favour of the first.

"You're right. A fish that size should just snap up that minnow without a second thought. But she senses something's different here. She heard you call the calicos. And it's like you haven't hung up the phone yet."

"Oh, great. A party line. Just what I need."

"Nuthin' to worry about, kid. Just relax and we'll bring 'er in. Now talk to her. Coax her to come closer."

Alright you mangy...

"And don't insult her! She doesn't like it."

At the time it didn't register, I suppose it would have wiggled me out something fierce if it had, that Stuey could hear the silent words I spoke to the fish and was seeing with me all the images unfolding behind my closed lids. I realized much later that by sharing his gift with me, Stuey had granted my wish, and, for a few moments at least, I was more like him.

When I focussed again on my poor beleaguered minnow, I was surprised to see it radiating a warm glow as though bathed in soft candlelight. The huge fish was still there, barely perceptible on the outer reaches of this strange illumination. She seemed completely engrossed in the minnow, but held her position, watching intently from the shadows.

Uh, Ma'am? I called to her in my mind. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you names. I don't even know what 'mangy' means, but whatever it is, I'm sure you're not that at all.

She remained where she was but seemed to me to be listening.

I know this here minnow must seem awfully small to you, but I think if you were to try it, you'd find it... 'delicious and nutritious', I said, quoting from one of Mum's breakfast lectures on the virtues of porridge.

She glided slowly into the light, about half the distance to the minnow and I could see her enormous length and exquisite colouring — the green-gold iridescence and the dark vertical bars decorating her sleek flanks.

Oh Ma'am! I thought those calico were something to behold. But next to you, why, they're downright... mangy! Won't you come and...

But before I could finish the invitation, the fantastic fish spun around and, like a reluctant debutante, fled into the shadows once more.

"Did I scare her away Stuey?" I asked, my eyes still closed. "Did I say something wrong? I don't know the right words."

"No, no, kid, ya did great! She's just a little skittish is all. Look, she's coming back."

Once again she sculled on the fringe of the corona, clearly drawn to the minnow but mistrustful at the same time.

"Try again," Stuey urged me.

Are you afraid? I asked her. *Well, to tell the truth, so am I. Now I'm not gonna to lie to you. You have every right to be suspicious. There's something buried in that minnow, something hard and sharp. And if you take it, well, there's gonna be an awful fight between you and me. And I know, a fish your size — you've probably taken on a lot of fishermen and won every time. I mean look, here you are! But me, I've never caught so much as a single fish, not one. Just ask my Dad, he'll tell you. So chances are, you're gonna win this time too. But just so you know, I'm gonna try my best to take you. I'll leave it up to you now. You decide.*

She hovered where she was a moment longer, then wheeled around and disappeared into the blackness.

Before I could register my loss though, she came charging back, bearing down on the horrified minnow at incredible speed, her giant maw agape. She clamped down on my line with such wrenching force, I was yanked to my feet and would have landed in the drink, just like in my nightmare, if Stuey hadn't made a quick grab for me when he did.

"Jeez Stuey!" I said, rejoicing. "Ya think we made her mad?"

"Yeah kid, I think maybe we did!"

And we laughed my brother and I, laughed for the excitement of being tied to this wild heart thundering through the water, laughed for the challenge she threw in our teeth, laughed for the sheer joy of being young.

Bulling her way out into the bay, she was taking line so fast my drag sounded like a deranged cicada. Just then Dad appeared, scurrying across the steep incline as fast as he could without losing his balance, his eyes lit with such pride at the sight of my bowing pole, I believed I might be in danger of dying from happiness.

"Well Kevin," he said when he reached us, "what have ya got on your line?"

He hardly got the question asked when the enormous fish erupted from the water, arcing her body into giant esses, shaking her massive head this way and that in a furious attempt to dislodge the steel biting deep into the corner of her jaw. She danced above the surface like that for a brief sparkling eternity before slamming back into the water in a stupendous spray of sunlit gold.

“Good God Almighty!” Dad breathed. “It’s a muskie!”

Then, still looking at the spot where the fish had plunged back into the water, Dad said “Kevin,” as matter-of-factly as if we’d been discussing the possibility of rain in the forecast. “Kevin,” he said, “you lose this fish and I will throw you into the lake after it.”

And I had no doubt but that he would do just that.

Stuey told me to lean back on my heels and brace myself against him for support. “And don’t worry, kid,” he said quietly, “I won’t let either of ‘em dunk ya today!”

Ah, my rock and my fortress!

“Look at ‘im run!” Dad cried. “Wonder where he’s headed.”

I knew exactly where the muskie was headed. Since taking my line, a word had been reverberating through my consciousness and had grown now to such a volume I thought it would shake my mind apart.

HOME!

The muskie was racing back to the weed bed, a place where she felt safe and protected, but more importantly, a place where she could extricate herself. An ancient pine lay partially submerged across the weed bed, practically to its middle. The muskie had only to catch my line on any one of the spindly branches hidden below the surface and she’d be free.

And there wasn’t a damn thing I could do to stop her.

“The weed bed?” Stuey asked me.

“Uh-huh.”

“Hang on! I’m going to try something!”

Dad realized what was happening and said worriedly, “He’s making for the deadfall Kevin! Keep ‘im outta there! Turn ‘im to the left! The left! The left!”

There was no possibility of turning the fish in any direction. She was still taking line so fast my reel was smoking, and by now far enough out into the bay only the hand of God could have moved her from her determined course. No. I was pretty sure I was going to lose this fish.

“Lean back into me some more,” Stuey said, and when I complied, he kept one arm wrapped around my chest and crouched down low. With his free hand he rummaged through the tackle box until he found one of the three-ounce bell sinkers we used for catfishing. Then, showing the pitching form that won St. Raymond’s Elementary the regional baseball championship two years running, he hurled that sinker with deadly accuracy and fearsome velocity. It ricocheted off the exposed trunk of the pine, dropping inches in front of the “vee” of the muskie’s wake.

If she had had a voice, she would have roared!

The startled fish veered left and bolted for the open water of the lake.

Dad shook his fist in the face of the sky and shouted, “What an arm! What an arm!” Then he moved down towards the water’s edge to get a better vantage point for watching the muskie’s course. She breached again, not as high this time, my stupid red and white

bobber suspended above her head like a child's balloon. It disappeared when she dove deep, pulling on my line with the obvious intention of dislocating my shoulders. It was like trying to hold on to a speeding motorboat. The physical exertion, the strain of not wanting to douse the light in my father's eyes, the overwhelming experience of sharing Stu's 'sight' — it was all beginning to tell on me. I could feel sweat coursing down my chest and back. My knees trembled violently and my arms were leaden.

"I don't think I can hold her anymore," I said over my shoulder in a voice that sounded as weak as I felt. "My arms aren't strong enough."

And that's when Stuey said those strange words to me, words that poured life and strength back into my soul, words that will sing in my memory until the day I leave this vale of tears.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "My arms are everlasting."

I swear that's just how he said it, and with such gentleness too I could have believed it was the very Christ himself whispering in my ear. But I'd never heard Stuey use such language as that, nor anybody else for that matter. I wasn't even sure what he meant by "My arms are everlasting". But one thing I did know right then and there, and I held to this knowledge fiercely — my brother loved me. And we were going to bring this damn fish in, and we were going to do it together!

So he held me, my brother did, as if I were a drowning child and he was keeping my head above the water. He lent me his strength so I could rest my arms on his and we could hold the fishing pole together as it danced, strained, and pulled against us, and the reel continued to whirr.

Dad climbed back up to where we stood and said,

"Looks like he's running for deep water. Stuart, y'know what to do?"

I could feel him nodding behind me.

"Good. Now Kevin, you listen to your brother and do what he tells ya."

"Yes sir."

"I'm gonna get the net and bring it down to the water with me. You boys steer that monster as close as you can to the shore and I'll do the rest. Deal?"

"Deal," we said together.

He grinned.

"That's what I like to hear."

When he returned to the water's edge, Stuey said,

"She's gonna stop running any minute now. I can feel it."

"Uh-huh? Well, that's good to know. But it better be soon," I said, "cause in about three seconds, I'm going to run out of line!"

Stuey glanced down over my shoulder at the reel. We had maybe five feet of monofilament left, certainly not six. One short run and it would all be over.

"Don't worry," he said. "She's getting tired."

"Tired, you say? Sure doesn't feel like it to me!"

"No, but she is. She's slowing down, slowing down, slowing, slowing, and...there! That's it!"

And I'll be damned if my reel didn't fall silent at that precise instant. The pole was still flexed to the breaking point but it was obvious she'd stopped taking line.

“It’s getting too hard to pull against the hook,” Stuey continued, and I realized he wasn’t talking to me. “It takes too much strength, too much. It would be so much easier just to turn around, just turn around, just turn, turn, turn...”

As he spoke, he slowly lifted my arms in his and then smoothly lowered them again in one fluid motion. Lift and lower. Lift and lower. The fourth time we performed this choreography, I felt a change in the resistance at the end of the pole.

The fish had turned around.

“Now Kevin!” Stuey cried, and I managed to reel up about ten feet of line before she stopped me. She didn’t take out any more line, but neither would she let me retrieve any, stalemating me with her bulldog strength.

“Now, now,” Stuey crooned, “it’s alright. Settle down now. Just relax, relax, relax...” A few more lifts and lowers and I managed to recover an additional 25 feet.

But just when I started to believe that landing this giant might be easier than I had anticipated, she bolted again, peeling off line down to the last three or four loops before she tired. This was her game and this was how she wished to play it. If we wanted to join, it had to be by her rules. Stuey would talk her in, and we would lift and lower and lift and lower, and then I would reel up as much line as I could, as much as she would let me, before she took off again. Dad was a dark silhouette against a blood-red sky by the time I noticed her runs were becoming shorter and I was able to retrieve more line each time.

We had her maybe three feet from shore when she made her last run. Dad was dancing all over the rock face, hitching up one pant leg then the other, trying out different footings, switching the net from hand to hand, and yelling incoherent instructions to us believing the end was near. Finally, he grabbed hold of a skeletal pine tree growing deformed but determined from a crack in the granite out over the water’s edge. He leaned out as far as he dared and tried to put the net on her, once even touching her with the webbing, but the muskie managed to stay just out of reach. His language grew progressively more colourful with every futile pass, until on his last attempt, dangerously overextended, he nearly lost his balance and let go such a string of expletives the air around him turned a deep, deep blue.

Our fish showed herself every inch a lady then, and fled the scene of such verbal depravity, diving deep to the bottom of the bay, leaving me to wonder where she got her supernatural strength. Had Stuey not been holding up my arms, this battle would have been lost long ago. Even my reel seemed to whine in protest as the muskie stripped off line yet again.

“She’s gonna try to pop out the hook against the bottom,” Stuey told me.

“Uh-huh.”

“This is her last run. I can feel it. She’s pretty well played out.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Just hold on Kevin. It won’t be long now, I promise.”

“OK Stuey.”

And I did. I held on, with such grim determination I thought they’d have to bury me with my fishing rod still firmly cemented in my grasp. Eventually the reel fell silent and we began the arduous process of lifting and lowering and reeling in line a few feet at a time.

In the end, she simply surrendered and let Dad put the net on her with a single indignant flap of her tail.

Dad howled in triumph, but Stuey and I could barely manage a smile we were so exhausted. The exquisite pleasure of lowering my arms and feeling the blood pulse through to my fingertips, the rapture of just sitting down for the first time in almost an hour! I stared at my legs, amazed they could still bend, and in the proper direction too!

It took Dad a while to wrest the fish from the net, what with his having to avoid the innumerable teeth. When he finally managed to free her, he carried her up to us under his arm like a football.

“Twenty pounds at least!” he announced gleefully. “And if that’s not 40 inches stem to stern, I’ll eat my hat! Your first fish Kevin, and it’s a real lunker! Looks like all the men in this family are first-class sportsmen!”

Somewhere in my overworked brain, enough synapses were still firing to alert me to the fact that this was the first time my father had referred to me as a man.

“So this is what it means to be a man,” I remember thinking, “catching big fish. I never would have guessed.”

“I don’t relish the thought of trying to put this beast on a stringer,” Dad was saying, “and I’m pretty sure the damn thing ain’t gonna fit in the lunch cooler. So we better clean it right here and then we can put the fillets on ice, or what’s left of the ice anyway.”

“Uh, no, Dad,” I said struggling to my feet.

“Sorry son. I know ya’d like to show this bruiser off some, and it’s a shame to have to cut it up, but I can’t see getting it home any other way.”

Stuey stood up beside me then, his face sober, his eyes intent on me.

“No Dad,” I said shakily. “I-I want to put her back.”

“What?”

I glanced at Stu, then back at Dad and the magnificent muskie cradled in his arms.

“I want to put her back,” I repeated, my voice trailing off to a feeble whisper.

Dad looked at me like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Ya wanna put it back?”

“Yeah. I mean, yes sir.”

As if to signal her emphatic agreement, the muskie bucked violently against Dad’s side. He pressed his elbow in hard against her flank.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “This is your fish, your first fish. And after everything ya did to get it, now ya just wanna throw it back?”

“Yes sir.”

“Are you daft boy? Stuart, talk some sense into your brother!”

I could feel Stuey’s eyes on me, studying my face. He could have saved the day. He could have made it alright. He could have said, “Aw Dad, Kevin’s just putting you on, aintcha Kevin?” And I’d have said, “Yeah, it’s all a joke. Let’s cut ‘er up and see how much meat we can get off her bones.” I could not have stood against both Dad and Stuey, and Stuey knew that. His eyes flicked from me to Dad, and he said in a voice drained of emotion,

“It’s Kevin’s fish.”

Dad stared at us in astonishment, then snorted contemptuously.

“Thought I had sons,” he said. “But you’re worse than little sissy girls. Powder puffs, that’s whatcha are, even thinkin’ about throwing back a fish like this!”

I watched the light drain from the sky and my father’s eyes as I tried one last time to save my beautiful fish.

“Dad, please. Don’t let her drown in the air.”

He opened his mouth as if to say something, then changed his mind. The muskie was weakening, her huge gill plates fanning ever more slowly, her eyes already clouding over with a milky film.

“‘Drownin’ in the air’,” Dad said, shaking his head. “‘Drownin’ in the air’, is it? Well, I can fix that right smartly.”

The sun had disappeared into the lake. It would be dark soon.

Sometimes when horrific things happen, the mind is too dazed to react immediately, too disbelieving to apprehend the reality of what seems like a bad dream. And so it was my brother and I did nothing, didn’t move a muscle, just stood there, while our father, his eyes fixed on us, rammed his thumb and index finger into the fish’s eyes, exploding the innocent globes and pulverizing what lay just behind them. The muskie writhed and twisted but Dad kept his fingers buried up to the second knuckle until her perfect brain was ruined. Her desperate contortions gave way to weak spasmodic twitching, and soon even this ceased and she lay still in my father’s arms. My knees began to buckle, but Stuey, without even looking at me, grabbed my shirt and hauled me back up, holding me tight to his side.

With a lurid sucking noise, Dad pulled out his fingers, slick with gore, and heaved the blinded queen at us. She slapped the ground at our feet with a dead thud.

“There,” he said. “I guess it ain’t drownin’ no more.”

Then he turned, picked up his fishing pole and his stringer of live fish and walked away.

Dazed, I bent down to pick up my fish, but in my grief and clumsiness I inadvertently kicked her with the toe of my sneaker. I cried out helplessly as she slid away from me down the granite rock face and into the dark water below.

Love the Tattoo

...Leith Daniel

ASIM congratulates Leith Daniel on his first publication:

I entered my first writing competition when I was in Year 2; or at least I would have, except my story (a time travel epic which ends with the hero killing someone on a futuristic battlefield only to discover it was his brother who had spent most of his life trying to find him) took too long to write, and I missed the entrance date.

Since then, I've held delusions of competency which has finally shown some glimmer of not being just a delusion, with this, my first published fiction work. (My only other publications have been two tracts in the WA English teaching journal: one about the benefits of teaching B-Grade film – especially zombie films – in the English classroom; and one about the history, origin and use of the word, 'fuck'.)

Oh, and my tattoo is of Ned Kelly.

“Love the tattoo!”

I looked up from my book and squinted through the glare of the sun at the speaker. The man was well tanned, somewhere in his forties, somewhat pudgy, and from his appearance and accent, probably Scandinavian. His body had a gleam of either coconut tan oil or sweat; either one, it put me off the way it seemed to drop from his nipples.

“Oh...thanks,” I said, and went back to my reading in the vague hope the man would take the hint and leave.

My tattoo had long ago become a source of annoyance for me. When I first had it done I never thought that there could possibly be a day when I'd be sick of it. Truthfully, I wasn't really sick of the tattoo itself. I'd grown sick of the reactions of other people.

I soon realised the paradox of having a cool tattoo. The more symbolic and original a tattoo is, the more you have to explain it and its significance to others — an act that is in itself, very uncool. The more you have to deconstruct the fucking thing to someone who thinks it's 'kinda cool', the quicker you both become

bored. Add to this the fact that the tattoo is on my back; I have to explain the tattoo while people are looking at it, so I have two choices. I can wrench my neck around to try to look at them, contorting my arms to vaguely gesture at the general areas of the tatt I am talking about (not always easy since the tattoo takes up the vast majority of my back). Or, I can face forward while talking about my back, giving passers-by the impression I am a madman talking to myself. This impression is enhanced when the people I am talking to walk away halfway through my explanation.

“What is it of, if I’m not prying too much?”

I sighed. I resigned myself to divulging the soliloquy of my ink. I put my book down and sat up; I wasn’t going to get any more reading done in the fading light anyway. The man walked around my towel and stood behind me, his eyes never leaving my tattoo.

I looked briefly at the tent that housed my wife to see if she was laughing at me, but she was still asleep, presumably exhausted from a day full of telling me how to set up a campsite.

“Well...” I switched to auto pilot. “It’s supposed to represent my personal philosophy of life.”

“Hmmm.”

“The guy you see holding the cards is the Joker from the Batman comics. He’s supposed to represent God, Fate, Destiny: whatever it is that deals you your cards in life.”

“Very clever.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Usually at that point of my explanation when someone commented like that, their tone was usually sarcastic or bored. This guy though, seemed genuinely intrigued. And his eagerness was intoxicating. “Anyway, you can see the poker hand he’s holding, right?”

“Yes yes.”

“Well, there are four aces, but the suits are slightly different from what they would normally be.”

“Oh yes. I see.”

“The heart is broken — that symbolises my love life. The diamond is a dollar sign — that symbolises my wealth. The club is a dumb bell — and that’s supposed to be my health and sporting achievements. And the spade is actually a shovel crossed with a pick and that symbolises...”

“Your work?”

“Exactly! Anyway, they’re all aces, because that’s what I’m working towards. I want to be all I can be in all aspects of my life. Then — and only then — will I accept the final card.”

“That would be the card with that intriguing looking fellow...there!” I felt the man press a thick finger in the middle of my back. He didn’t do it hard, but firmly. Even when he released it — slowly, as if he dreaded removing it — I could still feel the impression of it in my back. I turned my head around and got a glimpse of him rubbing the tip of his finger with his thumb.

“You have very pliable skin.”

“Um, yeah.” I thought briefly about running. “Um...that’s the, er, Joker card. But the Joker has been replaced with a picture of the Grim Reaper. What I’m basically

saying is—” I stood and turned to face him. He blinked, as if I had physically torn his eyes from my back. “—I will only be fulfilled after I have achieved everything I can in this life.”

“A wonderful story!” He looked as if he was about to break into applause. “I must repay you.” For a horrible minute I thought he was going to pull down his too-tight shorts to reveal a tattoo — there was no other place he could hide one. But: “Do you drink sir?”

“Does the pope shit in the woods?”

“Er, quite.” He chuckled. “Some vodka perhaps?” I didn’t really want to spend anymore time with this guy; he was making me feel uneasy in a Deliverance kind of way. But I hadn’t had a real drink in days (my wife had me on a diet). So I stole a quick glance at my tent (she still hadn’t stirred) and said, “Sure, why not?”

“Great!” He turned and walked past some other people’s tents and caravans. I couldn’t see where his was. I tried to rub my back, attempting to remove the memory of his touch from my skin. But the feeling lingered until he came back to my small campsite holding two glasses. “Do you like it straight?”

I tried to hide my amusement at the homoerotic subtext of his question and said, “I usually drink it with OJ, but I’ll live.”

“Good. It is a little strong.”

I started sipping the drink. When I was almost finished the glass he said, “You know — I have wanted another tattoo, but my doctor says I have too many already.”

My last thought of the evening was, “Too many? Where?”

When I woke up in the morning, I was flat on my stomach outside my tent. My head was throbbing, my back was burning, and my wife was screaming. I thought I must have gotten extremely drunk, extremely sunburnt and extremely offensive the night before, but I didn’t think I could have done any of those things so badly as to warrant my wife’s reaction.

“What happened to your back?!”

“What?” I yelled at her as loudly and irritably as my throbbing head would allow. “So I got a little sunburnt.”

“Sunburnt?” She was attracting quite an audience. “Where’s your fucking skin?!”

Amygdala, My Love

...Lee Battersby

I've been lying here for hours, and I still can't answer the questions the darkness asks me: Where did they get the photos? Who supplied the pictures of you, Thierry, and me, and our life together? Who gave them the ultrasound images?

I didn't have to agree to the experiment. It was my choice. Six of us sat in the cold, grey room while Professor Teller gave his speech. Had I not signed up, there were still five minds for him to stir. But I already had the shunts in my skull. The whole thing would take less than an afternoon, and days remained before my surgery. After all, what was there to fear in pictures, and wires in my brain, and two nice doctors in a room taking readings? So when the day came, and I sat before the flickering screen, could I blame anyone but myself?

Every twenty-ninth of a second, the Professor explained, an image would flash onto the monitor. Some would elicit an emotion. Most I wouldn't even notice.

"We're not expecting you to actually see them," he told me. "We're measuring the recognition of visual clues, the flash of neurons across the amygdala, that part of your central nervous which determines the fear response. We're interested in your animal instinct." He led us into his office and sat us before two coffee cups and matching contracts. "Not your personality."

I shrugged. I didn't care. The fee he paid was small, but it would help offset the cost of the operation. And I loved you so much. I didn't want to be an epileptic any more, didn't want to cause you more worry. To watch blinking pictures for half an hour, medicated against seizures, was no price to pay. You sat at my side, silent and ever-caring, engulfed my hand in yours, and watched me. You didn't try to dissuade me. You never do. Even if I had not wanted to go through with the procedure, I would have done so anyway. Your faith and belief set too high a standard. You were caring, and supportive, and receptive to my every concern. And in the end, I only did it to avoid the thought of disappointing you.

"Are you sure?" you asked at every opportunity. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes."

So you held my hand, and talked of results and futures, and how much you loved me. We walked to the laboratory together, hand in hand, and I was not afraid when you released me into the arms of the scientists. When Professor Teller asked you to go with him and fill out consent forms, you kissed my cheek and told me

you would be with me soon. And I believed you, because that is what I have always done, and I love you.

You went away, and I was led into a little room, with no window and no wallpaper, and deposited in an armchair of plain white cotton.

“No distractions,” Teller said as he wheeled in a flat-screen television. “Nothing to take your attention away from the screen.”

He settled me into the chair, made sure I was comfortable, and tilted my head forward. I pressed my chin against my chest, and tried not to wince as he pushed cold wires into my shunts. I know I did not really feel them. The nurses tell me so, again and again. But they were cold, all the same.

The Professor patted me on the arm, and left without a word. A cushion pushed my shoulder blades forward, so my head was clear of the chair. Another cushion supported the small of my back so I wouldn’t wriggle. The television hummed. A white spot emerged in the centre of the screen, and then the first picture materialised.

If I close my eyes, even now, images appear: a tiger in mid-leap; a field of daisies; a grave piled high with Jewish corpses. But the pictures I want, the ones I know my mind documented even as my eyes skimmed over them, will not come. I cannot place them into any sequence, cannot persuade myself that my mind was one-thirtieth of a second too slow. I cannot believe that that I responded to the wrong stimulus. Not knowing, not having a chance to convince myself otherwise, how can I doubt my subconscious? The images came, and went, twenty nine of them every second. And I don’t know which ones to trust.

I was safe in my bed within an hour. Teller thanked me on my way out of the lab, promised swift payment of my fee, and released me. My surgery was three days away. The shunts would be removed. I would recuperate, and come home to grow my hair again. You love to run your fingers through my hair. You sat at my bedside, your fingertips tracing paths across my skull, and told me how proud you were. I leaned into your touch, met your lips with mine, and lost myself in the smell of your skin. Just for that moment, for that brief respite, I was no patient, or cripple, or object of pity. I was your wife, and it was all I needed. When I looked into your eyes I saw love, and happiness. I fell asleep against you.

I woke alone, and was not afraid.

When the hospital psychologist dropped in to talk, my only assumption was that she wished to discuss the upcoming operation.

“I’m fine.” I lay back on the bed, and crossed hands behind my head. My fingers curled round the metal protrusions with no conscious effort on my part. “I thought I would be scared, but I’m not even nervous.”

“Aren’t you?” The psychologist was a large woman, larger than her skirt suit was designed to hold. She clutched a sheaf of papers which she steadfastly refused to acknowledge.

“No.”

She sat on the room’s single chair, crushing the documents against her thigh. I watched the skirt strain, holding back the eruption of quadriceps through fabric. The mass of her hand kept everything flat.

“We’ve got some results.”

“Results?” I sat up. “I haven’t had any tests. The surgery’s—”

“It’s not about the surgery.” The hand slid across the pages, picked them up.
“Professor Teller—”

“Teller? What about him?”

“He noticed some...anomalies in your test results. He passed them on to me.”

“I didn’t realise I was being tested.”

“No, no.” The psychologist waved her fat paw, swatting my words from the air.
“Not being tested. It’s just—”

“What?”

“Well...” She glanced down at the notes, then back at me. “How is your relationship with your husband?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your relationship, with your husband?”

“I know what you said.” I swung my legs off the bed, leaned forward to frown into her porcine face. “What has Thierry got to do with anything?”

She riffled the papers between finger and thumb, placed them down next to me.

“The results of your analysis show...” She sat back, and tried a professional demeanour on for size. “Is there any reason you would be afraid of him, Nathalie?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

She indicated the notes. I picked them up, scanned the pages. “What is all this? How am I supposed to read this mess?”

Lines crowded the page like the map of an ant farm. Arrows pointed to and from three-letter codes, and my angry eyes couldn’t latch onto anything identifiable. I flung the sheaf onto my pillow.

“The lines measure electrical currents across the brain quadrants the research team was assessing.” The psychologist’s voice was soft, as if placating a troublesome child. “When we sense a threat, the eye moves to something it can process rationally, some aspect of the object confronting us which can help us determine an appropriate reaction. In certain situations, that appropriate reaction is fear.”

She raised her eyebrows in an attitude of such manufactured sympathy that I would have laughed if I were not the subject of her charade. “Where the green line spikes, that’s the fear response from your amygdala.”

She leaned forward, laid her heavy hand upon my arm. I jerked it away, wiped at the sheen of sweat she left behind. “Nathalie, a significant proportion of those spikes occurred during images of your husband and son.”

“No.” I grabbed the papers, tried to shake meaning into them. “You’re wrong.” The psychologist stared at me, the folds around her eyes allowing no possibility of disbelief. The squiggles on the page dared me to comprehend them, contradict them. “Fat bitch. Stupid fat bitch.” I threw the notes at her. “Get out. Get out, you fat lying bitch!”

Stress has always been my trigger.

The seizure hit as I rose to slap her. My tongue locked against my teeth. A convulsion twisted my neck, forced my hands into claws. I fell for the bedside table, scrambled for the bottle perched on its edge. I knocked it over, and the pink pills skittered this way and that, evading my bent fingers. I lunged after one as it left the lip of the table.

My head struck the corner. I reared away from the pain and my body disobeyed me, slamming me against the table once more and tearing a shunt away from my skin. The psychologist screamed for help. I pressed my face into the carpet, whimpering as my calves beat a mad rhythm against the metal leg of the bed. Vomit burned my mouth, my nose. My tongue retreated into my throat, and I began to choke.

Then something immeasurably heavy gripped my shoulders and hauled me onto the bed. Hands wrapped around my head, forcing me into stillness. A spoon drove between my teeth and pinned my tongue down. A finger, thick and salty, violated my mouth. Something lodged in my gullet, was joined by a splash of cool water, and disappeared.

Then I slept.

They kept me unconscious until after the operation. It was only three days of my life, after all.

I awoke in a strange room, as bright and clean as my new life was supposed to be. A window lay open across from me, separating me from lawns and gardens I didn't know the hospital possessed. Figures in white robes wandered from side to side in the sunshine. I blinked. My head lay wrong upon the pillow. It took long moments before I realised that the pressure points I had grown used to were missing. I ran cautious fingertips across my skull. The shunts were gone. Small wads of gauze covered the evidence of their removal. For a moment, I was bereft.

You sat at the foot of the bed, Jean-Paul in your lap. I started at seeing you. My hands grabbed at the mattress in an attempt to push me away. I caught myself with some effort, and shook my head. You are my husband, Jean-Paul my son. There was nothing to fear. It was the surprise, that was all, and waking in an unfamiliar place. That's all it was. Surprise.

"Nathalie." I shivered when you spoke my name, then cursed myself. Jean-Paul cried and reached his little arms toward me. I shied from the contact, then bit my lip. You frowned, in that quiet way you have when I do something that puzzles you.

"What's wrong, love?"

"I..." I could not tell you. I didn't know. I was not afraid. I was just... "I'm sorry. You startled me."

"Of course." You smiled, a nervous twitch of your lips. "The doctor says the surgery was a success. You're cured, darling. I mean, they'll monitor you for a while, just to make sure, but—"

"Please." I could not take my eyes from your face. Your eyes were so black, your lips so thin, your teeth so sharp. "Please." I hid behind the back of my hand. "You have to go. I'm...I'm so tired. Please?"

You stopped, then. I heard the chair scrape, then your voice: uncertain; slightly hurt. "Yes, of course. You rest. I'll come again tomorrow." A weight distorted the edge of the bed, then your lips pressed against my cheek, wet and intrusive. I tried not to flinch.

"I love you, Nathalie."

I couldn't answer. I didn't know which answer to give. I love you, Thierry. I have always loved you. The door clicked shut before I was brave enough to raise my head. Jean-Paul cried the length of the corridor as you carried him from me. After that, all

was silent, except for the breath in my chest. I could not hear the passage of electricity across my mind, could not detect the activity within my amygdala. The light folded towards night, and I lacked the courage think of you.

Tell me, Thierry. Am I the subject of some further test, some extra research to determine my response to stress and emotion? It is as easy to sign two contracts as one, and a man who observes one room can observe another. Am I still being measured, recorded, translated into ant farm schematics on the other side of a glass wall?

Or have I always been afraid, somewhere too deep to reach? Have I always reacted this way to your presence and only now, with the experiment, become aware? I don't know. I cannot remember. I cannot read the lines. I have no machines to tell me what to see. I have nothing but the evidence of my eyes, and they do not recognise as many images as they are shown.

You will come again tomorrow. I know you: devoted; attentive; punctual. You will be here the moment visiting hours begin. I can't be sure of how I will behave when I see you, so I will not put us through another trial. I have changed my hospital gown for jeans and a blouse. I have packed my suitcase. Soon, I will walk down the corridor to the nurse's station and discharge myself. I am going to leave, and if I don't know where I'm going, how can you possibly follow?

I love you, my husband and son. I love you both so much. But I cannot live in fear, and whether I once knew it or not, I have seen that fear displayed upon a page, and I know its source.

Hours alone in the dark, and I can find no answer to the question that terrifies me most: Who gave them the photos, Thierry, and what did they hope I would see?



Under Waves and Over

...Grant Stone

Peter saw her lying on the beach, reclining in the surf, moonlight reflected in her dark hair. Obviously, he fell in love.

He'd only stepped out of the conference center looking for air with a little less smoke, less booming music, less dirty jokes. Walking the path to the beach he watched bats flit between the coconut trees. He'd taken off his tie at least an hour ago, but the tag that declared, "Hello my name is *Peter Worth*" was still clipped to his shirt pocket. First rule of sales conferences — make sure people remember your name, no matter how drunk they are. He slipped out of his shoes, toed his socks off his feet and walked out across the sand.

He was still trying to think of a good opening line when she looked up at him and smiled. He'd lost count of the martinis; he didn't notice the hardness under her skin or the strange tenor in her voice, whispering like the retreating surf. He'd only planned to step out for a few minutes, but now they were kissing. A gust of wind took his name tag; it rattled down the beach before a breaking wave took it out to sea.

You don't get to be regional sales director by being easily surprised. When dawn came and she drifted into the sea, he was not concerned. And you don't get to be regional sales director without persistence. She was already well out to sea and barely visible against the rising sun when Peter started swimming, moving too fast for him to catch but then she stopped and turned in the water, waited. Peter felt the warmth bleed out of his legs as he crossed over the reef and out into deeper water.

"I love you," he said, when he finally reached her. Having nothing else to say he'd kissed her then, her legs wrapped around his waist. Water closed over their heads. Peter looked up once and saw the dawn sky broken by the waves into quivering slices.

His arms would not move; his legs kicked uselessly in the water. He couldn't remember anything after the kiss, but he was still underwater—

—The realization hit him and he thrashed furiously, although not enough to shift even one finger of the hands that gripped him—

—still breathing, somehow, each breath sharp with salt.

An iridescent coral provided light. His arms were held by mermen, one on each side. Through all his panicked thrashing they had remained impassive.

And now he saw her, supplicated, in front of a great coral throne on which sat a merman, an immensity, at least twice Peter's size. An intricate array of raised scars started above his left eye and trailed down his cheek, neck and upper chest, meticulous geometric shapes, a tapa cloth carved in his skin.

She was speaking. The great merman sat, unmoving save for the muscles of his jaw pulsing beneath his beard. His eyes were milky, cataracted. The mermen holding Peter's arms were closer to his size. Each had similar scar patterns on their faces and necks. The one on his left was somewhat the smaller of the two; when Peter looked down he saw that this one was missing a good part of his tail.

She said something else and the sea-giant boomed and pounded his fist. Coral crumbled and dispersed in the current. Now the giant turned to regard Peter for the first time and pointed to him, shouting. She swam toward Peter, her face a rictus of agony. She spoke to the larger one, who strengthened his grip on Peter's arm. He growled a reply and he loosed his hold, pushed Peter away, turned and swam into the darkness.

She grabbed Peter's hand and they began to rise.

"What's this?"

"It's a Martini."

She sipped, and made a face. Then she sipped again.

They sat at the bar. The conference rooms were packed. Nine-thirty in the morning, they had the bar to themselves. Peter had found the crumpled remains of his suit and brushed off the worst of the sand. She had done something with broad palm leaves. He'd found both his shoes, one sock. His tie...he had no idea.

"What just happened?"

"I spoke to my father."

"He didn't seem to take it very well."

She raised the Martini to her lips again, thought better of it. "He said if I wanted to be a dirt-walker then I was free to do so. My brother, Shan Ta, said if he saw me again, he would kill you and I both."

The sun through the window caught bottles behind the bar; dust motes swam like plankton. Peter waved the bartender over, ordered two more whiskeys and another Martini for her.

"This has never happened to me before," Peter said, staring at the bottles behind the bar, "Attraction, sure. But..." he turned to look at her and she smiled.

Eventually, he said, "I have a lot of questions."

She kissed him. "There'll be time later."

Except of course there wasn't.

He made some calls. Changed his flight to leave the next day, booked an additional seat. He phoned his brother, but there was no answer and when he heard the beep he couldn't think of anything to say.

They left the hotel — him in his emergency suit, her in a sarong from the gift shop. The taxi turned was a large white van, ridiculous for just the two of them. They sat in the back while the driver steered with one hand and adjusted the stereo with the other. Beatles. White Album.

“I still don’t know your name.”

She made a sound like water crashing on rocks.

“Hm,” Peter said.

She sat for a while, listening to the music. “Call me Julia.”

Peter knew someone who knew someone with the Fijian immigration service. Julia gasped when the camera flashed. Peter handed over a thick wedge of New Zealand dollars.

He watched her as the plane made its final approach into Auckland, looking down as they crossed from sea to land. Just for a moment she placed one hand on the window, her right, the one with the rough patch that she’d rubbed raw. Then the plane bounced twice and they were on the ground.

“I remember when this was all farmland,” Peter said as they pulled into his driveway. He introduced her to soy lattes and curries and takeaway fish and chips. She took long showers morning and night. Her patchwork knowledge intrigued him; she couldn’t read, but she knew the lyrics to several Whitney Houston songs. She peppered him with questions and he did his best to explain the Internet and revolving credit mortgages and football.

On Sunday night he said, “I’ll be going to work tomorrow.”

“Oh,” she said. “What should I do?”

“Well...anything you like. What do you feel like doing?”

“I don’t know.”

She fell asleep listening to the traffic rushing past the window, like the sound of a shell held to her ear.

Julia stood uncertain, just as she had this morning when Peter had kissed her and left. Only after she’d watched his car back out of the driveway and disappear down the road did she take a shuddering breath and wonder what was next.

The new shopping mall was not far away, a short walk along a busy, four-lane road, packed to capacity at ten-thirty in the morning. The exhaust fumes made her eyes ache.

“Are you OK?”

She blinked; saw the woman behind the trestle table looking at her, concerned. She nodded.

“Fine, I’m. Fine.”

The woman swept the plastic boxes and shiny paper covering the trestle table into a large cardboard box. “No you’re not. Come with me.”

Starbucks was nearly deserted. In the corner a mother sipped a hot chocolate and rocked her baby’s stroller distractedly with her foot. A couple of teenagers two tables

away sniggered and paid more attention to their mobile phones than each other. Julia looked out towards the mall, the cardboard box on the seat opposite her.

The woman carefully placed the tray on the table.

“Right. Name’s Veronica, Veronica Stanley. I’m a mother, a grandmother, and for the last four years the leading Tupperware salesperson for the Manukau area. Your turn.”

“Um.”

Veronica shrugged. “OK, first things first. What’s your name?”

She opened her mouth to speak, stopped, then said “Julia.”

Veronica reached over the table. “Pleased to meet you, Julia. Now, what’s the problem?”

“There’s. No problem.”

Veronica snorted. “A beautiful young woman like you doesn’t walk around with a look like that on her face otherwise.”

Julia rubbed the skin underneath her wedding ring. Veronica looked at the reddening mark and said nothing.

They sat in silence, sipping hot chocolates. Julia’s was far too hot, burned her tongue. She sipped anyway.

“Ah well,” Veronica shrugged and put her cup down. “Guess I’d better get back to it. Don’t want that tart Margaret to steal my spot.”

“I can’t pay you for the drink, I’m sorry. I don’t have any money with me.”

Veronica smiled. “Wouldn’t expect you to. “ She pulled a card from her jacket pocket and flipped it towards Julia. “Give me a call if you’re interested in buying some Tupperware. Or if you just need someone to talk to. Any time.”

Peter kept a fish in a small plastic bowl. It swam unceasingly around its castle. When Julia looked at it her skin itched. She turned on the television.

When the slam of the door woke her, the sky outside was black.

“I’m so sorry,” Peter said, flowers in one hand, wine in the other. “The shit really hit the fan with the Anderson account. Last time I put Thompson in charge of anything. I spent the whole morning on the phone, which accomplished exactly nothing, then thought ‘bugger it’, and just went over there. Talk about dodging a bullet. I called before, but you didn’t answer?”

“I went out.”

“Oh. Okay.” He took off his jacket, threw it over the couch, walked toward the bathroom. “Oh, yeah. Anderson and his wife are coming over for dinner on the weekend. Felt it was the least I could do.”

She heard the bathroom door close and water hissing in the shower.

She glanced at the flowers lying on the coffee table and flicked off the television.

She recalled the story of her uncle, Sion-ta, of the time he found himself bleeding out in the blackwater. He noticed the trail of blood the same time the sharks did. Three came in, fast. Though he carried no weapon he turned and faced the three, even as another two joined them. The first mermen had forged an alliance with the ancestor

of all sharks, but when the blood madness came upon them they were quick to forget ancient compacts.

One, larger than the rest, sides hatched with old scars, broke away from the shiver. Just before its mighty jaws closed over his head, Sion-ta feinted beneath, reached up, willed his hand to be as sharp as coral. His fingers tore through the shark's underbelly, pushed through to softer things inside. The others were close. With a mighty pull he wrenched the shark's innards down upon him. He swam, down and underneath, out through the pink cloud of the shark's blood. They had forgotten him, nearly torn their leader's body in two. Then, their frenzy unsated, they turned on each other. He looked back once at the maelstrom, saw nothing but a cloud of blood that was not his.

The first mermen had maintained an uneasy peace with the first shark, unnamed because no name was large enough to contain him. This was the shark that would later be caught and hauled with no reverence to the surface and left to dry, while seagulls shat in his exposed eye and dirtwalkers made their homes upon him. As Julia walked the short distance from the house to the mall, she thought often of that shark, bones gone to coal and skin to grass and trees, farmed and tamed and covered in asphalt for cars to drive. Peter remembered when all this had been farmland. She knew it had been something entirely different before.

Cars sped past, only stopping, begrudgingly, for traffic lights. Home, to the mall, then home again. The full extent of her life.

Julia Worth had a customer loyalty card. Julia Worth walked between bookstores, music stores, supermarkets, always moving, like a brightly colored fish nibbling coral. Some instinct keeping her in motion, not staying in one place long enough for whatever was following her to catch up. Julia Worth went to the multiplex cinema, bought a giant box of popcorn and watched love stories and cartoons and men with guns. Her conversations were with people behind counters and display stands and bars.

Her skin no longer itched or flaked. The beauty therapist had suggested Lancôme and Estee Lauder; the pharmacy other, fouler smelling things. By the end of the month she hardly thought about it.

Rick had a grin on his face and arms wide open. He clapped Peter on the back, hard enough to knock the air from his lungs. Rick pushed a cold pint over to him, raised his own in a toast.

"To the happy couple."

"Cheers." Peter sipped his beer and grimaced. The pub's faux-British ambience was ridiculously synthetic, but they brewed their own award-winning and very good beer. Rick had brought him the only other drink available. It claimed to be Guinness, but all similarity ceased on tasting.

"Bit quick wasn't it? I thought you were the sensible one." On reaching 30 and with two failed marriages already behind him, Rick had apparently given up on love.

Peter shrugged. "You fall in love, this is what happens."

"So when do I meet her?"

"Soon. Things have all gone to shit at work though. It's going to take me a little while to get some free time. Fact is, I really shouldn't be here now. Give us a few weeks."

Rick nodded. Tables were starting to fill. Rick had found a spot at the back, far enough from the speakers that they could hear themselves think, at least for now: a band was setting up on a small stage in the corner.

“Got a photo though?”

“We haven’t had time.” Peter pulled out his wallet. He’d kept a duplicate passport photo.

Four pints later, Peter leaned forward over the table and said, “Can I tell you something?”

Peter told him everything.

When he’d finished, Rick was silent for a long time. Finally, he said, “So you’re telling me you’ve shacked up with a mermaid?”

“You think I’m imagining things?”

“So what, she sleeps in the bath?”

“No, nothing like...She doesn’t have a tail or fins. Or rather she did but...you know. She changed.”

Rick stared at him for a long time. “She give you anything to drink, before all this happened?”

“No.”

“Scratch you? Eat anything? Something sprayed on you?”

“No. Nothing. Why?”

“Mate, think back. Did all that *really* happen? Really?”

“Everything. Just as I said.”

“Speak English?”

“What? Course she does. What’s your point?”

“Know how to drive a car? Work the microwave?” His phone buzzed again. “The phone?”

“If you’ve got something to say, just say it.”

“Look, it’s not that I don’t believe you. You’re telling me what happened as you recall it. But you’ve just told me something I can’t believe exists. Occam’s razor, mate.”

“You don’t believe mermaids exist.”

Rick shrugged. “I’m not even sure love exists. Look mate, I’m gasping for a fag. Bloody smoke-free pubs. Back in five minutes. Don’t go anywhere.”

Suddenly the noise was too much. Peter grabbed his coat and keys and made for the other door.

By the time he reached the car park he was running. He slammed his car door and reversed out of the space without looking.

His house was a couple of minutes away: out of the car park, third street on the right. But as the lights on the intersection turned green, he found himself turning the other way. The building on the corner was a church, although the fluorescent sign and giant crucifix that doubled as a cellphone tower were the only clues; the unpainted concrete walls could have held a department store or warehouse. The car park was empty and he pulled around the side of the building, as far away as he could get from the road.

He didn't believe Rick, not for a second. It was all true, everything. She'd kissed him, taken him down under water. He'd seen the others, her father, brothers. He'd breathed the water.

She read the paper. Watched TV. Spoke on the telephone, constantly, to some woman she'd met at the mall. She sold Tupperware, and that was the thought that finally hit him like a plunge into cold water. She sold Tupperware.

He sat in the car while the traffic thinned and the stars came out. He opened his eyes and it was morning.

Someone was walking from the church towards him, calling out, janitor or pastor perhaps: a ring of keys jangled at his hip. Peter started the car and drove to work.

They made a good team. Veronica had been selling Tupperware for years but recently things had slowed.

"This is the problem," Veronica said, and smooched up her cheeks. "Look at these wrinkles! I must have sold to everyone in Manukau by now, everyone my age at least. But these ones..." she waved her arm across the atrium. Young mothers, pushing babies in three-wheeled designer prams, talking on cellphones, on their way to the gym. "Used to be you respected your elders, but now..."

Julia had started helping out of boredom. Peter had been working late and it was nice to have company. The evening sales parties and the company of other women were a pleasant distraction. Three days a week Veronica set up her trestle table in the atrium, fishing, with Julia as bait. Young mothers would approach Julia, ignoring Veronica entirely. She made polite conversation as Veronica started her sales pitch. Soon Julia could sidle away as Veronica reeled them in.

Julia wore a blazer just like Veronica's, and a laminated name badge that proclaimed to the world that she was *Julia Worth*.

She saw a man watching her across the atrium. His black hair hung limp across his face. He walked toward her, limping, slowly and painfully. When he had covered half the distance between them he raised his face.

"Brother," she said, in her own tongue.

His voice was dry, almost a whisper, but in it she could hear the fury of the surf.

"We need to talk."

Near the car park was a bench, shaded by trees and the bulk of the shopping centre. Issa sat hunched, arms clasped around his middle, rocking.

"You are hungry," Julia said. "I'll get you something to eat."

Issa snapped his teeth. "Nothing good here. Nothing but dirtwalker food." He spat, just missing his own bare feet.

Julia watched him, uncertain. Veronica had been occupied with two customers when Julia had run to him without a word. She didn't know what she would say to Veronica.

She didn't know.

Issa spat again.

"Why are you here?"

"Our father is dead."

A bloated peplemover crawled by, back window festooned with stickers. She thought of the last time she had seen her father, furious, condemning her. Alive.

“What happened?”

“Shan Ta,” he said, and she gasped. For her brother to kill her father, to turn on him like a blood-mad shark...Shan Ta had always been angry, always had a heart like a clenched fist. But to *murder*—

“I...I cannot believe it.”

Issa shrugged. “Maybe here on the dirt you have the luxury of disbelief.” He pushed himself painfully up from the bench. He looked at her one last time, then turned and made his way out into the road, paying no heed to the cars that honked in his wake.

It was Veronica, she realised, hand on her shoulder, calling her name, asking what was wrong.

“My father is dead,” she said, in a voice that came from miles away. A buzzing started in her head and did not cease, even as Veronica was bundling her into her battered Honda Civic, driving the short distance to Peter’s house, taking her keys. She let Veronica steer her into a chair and hand her a cup of instant coffee. She managed a smile.

“I’m alright,” she said, a tear on her cheek. “Everything’s. Alright. I just want to be alone.”

Veronica pursed her lips and stared at her for several seconds. “Okay. Of course. You have my number, dear. Don’t hesitate.” She leaned over and hugged her, then left, locking the door behind her.

When Julia heard Veronica’s car turn the corner at the top of the street she screamed and threw the coffee against the kitchen wall.

Eventually, curled on the couch, she slept and dreamed of her mother, before she sickened and died, back when Julia was just beginning to learn who she was.

Her mother kissed the top of her head and said, “Ai, Lish-ma. My first.” They were sitting, entwined, in a warm current across the top of the reef where the blackwater began so the water ran, now hot, now cold, across their skins like fingers.

“Why am I first, mother?” she asked. “Why not Shan Ta? He is eldest.”

Her mother nodded. “Eldest yes, but male. Regency is always the daughter’s. Your father is the sole child of his mother. When Shan Ta was born I cried, Ai ma, because I understood that this would be the end of us. But then you were born, and so the curse of your father’s line is lifted. Sparse though we are, our people will live on. Through you.”

She looked up at her mother. “I do not understand.”

“It matters not,” her mother said, “understand or no, it is and will be.” She smiled then. “Do not concern yourself. Your time is not yet come.” Her mother waved her away, out into the blackwater. “Go, play with your brothers.”

She did not go, when her mother died, to take her fled body out, far beyond the black, there to await Ron-ur-Tai, sole ancestor of the great fish, the nameless ur-shark. Now, she supposed, Issa would make that journey alone, only their father’s body for company. Out, and down, down, down, where no light remained, and unknown shadows brushed at skin. She should be there with Issa when he made that journey down, but she had risen up like a bubble and once risen, there was no sinking.

“Go home.”

“What?” Peter looked up from his screen. Joost was leaning against the doorframe.

“Go home, man. You’ve been here three straight days, in early, out late. Making me look like a slack bastard. Not good for morale.” Joost smiled. Technically, Peter was Joost’s superior, but Joost was good, confident, a shark. Friendly enough, but always to be watched. Peter shook his head.

“I’ve got too much to sort out. Only just got the Anderson account straight again yesterday. Should have left you in charge, not Thompson,” Peter said, knowing exactly why he hadn’t.

“Tell you what,” Joost said, “come with me now. Have a beer. You can take an hour out. Then you can sit in front of that screen until doomsday if you want to.”

Peter looked at the spreadsheet and suddenly felt very tired.

The sound of the car pulling into the driveway woke her and she sat up on the couch. Mid-afternoon sun glared through the window, reflected off the blinds. She heard keys jingle and she stood and walked towards the door to greet him.

He said nothing but brought her close, held her for a long time, his face in her hair. Eventually she realized he was sobbing. Finally he stopped, composed himself, looked at her. “I am so, so, sorry,” he said.

He said nothing more. Julia smiled, turned her head to one side. “It’s okay,” she whispered.

He strode into the kitchen, banging open doors. “Okay. So. I’m going to cook you something incredible, and we’re going to sit down together and eat, and I want you to tell me *everything*. I want you to tell me what it’s like to live down there, tell me about your brothers, your father...” She heard the hiss of oil splashing in a hot pan. “I...I’m so sorry. I can’t believe we’ve never talked about this. Can’t believe I’ve never asked you.”

She walked into the kitchen. He’d put an apron over the top of his work shirt and was wearing a chef’s hat, a joke gift from an office Christmas party. He shook the pan with one hand, spreading the oil and reached for herbs.

“I can’t stay,” she said.

The car’s engine was still ticking. She carried no luggage.

“Airport?”

She shook her head. “Just take me to the water.”

The nearest beach was fifteen minutes away. Peter turned the key.

“Tell me everything,” he said, “everything you can.”

She didn’t know where to begin. Then she did.

“We were a *people*, once. The water was warm, we sang and we were happy and we were strong. My mother told me this. Our kingdom, our clan, had lived there forever.

“Not long after my mother and father were betrothed the fire came. They had gone that day, out where the water was cold and black. Fortunate. If not, they would have been among the dead. Even there they felt it. One moment all was dark. The next, a brightness, a blast of heat. They clung to each other as they were pushed away, caught in debris. When they woke it was a long time before either of them could muster the strength to rise from the seabed.”

She fell silent. The lights ahead turned red. Peter looked over at her. Tears streaked her cheeks. The lights turned green. A car honked behind them and Paul started, put the car into gear, moved slowly through the intersection.

“They were sick, both of them, but they held each other close, supplying to the other strength they did not possess. They made their way home, and home was gone. They passed no coral. What fishes they saw were burned and dead and shredded.

“Some of the people were still alive, though the seabed was littered with bodies and parts of bodies. Clouds of blood floated in the near-boiling water but no sharks came. The few still living looked to my mother for guidance but she could give none. They swam, as long and as far as they could, before their strength gave. Only resting when they were at the point of uttermost collapse, they kept going, out, down, further into the blackwater than any had ever traveled. Many died.

“They felt it, when the water became warmer, shallower. Many of them were now blind. Every time the moon appeared new above the water there were less of them. Eventually those left, the remnant of the remnant, chose my parents to lead them.

The beach was deserted. Paul stopped the car.

“Mururoa,” he said. “Your people must have lived near Mururoa. It was a nuclear test.”

She shrugged, staring through the window. “Devastating as these things had been, they believed the worst was over. Then children were born. Those few that lived were blind, or insane, or twisted like seaweed. One or two seemed true, all male. When I was born, my mother thought it a sign that the curse was over.” She took a shuddering breath, climbed out of the car and walked down to the sand.

Peter followed. Sand filled his shoes and he kicked them off. “Wait,” he said. She stopped. He walked to her, embraced her.

When they separated again, she smiled. “You’re crying,” she said.

Peter laughed. “Of course I am,” he said. “I love you.”

She looked out to sea.

“You won’t be back,” he said, not a question.

She shook her head. “My brother needs me. My...my people need. Me.”

Thoughts ran through Peter’s mind, arguments to make her stay. But you don’t get to be regional sales director without learning that some battles cannot be won. He stepped back, and nodded his head.

She walked into the surf. When the waves crashed against her waist she turned and looked at him one last time. Then she dove under the water and was gone.

Peter stood and watched the sea for another few minutes.

No doubt she was already well out to sea. Not a chance of catching up with her now.

He walked back down to the surf and unbuttoned his shirt.

Map

...Adam Bales

A smudge on the horizon: the last port before a wild sea of desert. And beyond, the tribe who changed with every visit as tribal rights clashed with white man's rights and the tribe followed bits of both. *Will they still accept me?*

The smudge resolved: a corrugated iron shelter over dusty pumps. A weatherboard building, stained the red of the country so that it blended and threatened to become part of the land. A wide area out front — room for trucks. None were there.

Sarah worked the petrol pump, waving flies away as they buzzed at her face and not even noticing the action at first. *What would an alien anthropologist say?* Sweat beaded on her forehead, dampening her gray hair, and the thick smell of petrol assaulted her.

Inside, as hot as out. She walked up to the counter and rang a bell.

Feet hit the floor behind a door. It swung open to reveal a young man, singlet top sticking, receding hairline cut short, probably a beer in the back room. He looked her over but didn't seem interested. *Probably doesn't look past the leathery skin or the bony face.*

He scratched at a tanned arm. "Yep?"

She indicated the car outside.

He scanned the items. "Heading west?"

She nodded.

"Not a place for humans out there — all alone."

"I'm used to being alone."

A grunt. "You're never as alone as you are out there."

She smiled: a dismissal, a ceremony, a piece of social lore. Then she headed back to the driver's seat.

On the road she watched the sands. Here the human world stood further away — this was the land of Kangaroo and Snake, not of man.

Particles of dust tumbled across the road forming a layer of red above the bitumen. Off in the distance, huge electricity cables and a smaller fence competed to be the primary sign of humanity.

The road changed to gravel. Sarah frowned. *I thought it was all sealed.*

Then the gravel deferred to dirt marked by tyre tracks. Sarah slowed down as the tyre tracks faded away, leaving no hint of where to go. She stopped the car and studied the map. The road should be sealed.

She closed her eyes and rubbed at her head. Then she turned the car around. After a minute, she was still on dirt. Then another two without change.

Where's the road? I stopped only five hundred metres from the gravel. Sarah tried to ignore the feeling — dreamlike in its illogical power — that she did not belong here.

Where are the power lines? She looked at the skyline which stood devoid of human monuments and seemed a purer blue than ever — like all other skies yearned to imitate this one. *They're too big to not be able to see. They were close.*

And in the land devoid of humans and signs of humans with the travellers lost in the middle, Sarah remembered something:

An elder stood watching her. The other men and women sat silently, waiting for him to talk.

He began. “At one time, a man could wander from the tribe and get lost in a land yearning to escape from humanity. But man is meant to be tribal so an elder asked Kangaroo for dreaming magic to help the tribe stay together.”

He sketched complex paths in the sand. “So Kangaroo taught man how to mark the sacred places and how to mark the normal places with signs that they belonged. And man learnt and did as Kangaroo said until places where they could become lost were mostly gone. But we still leave a kangaroo alone if it seems to disappear, out of respect for Kangaroo, who taught us the magic.”

Could I be lost there? Her reminiscence was broken as she caught sight of a few metres of fence. The posts, wardens on the horizons, looking out for lost travellers...or laughing at them.

She turned the wheel and started the car toward them. *While I was driving I was thinking about part of the fence and how human it seemed here. Maybe the land struggles to remove something I focus on as connecting to my world.*

The car rumbled onward. Everything seemed normal at first but then distances dilated, as if the ground was elastic, stretching and compressing. Sarah slammed the brakes on as the car seemed to skip fifty metres. She came to a halt by the posts: no longer wardens but just a meagre strip of half-forgotten humanity. And then, as she watched, a length of the wire joining the posts disappeared.

It's a trick of the sun. Not true, not true. But what if it is? I have to focus on the wire. I can't let it disappear.

The wire continued to fade as if acid ate at the end. The wind peaked, blowing dust across the fence posts, obscuring it. Figures formed in the sand and faded, reaching out and constantly shifting and fighting any sense of stability.

When the wind fell and the dust died down much more wire was gone. *It's not working. It's not real. It is.*

The voice that feared the monster in the cupboard won and Sarah scabbled in the glove box, looking for the satellite phone she had bought for this trip. She looked at the display. *No service. It's meant to always have service.*

Sarah watched the wire continue to fade. *Maybe if I imagine something bigger, more human? Like a city.*

She tried to picture a vast city, spread across the desert. Phantom people walked to and fro, too busy to talk even in her imagination. *It's not working. Maybe a city is too alien to this place. Or maybe imagination just isn't enough.*

Acting on instinct, she grabbed rope from the back and leapt from the car. Her feet hit dirt, which crawled beneath her, as if thousands of invisible ants marched there. She staggered on and trailed the string around a nail on the first post. She ran it through to the end bit of wire where she tied it. Reinforced, the wire ceased to disappear.

Sarah hurried back to the car as if its metal frame, a fragment of the world she knew, offered protection. *I just have to figure out how to reverse it before this stop gap fails.*

She stared out the window at the dirt which showed no signs of motion. Instead, all texture seemed to be gone and it stretched away like a plain would in a child's conception — too flat.

She studied the fence. *If a little humanity can stabilise it, could a lot bring it back?*

She jumped from the car, ignoring the strange texture of the ground, and grabbed the esky, placing it beside the final fencepost. She pulled the string and tied it to the handle.

She added more fence posts: a gas lantern, a rucksack, a tent bag. The fence grew longer and everything seemed to hold.

And then the rest of the wire disappeared. *It's not enough.*

Sarah's mind, an anthropologist's mind, shot into action: pictograms and paintings, writings and scribings. Across culture, visual communication prospered and written language was a sign of development.

She fell to the ground and, with her fingers, began to carve words into the dirt. The dirt seemed to pulse against her but the words stayed.

She needed something more structured. More human. Noun, verb, sign, signifier. Metalanguage, a show of complexity. A fence post began to unravel...then halted. She continued to write.

Then the fence began to grow back, particles the size of a piece of sand appearing and building it up. *Too slow though. What more?*

Then an idea. She grabbed the map book and began to carve features from it onto the ground, adding labels and a grid reference. A map, the sign of human dominance over the land's mystery, a reminder of the world she wanted to return to. And, as she scribed, more and more particles began to join the fence seeming to sew together the wood, a stitch at a time.

She extended the map, faster and faster. The fence reappeared. Then the first electricity pole began to form and wires began to join it to others. The artefacts continued to spread.

She didn't stop, continuing to extend the map and label it in more and more detail, adding a key showing human features. And the road began to appear and stretch further onward until it seemed to be back to normal. Even then, she continued to scribe.

And then it became too dark to see.

Sarah flicked on a torch. *I think it's back to normal.*

She got into the car and drove along the sealed road.

And not until she passed the first house and greeted the first member of the tribe did she take her eyes off of the road.

The Unicorn in the Tower

...Eilis O'Neal

I had never intended to tell the story of what occurred that night. I have always felt that, should I touch ink to paper and record the events, they would become more solid, more actual, and thus, somehow, less real. Moreover, I have worried that words, so indelible once set down, might reveal the very culpability that I have always tried to keep from myself. Though I have rubbed the stone of memory in my head, until it has become smooth and polished with time, I have always clung to one fact. Until that night, I had never intended to free the unicorn.

There. I have stated my defense. Though I take responsibility for my actions, I take none for my intentions. Those were someone — or something — else's. Still, I worry that this thin cloak of protestation will not shield me from the cold reality that telling the story might bring on.

But James cannot visit without asking if I have written down the tale. He pulls at me like a rider reining a reluctant horse, drawing me back when I want to go forward. He speaks of my daughters, who will never learn the story if I do not tell them, and of my age, and I think perhaps he is right. Then I recall the possible consequences to my family, should some ill-meaning person reveal my deed at court. Yet the sight of the scar across my palm, so white and thin now, brings with it the remembrance of eyes, of the bars reflected in those forest hues of brown and green—

Enough. Freedom comes in many forms, from both the open gate and the blank page awaiting words. I will tell it. It was the year of our Lord 1666 — the sixth year of the reign of King Charles II — and I was seventeen.

I do not recall the precise day that Mr Pepys called upon my father and sought permission to take my brother and me to the Tower to see the King's Menagerie, but I think it must have been in early August. Mr Samuel Pepys, the Clerk of the Acts to the Navy Board, was a great friend of my father, so it was not unnatural that he should call to inquire as to whether James and I might like to "visit the lions". James pleaded with my father, declaring that he would not rest until he had seen the lions, and through the sheer exuberance of a twelve-year-old won his way. Mr Pepys promised to return and, with a wink at me, to bring with him a guest that I might enjoy.

Mr Pepys returned three days later, arriving in grand fashion in his own coach. James darted out into the street as soon as the horses stopped, though I remained indoors, as my father had just come from his study to stand at my side. Part of me

longed to dash about as James did, but I was a child no longer, and knew I must act as befitted a young lady.

An instant later I was glad that I had kept my place, for following Mr Pepys out of the coach was a form I recognized, one that made me take too deep a breath. My stays hitched against my ribs, but I paid them no mind. One of our maids, Nettie, opened the door that James had let slam, and in galloped James, followed at a more sedate pace by Mr Pepys and Robert, son of the Baron de Ros.

My father greeted Mr Pepys and Robert warmly, then beckoned me forward. "Robert, I trust you remember my daughter, Miss Elizabeth Davies."

"I could not forget, though it has been too long since our last meeting," he said as he took my hand and bowed over it, his eyes never leaving my face.

"Indeed it has," I agreed. "But if our King felt it necessary to flee London last year to escape the plague, his subjects could only do likewise. And my father is much concerned for his children's welfare, since that same disease claimed my mother three years ago. We have only recently returned from our country house."

"Your father is a prudent man," Robert said. "But I, at least, am glad that you have returned to London."

My throat caught so that I could not speak, and I was thankful to Mr Pepys, who said cheerily, "Well, we mustn't tarry. If we arrive too late the lions will lie fast asleep with their bellies full from breakfast." With that, he led us to the coach.

"We've never been to the Tower before," James confided to Robert, who sat across from him. "Are there truly three lions?"

"There are," Mr Pepys affirmed. "And all manner of other beasts besides. But I'll not spoil the surprise by telling you about them. You'll have to wait and see them for yourself."

Undaunted, James bounced up and down on his seat. "Did you hear that, Lissa?" he asked. "Three lions!"

I smiled at him, without the heart to spoil his joyful mood by telling him not to jump on Mr Pepys' coach seats. As we moved into the center of the city, the noise and bustle grew until it threatened to overwhelm all conversation in the coach. Pedestrians of all sorts — from little boys in ragged shirts to plump merchants' wives armed with baskets for their shopping to sailors from the great ships crowding the river — hurried through the streets, dodging the hackney carts and other coaches that slowed our own progress. Above the huddled houses, I could make out the spires of churches, though none as fine and large as St. Paul's, amid the haze of heat cast over the city.

James yelled, his still-high voice breaking free of the tumult around us, and pointed at something out his own window. When Mr Pepys turned to look that way, Robert leaned his own head near mine and whispered, "You look very fetching in that dress, Miss Davies. It brings out the green in your eyes."

To my dismay, particularly in my youth, my eyes have never been anything but a sort of muddy hazel. I consoled myself that I had other, more attractive qualities, but I knew that my charms did not lie in my eyes. These thoughts whistled through my mind at his words, but I merely said, "Thank you, my lord."

"I wish you would call me Robert," he said. When I did not reply, he said, "It's a lucky thing that I saw Mr Pepys at court only five days ago. When he mentioned that he was going to ask your father's permissions to bring you two here, I pled to be included, since he could act as chaperon for us."

I stopped myself from biting my lip, but I could not keep from twisting a length of ribbon attached to my dress. I was saved from responding by James reaching forward to grasp my hand and crying, "Look! I see the Tower. We're nearly there." When I hazarded a glance, Robert was once again sitting at a proper distance, his eyes trained on the river and Tower Wharf. James continued his stream of talk, exclaiming over the whiteness of the Tower, the ships moving on the river, and the ravens swooping over the Tower. Of these things I took little note, being too caught up in my own thoughts.

Robert de Ros. We had first met in the year before my mother's death, when I was still a girl, and he a lad of only fifteen. He had been handsome even then, with none of the ungainliness that haunts many young men, and those good looks had only intensified with age. He wore his hair long and shiny around his shoulders, eschewing the curled wigs popular since the return of King Charles, and his eyes were as gray as the mists that clung to our country house. I heard of the women, both young and old, who tittered behind their fans or pressed their hands to their chests when he passed them at court. Having never been to court myself, and thus relying on the gossip of others, I did not know if he accepted the advances of such women. With the King keeping several mistresses himself, I suspect few would have faulted Robert if he had.

Robert de Ros. My feelings for him were a knot of briars in my heart. I could not loose one without bringing the whole tangle with it. He had never spoken to me except in sweetness; he listened to my brother's childish prattle without boredom, and sought my father's advice, though he could have found better counselors at court. He sent small gifts sometimes, none inappropriate — a box of lace handkerchiefs, a singing yellow bird in a pretty cage, a book of poetry suitable for a young woman. And yet I sometimes saw his eyes wander around our parlor, taking in the fine furniture and carefully dusted ornaments. Those moments always recalled the reasons for my hesitancy to me. For I knew, as well as any in London, his family's circumstances: their wealth squandered a generation before, their title and small bit of land all that kept them in new clothing. He was his father's only son, and so had to marry for money, even if it meant choosing someone outside the peerage of England, which had been so devastated during the reign of the Commonwealth.

He wanted to marry me.

He had not asked my father for my hand, for I was young yet. Still, I was no fool. I could see the way his eyes marked me for their own, the way he wooed me with sugared words and small kindness to my family. I had no reason to think ill of him, and yet I could not help but wonder and fret. I did not want to marry anyone who saw only coins when he looked at me, no matter if our first son would one day become a baron.

James squeezed my hand to assist me from the carriage. The smell of the Thames and the noise of men unloading cargo from the far corners of the earth broke my thoughts. We followed Robert and Mr Pepys, who paid the small fee at the gate near the Lion Tower. A fee bill was posted on the wall, and James read it aloud as we waited.

"All visitors must pay the set admission fee, or, in its place, one cat or small dog." James looked confusedly from Robert to me. "What do they want with cats and dogs?"

"Those too poor to pay the fee," Robert said, "can bring an animal to feed to the beasts inside." Though he did not sound repulsed by this when he began, when he saw James' suddenly white face and my own blanch, he quickly added, "I will speak to Mr Pepys when we go in, and we will make sure that no such animals will be fed to the lions today."

James nodded, a little weakly, but soon forgot his trouble as we made our way to the viewing platform. The three lions had been let out into the yard and were sunning themselves, oblivious to the growing heat. "There's old Crowley," Mr Pepys told James as he pointed out the male lion. "I come to see him quite often, and I fancy that he knows me. Crowley," he called, "it's Samuel, come to see you and your wives." The old lion, his mane dark around his face, turned his head as if he did understand what Mr Pepys had said, and yawned widely, displaying a set of long pale teeth. James laughed in delight.

James exclaimed over Crowley and his two lionesses, and Mr Pepys began to tell him how the health of the King was reflected in the health of the lions. "They are watched closely," he said, "for if one begins to fall ill, it means that the King may soon do the same. When they are robust, though, all of England can feel easy and know that the King is well." Too soon we descended to go and examine the other animals in their cages.

Mr Pepys had not lied when he told James he would be surprised at the animals. A leopard, its yellow coat darts with dark spots, and a striped orange tiger: like the lions, these huge cats lounged in their dens, but they did not deign to look at us as we passed. A dog called a jackal, which reminded me of a skinny fox, but longer of leg and more grizzled, worried a bone in the back of his cage. Three eagles perched on roosts in separate enclosures. One had a white head and neck, and Robert told us that it had come all the way from the New World colonies. Another, even stranger bird stood in a cage with high bars. Called an ostrich, it had an exceedingly long neck, a cruel-looking beak, and huge black feathers on its back that gave way to snowy white ones. Mr Pepys told us that the animal could digest iron, and that the keepers put several nails in its food every few days to keep it in health. I wondered about this, for it seemed that I could see a small pile of nails lying uneaten in the back corner of the pen, but I said nothing, as it seemed rude to contradict him.

As we came to the end of cages, James started to ask whether we could go back to see the lions again, but Mr Pepys held up a hand to silence him. "I have one more surprise for you," he said. "Look, here comes the Keeper of the Menagerie." A short man wearing the King's colors was hurrying towards us, his clothing covered in a thin layer of dirt. A large ring of keys jingled at his belt.

"Mr Pepys," he cried as he neared. The two exchanged hearty greetings, then the Keeper said to me, "I hope you will forgive my appearance, Miss. We've had a mountain cat just sent as a gift to his Majesty from the Ottoman Emperor. The beast has not eaten since it arrived, and I've been trying to coax it into taking some food. It pounced on me and knocked me to the ground just a moment ago, but then took the meat I offered it." He looked pleased at his last words.

"I was hoping we might see the other acquisition," Mr Pepys said slyly.

"For you, my friend, anything," the Keeper answered. "Follow me. But I shall have to ask the men to keep a distance once we reach the cage. You can go near, Miss, but everyone else should stay back, else it will drive the poor beast mad."

We followed him, and I hardly heard Mr Pepys saying that few people were able to see this particular animal, as it was not on display for the public yet. Something warm, like wine on a cold night, licked at my veins, and I felt my step quicken. Well away from the other dens, a barred enclosure was set into a long stone wall. Though the sun would eventually slant into the cage, the area lay in dim twilight now, and at first I could not see

anything. The Keeper held out his arm to indicate that the others should not go further. I paused as well, but Mr Pepys said, "Go on, my dear."

I do not know what I expected to see as I moved toward the bars. Perhaps some newly born creature that would be frightened by the arrival of too many people. But what I saw was no more newly born than the stars or the sea that reflected them.

As I came within an arm's breadth of the cage, the unicorn stepped forward to meet me.

Even now, so many years later, I can close my eyes and that moment folds around me. The dank smell of the river mixing with the scent of dung and fur from the far cages, the heat of the sun striking my arms, the rumbling roar of a lion back by the observation platform. The unicorn walked towards me like a leaf dancing on a breeze, so lightly that I had to look to make certain its feet actually touched the ground. It was smaller than a horse, more slender and longer of neck. Its coat, like the color of the moon when it is the barest fingernail in the sky, seemed to shine in the darkness of the cage. Eyes the shade of forest, brown and green and gray all swirled together, regarded me. Its horn spiraled out from its forehead with a pearly radiance whose brilliance made my eyes hurt. That horn was longer than my arm from elbow to finger tip, and appeared sharper than a knife at its point.

I could see the bars reflected dully in the unicorn's eyes, and my heart fluttered wildly for a moment, then went still, like a bird suddenly caught by some house cat.

Behind me, Robert said, "I thought the beasts could not be taken alive."

"That's almost true. They cannot bear the touch of a man," the Keeper said. "The captors told us this one almost died before they could subdue it. We've had to get a girl from town to feed it and change its water."

"The horn, powdered and put into a tonic, is the best medicine in the world," Mr Pepys said. James murmured something, and Mr Pepys said, "That's quite right. It's terribly expensive."

He went on, but I heard no more. The rush of wind and leaves crackling on their branches filled my mind. Confined as I was within the Tower, I could smell heather and rain, could see forests darker and wilder than any that had existed on English soil for hundreds of years. My hands closed around the bars and I leaned my forehead up against them. Somewhere, someone said "Miss Davies," but I could not think what those words meant. Then the unicorn whickered, and the sound thrilled all the muscles in my body, made me want to leap and dance in the dirty yard.

Suddenly, a hand seized my shoulder and pulled me away from the cage. I stumbled and nearly fell, but the hand held me up, then propelled me towards James, who stood with Mr Pepys and the Keeper. I felt feverish and weak, my thoughts dense with strange trees and meadows.

"Miss Davies!" It was Robert's voice, and it brought me back into the world. I blinked, the leaves fled, and I could see his handsome face before mine. A glance at my side showed me James with his hands pressed to my own, though I had not felt him touch me.

"I am unhurt," I said. My voice sounded scratchy, like the voices of the ravens wheeling overhead. I took a step back — Robert's maleness clung to him and made me want to flee, though I knew not why.

"What happened to her?" Robert demanded of the startled Keeper.

The man bit his lip nervously. "I don't know, my lord. They are strange beasts, and said to be magical. I have seen the girl we hired to care for it sometimes with a dazed look in her eyes. But Miss Davies does not seem harmed."

"Perhaps you should not let people near it," Robert snapped, his cheeks red with passion.

"Why didn't you answer when Mr Pepys called you?" James whispered, but I could only shake my head. Forehead pinched, he asked, "Are you truly fine, Lissa?"

"I seem to be," I said. I looked back toward the cage, but the unicorn had retreated into its dim interior, visible only as a pale sliver of moonlight cutting through the darkness.

"We should take Miss Davies home," Mr Pepys said a little worriedly

"Yes, come on, Lissa," James said, tucking his hand more firmly mine.

Somewhere in the Tower the lions roared again, and one of the eagles screeched, but to me they seemed suddenly unreal, as insubstantial as the wind. I looked at my brother, his brown hair falling softly across his forehead, his face studiously concerned, and wondered if he might disappear before my eyes. We were none of us real, I thought. The only real thing in all of London was the unicorn.

When we arrived home, my father took a single look at my wan face and wide eyes and sent me to bed. As Nettie led me upstairs, I could hear the other three speaking at the same time — James relating what had occurred, Robert asking if he should fetch a surgeon, and Mr Pepys apologizing profusely.

I said nothing as Nettie helped me out of my gown, my petticoat and my shoes. She inquired as to my health repeatedly, but I could not concentrate on what she said, for I kept imagining that vines had grown up around the windowsills. From the corners of my eyes I would see their twining advances, but when I turned my head to look they disappeared. So I felt some shock when she returned — I had not noticed her leave the room — with a bottle of foul-tasting tonic, several spoonfuls of which she insisted I consume. She put me into bed, then closed the door behind her.

The first of the dreams came that night.

I ran over the hills of a forest, tore across the rolling ocean of land faster than any creature on the earth. I leaped deep ravines and danced across open fields, the moon lighting the woods around me as bright as day. The light shone against my pelt, feeding me as sunlight feeds a rose. My hooves barely bent the grass they touched, and I could feel my mane flowing down to the middle of my back. I never grew tired, never needed to stop and drink from the cool streams that wound through the forest. I was free, I wanted to run, and so I did.

The waking hours of the next few weeks blur in my mind, as uncertain and unknowable as the path a raindrop will take down a pane of glass. Some moments stand out in my memory, bright and sharp against an unvaried backdrop of forgetfulness. My father standing in the doorway to my room, thinking that I slept, his lean form stiff with worry. The sight of a team of white horses, seen from my bedroom window, and the sudden, nearly overwhelming feeling of pity for them, their bodies so crude and ill-formed. One of the King's own doctors bending over me, a gray-haired man with kind brown eyes, come as a favor to Mr Pepys. Robert's voice creeping up the stairs like the vines I thought I had seen around the windows that first night. James bringing his favorite diversion, a colorful

spinning top, to the breakfast table on one of the rare mornings I ate with my family, and pressing it into my hand when my father wasn't looking.

Mostly, I recall the dreams. They came every night, dreams of running, of sleeping in a thicket filled with birdsong, of shaking early snow off a tree with my horn to uncover the last withered apples of the season.

I walked slowly in a meadow of golden flowers and young green grass. A human girl sat at the base of a wide tree, a lap harp in her arms. She strummed it idly with her slender fingers, and sang with a clear voice. She did not look at me as I approached and knelt to lay my head upon her lap. Too late did I sense the fear beneath her skin, its scent obscured by perfume. From the trees leapt the hunters, their spears longer than my horn, their dogs baying and slavering. I gored one man in the chest, and the blood ran hot against my silver coat. But their nets were too strong, their numbers too many. Then a cage. A long time locked in a strange vessel that moved across water I could smell but never see. Finally the smell of the water changed from salt to silt, and there was a new cage of white stone and iron bars.

History has made me recall the afternoon that James burst into my room, his good clothes rumpled and a faint smell of smoke clinging to him. On Sunday, September the second, I had not accompanied my father and brother to church, as I had still not recovered from what Nettie termed my "affliction," so James found me still abed.

"There's a fire," he said excitedly. "Down by Cheapside. Tommy Wharthon's family went to St. Paul's today, and there were people seeking refuge at the cathedral."

I was not remarkably impressed. Fires abounded in London, blazes that claimed a few poor souls and shabby buildings, then consumed themselves.

"Some of them said it started in Pudding Lane, but others said the French have come up the river in secret to roast us all alive. I wish I were old enough fight against the French," he added dramatically. "I'd show them not to set fire to London."

"It was more likely someone's hearth fire left untended," I said, though James scowled at this unromantic idea. My head felt clearer than usual, and, for the first time in days, I was hungry. "Would you ask Nettie to bring me something to eat?" I asked, and thought no more about his words.

By the next night, however, the glow from the fire could be seen from my window, while gray ash blew into our garden like tiny snowdrifts. James brought me reports—the fire moved like a hungry beast always in search of more food; no matter how many houses were pulled down to stop it, the wind caught the burning embers and flung them past the firebreaks. People streamed like rats out of the cramped and twisted streets of the city, seeking shelter in churches and guildhalls thought to be beyond the fire's reach, only to have to flee again as the flames rampaged over their sanctuaries. Boatmen increased their fees from shillings to fifty pounds to ferry people from the fire's center. I did not doubt any of James' tales, for I could see for myself the way the wall of smoke marred the sky during the day, and could have read by the light of the flames at night.

Late on Tuesday night, James told me that St. Paul's was burning. Though the Duke of York had ordered the entire area about the great cathedral cleared, a live brand had been spun about by the wind and landed to set the building alight. I cringed as James described how the lead fell from the roof in molten rivulets, the closest thing to rain to descend on London in many months.

“And the wind has shifted,” he said as he ended his tale. “That means that the fire will burn towards the Tower now. And Father says that if it reaches the Tower, there’s enough gunpowder there that the French will see the explosion across the channel.”

Nettie appeared in the doorway then, her hands on her hips, and said, “Stop pestering your sister, young master. She needs her rest, and it’s time for you to be abed as well.”

James groaned, but dutifully rose and kissed my forehead. “When will you get better, Lissa? I’m so tired of you being in bed all the time.”

My mind had drifted far away, across London to the Tower, so I did not answer him at once. Then I blinked, and said, “Soon, James.”

I waited. I waited until all the house lights had been snuffed. Late, when every other soul in the house slept, I placed my feet quietly against the wooden floor of my room and tiptoed towards my wardrobe. I did not concern myself with petticoats or stays, but merely pulled an old gown over my head, stepped into shoes, then crept from the house.

Near our home, the streets remained still. The stars had been obscured, stolen by the light of the flames and the great plumes of smoke. I kept to the sides of houses, so that I faded into the few lean shadows. Even in the haze of the madness that gripped me, I knew dimly that it would mean my reputation and future if I were caught unescorted on the streets of London.

I grew tired so quickly, my legs weak from the days spent in bed, but I did not slow my pace. As I neared Chancery Lane, people running from the fire became a tide I fought, as they were all moving away from the place I sought to reach. Occasionally, hands blackened with ash gripped my arms and tried to force me backward, but I yanked myself free whenever one touched me. Forcing my way across one of the thin bridges spanning the River Fleet required that I squirm and slip my way through a wall of humanity. By the time I had pushed my way through the worst of the crowd I was bruised and exhausted, and I had entered the fire’s territory.

Afterward, many said that they had seen the fires of Hell that night, and I can affirm that, if we did not, then God’s punishment for sinners must be worse than any man can even imagine. I do not know how I survived my journey across the ruined city; I can only guess that the animal will that had dragged me from my bed gave me strength and protected me. Still, the heat scorched my skin a raw red, the ash coated my face, and other debris snagged in my hair. Ash that flew into my eyes made tears drip down my cheeks, and live sparks rained down to singe holes in my clothing and burn my skin. All around me I could hear the rumbling crashes of houses being torn down by firehooks or collapsing as the flames reached them. The houses made of wood screamed and popped as they burned, accompanied by the cries of pigs, chickens, and other beasts abandoned as their owners ran for their lives.

A ghostly light colored the eastern sky by the time I reached the Tower. My feet felt numb, and I could not breathe except in wheezing gasps. All around the Tower, men ran like ants to keep the flames at bay. Behind them, sailors struggled to remove the many barrels of the Navy’s gunpowder to ships waiting at the quay. In the frantic rush to clear the Tower of its treasure, no one noticed me slip along the outer wall and through the gate.

Inside the hive of activity was just as frenzied, and again, I moved undetected through the throng. The animals in the menagerie shrieked in fear, but no one paid them any mind. I, too, ran past the lions, the leopards rushing the bars of their cage in anxiety, and

the eagles fanning their wings and cawing into the dawn. I had come for only one of the Tower's captives, and it waited for me.

The unicorn was lying near the front of its cage, so still that I thought it dead for a moment. But it rose gracefully to its feet, a wisp of silver light uncurling like a budding leaf, and locked its eyes on me. I stumbled towards the cage and uselessly dashed my hands against the lock. The barred iron door held fast. Outside the Tower the fire roared its malice, and I cried out in despair, a harsh, guttural sound that sent the unicorn's head tossing. I wrenched again at the door, then sagged against it, my strength spent. I had come for nothing.

I nearly closed my eyes in despair, but just then a streak of dazzling orange flared in the corners of my vision. A cinder, blown over the Tower's walls, fell from the sky and landed upon a patch of dried grass. The unicorn neighed then, a bell-like sound that chimed through my chest and sent me scrabbling towards the tuft of flame igniting the grass. I stamped the fire, pounded it until it died, paying no heed to the way it scorched my shoe. As I rammied my foot down the last time, I felt it hit something hard. A jangle of metal reached my ears above the shouted orders of the men racing around the Tower. My nerves suddenly singing, I fell to my knees and gathered up the object.

The key ring, surely fallen from the Keeper's pocket sometime during the frantic night, clanked in my hand as I ran back to the unicorn's cage. The key stuck when I twisted it in the keyhole, but I heaved with all my might, then heard a heavy click as the tumblers gave way. With trembling arms, I pushed the cage door open.

The unicorn stepped towards me, and my nose filled with the scent of water, earth, and forest, despite the stench of smoke in the air around us. I could think of nothing in the world but the beauty of the creature in front of me, not of my family surely searching for me, nor of the fire that might come over the walls at any moment. I reached forward, hypnotized, wanting nothing more than to feel the silver fur beneath my fingers.

The unicorn neighed once again, then tossed its head to slash my palm with the tip of its horn.

Lurching backward, I snatched my hand away and cradled it against my chest. Blood seeped between my fingers in crimson lines. The unicorn spared me no second glance before it leapt from the confines of the cage and raced towards the gate. I saw some of the men it passed look around in confusion at the sudden flash of silver light, but they did not see the unicorn. It reached the gate, then hesitated.

"No," I called, taking a few steps forward and sinking to my knees. The wind grabbed the word and hurled it away so quickly that someone standing only an arm's breadth from me would not have heard it. Tears rolled freely from my eyes and down my face, and I clenched my gown in shaking hands. I wanted the unicorn to run, to escape before it was noticed and captured anew. But I also wanted it to return, regardless of the fire, to lay its head in my lap and let me place my lips against the warm silver fur beneath its horn. The two emotions tugged at my heart, battering me between them.

"Come back," I cried. As the words left me, I reviled myself and all my weak human longing more than I had ever hated anything. The unicorn stepped backward on its tiny hooves, lashing its tail, and the fear that it might wait too long to flee whipped around me. "Go," I called then, knowing it could not hear me. "Please, go."

The new morning sun glimmered on its horn, the smoky, wind-thrashed air around it stilled, and my parched throat tightened. The unicorn looked back once, as if at me, and then was gone.

I do not remember leaving the Tower. I recall standing before one of the boatmen on the river, my arms limp at my sides, my throat too raw and thick to speak. The man demanded forty pounds to ferry me up the Thames toward our house, which was more money than I had ever carried in my life. My hand was still bleeding, my face still covered with dirt and ash.

I started to turn away when a sailor dropped the keg of gunpowder he was carrying, stepped onto the boat, and grabbed the boatman's shirt in his huge hands. I did not hear the threats he yelled, but then the sailor offered me an arm to settle me in the boat, and a moment later the boat was moving slowly up the river. No mention of money occurred again.

I was tired, so tired that I feared I might fall asleep and be tipped out of the small boat and never notice. Unworthy thoughts crowded my exhausted brain. I felt betrayed by the unicorn, whose flight had been so quick and seemingly without thanks. Surely, I reasoned, it could have given me some small token of regard. I would have been satisfied with the barest thought, the briefest nudge of the head. But no, I argued, I was expecting it to behave as a human might. Though it had sent dreams and somehow helped me walk through the fiery streets of London, it remained an animal, unable to express something so human as gratitude. The conflicting thoughts buffeted me like the wind on the boat.

The boatman left me, at my request, some distance from our house. My legs trembled and shook as I walked, but I did not care. Again I kept to the sides of the street, though now I blended into the charred masses fleeing the fire. I had almost reached our house when I rounded a corner and collided with a tall figure.

"Pardon me," I mumbled, my head down.

"It's no trouble," the figure began, but at his voice I forgot myself and looked up. Robert de Ros stared back at me.

He had forgone the trappings of his handsome beauty — the neatly tied cravat, the frilled shirt sleeves, the feathered hat. Only a plain shirt and breeches covered him, and his eyes were red-rimmed and weary.

"Elizabeth," he cried, then seemed startled at his own boldness. "Miss Davies. What are you doing out here?" he asked in bewilderment.

I had no answer. I could not tell him that I had freed one of the King's own animals, had as good as stolen royal property. I could not explain my singed clothes and ash-covered face, nor the strangeness of being unescorted on the street in the morning's early hours. No one, I realized, could fail to understand that I been out all night. It was enough, that impropriety, to ruin my prospects for marriage forever.

As if he heard my thoughts, Robert said, "How long have you been gone from your house?"

Again, I did not answer. "Where are you going?" I asked, for I could think of nothing else to say. I almost shied from my own voice, so hoarse and human did it sound.

"The King has called all able men to aid in keeping the fire at bay," he said. "I go to help the Duke of York." He gazed at me, then seemed to make some decision of his own. "You've been ill. Have you been sleep-walking? Did you not realize you had left your house?"

"I meant to leave," I said. "I went...to help someone."

"You don't know what you're saying," he told me. "Come with me. I'll take you home." The blood on my palm had dried, but the wound broke open when he took my hand to draw me forward. Fresh blood blossomed, red and bright, and stained his own hand.

"You've hurt yourself," he said with concern. "Here, let me staunch it." He produced a white handkerchief and unfolded it to bind my hand, but I pulled free of him.

"No," I said. "You'll ruin your handkerchief. It will stop in a moment." Robert tried again to take my hand, catching my fingers in his. A day or a month before I might have let him. Now I stood straighter and said, "Don't."

Robert frowned, but saw the resolve in me, for he untangled his fingers from mine. When he moved to blot his own hand, I glanced down at my wound. The blood on my palm seemed to contain a silver hue, pearly and opalescent. I touched my finger to my palm. That finger I then lifted to my mouth and laid upon my tongue.

I could feel my feet moving, taking me ahead of Robert as he began to herd me gently along the street. He said something I did not hear. Instead a kind of rumbling, indistinct as a honeybee's buzzing, filled my head. The rumbling gradually rendered itself into words, the real words under the ones that Robert spoke aloud.

They spoke of a cage. A cage of golden bars and velvet cushions, but a cage nonetheless. That if I married him, I would be his wife in name, but only one of many others in deed. He was not a bad man, they said, or a cruel one. Still, the words promised, it was not me he loved, but only the vaguest idea of a girl, a girl who might have been anyone of suitable looks and fortune.

Slowly, I realized that the unicorn had given me something after all, that it had not simply fled without thanking me. The under-words died away as we reached our doorstep and Nettie ran into the street, followed by my father and James.

I was taken up to my room, washed, and put again to bed. Delirium, I heard Robert saying to my father. He was glad to have found me before I came to serious harm. He made clear that there was something more he wanted to discuss with my father after the fires had been stopped. The doors of the golden cage rattled, but I knew they would not close on me. I was different than I had been when I set out that morning. I had dared the fire; I had risked injury to myself to save the unicorn. Even through my exhaustion, I felt braver, wiser, than ever before. After what I had done, it would be nothing to set my own course, one away from Robert de Ros, no matter what anyone else might say. I had received the unicorn's gift, and I would not forget.

As I lay in bed, I heard a creak and turned my head to see James peering around the half open door.

"You can come in," I said. He came forward carefully, his eyes dark like pansies.

"Where did you go, Lissa?" he asked, sitting on the end of the bed. "We were so worried."

Inside me, a wild unicorn stepped lightly across the floor of a forest and disappeared. Outside the fire still raged, but for the first time in weeks I felt at peace and wholly myself.

"Let me tell you a story," I said. "It begins with the Tower menagerie, and a unicorn."

Rick Gets a Job

...Jason Fischer

“Well, here’s your work clobber then,” and Geoff handed Rick a bundle. It was a set of blue overalls, the fabric patched and stained. A pair of steel-capped work boots, one size too big and scuffed, and a hard-hat. Someone had written in texta across the visor ‘STEVE’.

“That was the last bloke,” Geoff said. He was the foreman, and had the ruined face of a hopeless drunk. Rick could smell the grog on his breath, tried not to make a face. It was 8 am, Monday morning.

It was a big place, and he was a bit overwhelmed. Scared too, his first job and all.

They got around on four-wheelers, useful for towing pumps and gear. The tank-farm was at the top of the steep hill, and Geoff made him walk alongside the bike that first time.

“A bloke could get sick of walking up and down that,” the fat drunk laughed, revving the engine a little so that Rick had to walk quicker to keep up. Some of the other pump-monkeys laughed at this, jeering at him from the catwalks above the massive stainless steel tanks.

“You can keep your gear here,” Geoff said, leading the way into a fibro shack that served as the site office. He pointed at the hooks on the wall, where bags and hats were hanging.

“Change in there,” he told Rick, pointing at the dunny door. The door jammed when pulled to behind him, and the place stank of a thousand uncleaned turds. The floor was lino, sticky with long-dried piss. He tugged off one sand shoe, hopping around on one foot as he tugged the overalls on, trying not to touch the tainted floor with his socks.

“Hurry up princess, haven’t got all day,” Geoff called out. Rick emerged from the shit-pit wearing his new gear. The foreman handed him a sheaf of papers.

“There’s all your pay stuff, and your Exemption,” he said. “Fill ‘em in and get ‘em back to me by tomorrow morning.”

Rick stuffed the papers into his rucksack, but held his Exemption Licence almost reverently. Like all official documents and most road signs, the words were in both languages, the local lingo and the eye-bending squiggle of the Rajjinn. He got out his wallet, and slotted the square of plastic in between his library tag and his Ration Card.

“There’s the kit shed, we keep the pumps in there, and hoses and stuff. See them tool boards, with all the steel pieces hanging on them? Those are your connectors, and when you’re done with them make sure they go back, clean.”

A thousand instructions, a thousand small humiliations. He was the new bloke, and didn't expect any different. He could expect to be sent off to fetch left-handed hammers and striped paint, all the usual horse-shit. He thought of the Exemption and decided it was all worth it.

Rick looked down the hill, took in the enormous scale of the operation. He could see the harvesting plant, thick smoke pumping out of the chimneys. He thought of what they were doing in there, and felt like he was going to vomit.

"When the tank's emptied, you need to push the last of the product through the lines," Mitch told him, his voice such a nasally strine that it was hard to tell if he was putting it on or not. Rick had been paired with the man, who bore his presence with undisguised resentment. Turned out he'd been given the job of babysitting the new bloke as a kind of punishment detail.

"Go easy on the pump," he told Rick, unhooking the thick hose from the tap at the base of the tank. The last of the red sludge dripped out as he wrestled with the hose, dunked it into a plastic tub of water. The hose made a loud sucking noise as it drained the tub dry.

"Wind the pump back you dickhead, you'll burn the motor out," Mitch said. The pump was rocking back and forth on its wheels, whining until Rick wound the handle around to slow the engine. The red muck in the sight-glass became clear as water pushed the 'product' through the hoses.

"Turn it off when I say," and then Mitch was trotting through the alleyway, dodging hoses and taps and other pump-monkeys. He was bent down by the destination tank for a long minute, and finally gave a loud whistle, waved his arms. Rick found the off-switch.

"Clean that," he said on his return, pointing him to the emptied tank with a hose and a broom. There was a hatch near the base, which he climbed into.

It stank in there. It really stank, like a hundred dead cows rotting in the sun. Gagging, he sprayed the water back and forth, pushed at the leftover sludge with the broom.

"Gah! You're doing it wrong. Get out," and then Mitch was in there, sweeping back and forth with the ease of long practice. Still, even he couldn't move that muck.

They fed a caustic solution through the pump, rigging it to cycle on the one tank.

"Bunch of fat bastards went into that blend, believe you me," Mitch told him. "The fat gets left behind, makes most of that sediment and sludge."

Next job, and Rick was sent off running. He navigated the maze of hoses till he was kneeling down by the fittings on his tank. He cracked the side-valve a little, just like he'd been shown, and a fine mist of product sprayed out, hissing under the pressure. He thought he could see the colour lighten, knew the water was coming. Knowing it was the only way to tell, he gritted his teeth and dipped his fingers into the stream of gunk, lifted them to his lips. It tasted like iron, like death. He did it again, and could taste the difference, it was starting to dilute. He threw the valves as the sludge ended and the water began.

"Good," Mitch said as they put away the hoses and the pump. "You don't wanna get water in the tanks. Too much and the product is fucked."

Rick couldn't get the taste out of his mouth. He noticed a rusty red stain on his knee from where he'd been kneeling, and he started to feel faint. The whistle went for lunch, and he followed all the other workers down the hill and into the mess. He got a tray and

let the lady fill a plate full of muck, but when he sat down at an empty table he poked at the food absently. Food was the last thing on his mind.

“Hey new bloke,” someone was saying, and he found himself surrounded by other pump-monkeys. They were bolting down their tucker like starving dogs.

“How you finding it so far?” one man said, holding back a smirk.

“All right,” Rick said.

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” the man said in a stage-whisper. “Something they didn’t tell you in your induction.”

Rick listened, wary. “You know where they put the leftovers? In the mess food,” and Rick pushed the plate away, standing up and blushing bright red. They bayed with laughter.

“Lost your appetite mate?” one of them said, and as he walked off he saw them fighting over his lunch, spoons diving like the beaks of greedy seagulls.

When the final whistle blew for knock-off time, he followed the mob of workers down past the time-clocks and out into the staff car-park, where he noticed they’d let down the tyres on his bike. Rick was not surprised.

“Come in, come in,” Trish’s dad said, pumping his hand furiously. “Hurry up Patricia! Your Richard’s here!”

He followed Mr. Simmons into the faded sitting room and sat in the good armchair at his insistence, accepted a beer he didn’t want. Her dad had gone from disapproval to fawning in one easy step.

“She’ll be ready in a minute. You know women,” Mr Simmons said, sharing a conspiratorial wink. They sat there awkwardly, and Rick could hear the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hallway.

“So I hear you got into the Harvesting plant? Bloody good work that,” he told Rick. “They give you a better Ration Card?”

“They’ve started me out on Valued Worker,” Rick said, and Mr Simmons nodded appreciatively. “You stay there a while, they put you up to Honoured Worker.”

“Good that. Don’t you muck it up lad.” Rick had no intention of mucking it up. He’d be able to take Trish out somewhere nice now, not a greasy spooner like usual. He’d even picked up a new shirt from the Co-operative.

“You’re on the Exemption then?” her dad asked slyly, and Rick nodded. Trish had warned him it was a delicate topic, and he couldn’t help but look at the framed pictures of her mum. They seemed to sit on every available surface, photos of a curvy woman with shocking unruly hair and an amazing smile that she’d passed on to her daughter.

“You stay there as long as you can, lad. Those Exemptions are worth more than gold,” Mr Simmons said, his voice choking up and unwept tears shining in the lamplight. Rick felt awkward, and didn’t know what to say so he sipped at his beer. It washed away the rank taste of product like water couldn’t, so he took a bigger swig.

“Hey you,” Trish said from the doorway. She looked wonderful.

They left Mr Simmons in the lounge-room with his memories and his tears. There was no ‘back by eleven’ tonight, and Rick doubted he’d ever hear that phrase again. He’d made it in the old man’s eyes, and now he was probably praying that Rick would put a baby in his daughter’s guts, the sooner to make an honest woman of her. Wives were covered by an Exemption.

“What’s it like?” Trish asked him. They were at the drive-in, lying on a blanket laid out next to his motor-bike. She didn’t have a TV set, and Rick had to share one with his extended family and the neighbour who’d gone shares in it so this was a real treat. It was a double-feature, the first film a romantic comedy, the second one of those indecipherable Rajinn stories. No-one dared leave during that, even if they had little idea what was going on.

“It’s a job,” Rick said, affecting an air of cool.

“No, I mean how does it feel to work there? Aren’t you scared?” Of course Rick was scared, but he was nineteen and not about to admit that to his new girlfriend.

“They say that it’s a nice way to go. All peaceful like,” she said, eyes shining as the leading man swooped a starlet back for the type of chaste kiss the Rajinn approved of.

“Do you ever see any of them?” she said. “The ones that get Harvested?”

“I don’t work in the Peaceful Chamber,” he said, all of the frustrated romance souring within his gut. Damned if he wanted to talk about that place. “I think they come in by train, or in trucks or something.”

As per usual, the Rajinn movie was a morality piece, focussed on the noble draftee, doing his or her duty for the good of humanity, willingly going to the Harvest. Sometimes they’d show a fantasy piece, of the bad old days before the Occupation, of the wars that the Rajinn had stopped, the diseases they’d cured. The starving hordes, the unemployed rioters.

“I think they do many good things for us.”

“But they took your mother,” Rick whispered. “Doesn’t that make you angry?”

“Not at all,” she said. “She lived a good life, and they drew her number. They didn’t have to drag her kicking and screaming, even though Dad needed a sedative. She went with her head held high, with her good hat on and her gloves and a ‘thank you’ to the soldiers. I’ll always admire her for that.”

Rick secretly thought Trish had become unhinged by the event and he found her unnatural fascination with Harvesting a little disturbing. However, those unseen marvels lurking beneath her cardigan made him willing to overlook just about anything. If he played his cards right, she would no longer stop his wandering hands.

Things were starting to go Rick’s way.

“We’re training you on the screw-press today,” Geoff told him about a month later. “If you can run a machine, you’ll get your Honoured Worker quicker.”

That was all the motivation that Rick needed. The only rank higher than that was Hero Worker, usually reserved for celebrities and top athletes. Honoured Worker was about the best he could ever hope for. He’d get his own place, his own car. Trish’s knickers would drop quicker than he could blink.

He learnt the machine quick enough, but it was a ghastly task. The conveyor brought hearts and arteries up the hill from the Peaceful Chamber, dumped them into his machine. He could fit thousands into the steel drum, and when it was full he slid the hatch closed, started up the screw. It pushed against the mass of dead flesh, squeezed out every little last drop of blood through the mesh sieves.

“They love these pressings,” Mitch shouted over the machinery. “Run the press out again, you can get heaps more out of that lot.” And even though Rick had squeezed those hearts until they looked white and empty, he knew better than to argue.

They blended the gore in a vat, mixed in the chemical that stopped it from coagulating. Whatever it was, it was nasty stuff and they needed respirators and gloves just to handle the canisters. Then they hooked up a hose and signalled the pump-monkeys outside the shed.

“You picked that up quick,” Mitch shouted, and Rick nodded numbly, knowing that he would see that heaving mess of hearts and organs as soon as he closed his eyes tonight.

The machinery was so loud that a fella couldn’t hear himself think, but there was some sort of commotion outside. They saw a cop car parked out the front of Geoff’s fibro office, lights flashing. Rick could see flecks of blood on the window by Geoff’s desk.

“Bloody hell,” Mitch said, and wandered over to the cop blocking the doorway. He came back, mimed a gun to the temple.

“Bloody Geoff. Can’t believe it. Others yeah, but not him.” They’d never even heard the shot, just kept on crushing hearts into pulp as the life bled out of their foreman. The fibro hut was barely twenty metres away.

Rick usually ate at a table with Mitch or one of the others, but that day he sat outside by the smoker’s bench, off to one side from the nicotine addicts. He’d found a texta somewhere, and was scrubbing out the word ‘STEVE’ on his hard hat. He got as far as ‘RIC’ before the ink ran out, but he shrugged. Near enough. He no longer wished to wear a dead man’s name on his brow.

“Richard Cobbler?” the Raijinn said. They had that lilt to their speech, the one that made every sentence sound like a question.

“Yes sir,” he mumbled, hat in hand. He’d only seen three Raijinn in real life, and one of them was during his job interview. They honestly scared the shit out of him, resembling something like an enormous komodo dragon with a fly’s head. Massive segmented eyes, sharp proboscis built for tearing into flesh. Great sharp claws, long and cruel and yellow.

This Raijinn wore a tie.

“You prefer Rick?” it said, reading his file. He nodded.

“A performance appraisal, it’s not about blame? You’re not in any trouble?” it continued.

“No, I mean yes,” Rick said.

“You have approached your work with great empathy, great honour? You have never phoned in ill? We are pleased?”

Rick sat there dumbly, a weak grin on his face, his bowels loose. It would be the work of a moment for the Raijinn to snatch him up, jamming that great sharp stinger into his heart. Folks said they could drain a man dry in under thirty seconds.

“How do you feel about the Harvesting?” the alien asked. “Some cannot handle the strain of this? Your psychological profile suggests that you would be capable, yet we worry?”

Worry? This invader, this killer, worried?

“You’ve been observed missing your designated meals? Are you incapable of working in your role? Do you have a moral objection to the Harvest?”

He was in a terrible position. If he lost this job, his Exemption would be revoked. He would be put back on Basic Rations.

“Forgive me, sir. I have been...preoccupied. Troubles at home.”

“Would these troubles be centred around your domestic arrangements with your life partner?” it asked. “Are your hormonal needs being met to your satisfaction?”

“No, not like that,” Rick said. The Rajjinn had a document framed on the wall behind it, written in the bilingual text for the benefit of the plant workers. It proved that Plant Supervisor Quylin Rajjinn held a ‘Certificate of Advanced Understanding in the Humanistic Outlook’.

“I’m okay sir, I wish to continue in my work for you and your people. The Harvest is our duty, an important duty.”

The alien looked at him, steepling its claws the way it had seen the humans do it. The effect was more alarming than comforting, those great yellow claws grinding together.

“I believe in the Harvest,” Rick said earnestly, wondering who he was trying to convince.

His family were subdued when Rick got home that night, sat morosely around the normally raucous dinner table.

“It’s Barry. Barry Werner from work,” Dad said. He and Barry were mates from way back, and went fishing every couple of months.

“They drew his name in the Harvest,” Mum said, and silently dished out the boiled cabbage. None of them looked at him as they ate, but he could tell what they were thinking.

You’re gonna be the one, they’d be thinking. You’ll be there at the plant, carving him up, draining his life out of him, squeezing and boiling and mixing him up in those great big vats.

Barry helped you fix that old motorbike, and now you’re going to be the agent of his destruction.

He couldn’t stay, couldn’t eat another mouthful in this house. Rick dropped his spoon on his plate, pushed his chair back. Not a word was said as he opened the kitchen door and left.

When he got to the Simmons house it must have been almost 11 o’clock, but still he pounded on the front door.

“I need to see Trish,” he told the bleary eyed Mr Simmons, who bit back his protests when he saw who the late caller was. He was let in, shown up to her room. Trish was still half asleep, surrounded by the stuffed toys and knick-knacks of her childhood.

“Rick? What is it?” she mumbled, blinking against the light in the hallway. He sat on the side of the bed, holding her hands tight.

“I’m scared Trish. You asked me if I was scared, and I’ll admit that I am. I’m scared for you. I couldn’t lose you,” he babbled. She stroked his face.

“It’s our duty,” she said. “There’s no need to be scared.”

“You won’t have to die,” he told her. “I’ve got an Exemption.”

“But that’s for you.”

“Not if you marry me. I want you to marry me Trish. Tomorrow. As soon as we can find a celebrant.”

"I'm not going to marry you just like that!" Trish said. "If you loved me, maybe, and if that was why you were asking. But this isn't for love."

"It's the only way," he said. "The only way to keep you safe. I think your father would agree."

He didn't know whether it was the thoughts of her sad-eyed father, the promise of old age, or the warm body in her bed that swayed her. Trish took Rick in her arms though, made a promise with her body that said more than any words could.

It was the dumb luck of the thing. They'd given their marriage notice as the law demanded, but Trish was drawn for the next Harvest. She would die two weeks before their wedding day.

"It's not fair!" Rick railed, to anyone who'd listen. He even took it to Quylin Raijinn, who waxed philosophical and showed him a video entitled *The Benefits of the Capitulation System*.

"We need so little, and give so much more to your people," Quylin said.

"I've asked questions and I know the truth," Rick said, on dangerous ground and beyond caution. "I know you Raijinn have cornered the market in an intergalactic delicacy. Us."

After all avenues of appeal had been exhausted, Rick began a campaign of sabotage. Valves opened, thousands of litres of product down the drains. He was caught on surveillance video, and punishment was meted out by an offworld committee.

"Make an example of him," they said, and Quylin did just that. Rick's Exemption was revoked on the spot, and a special dispensation given by Quylin's supervisors to "circumvent the Harvest selection process".

He was dragged kicking and screaming by a pair of burly men, dragged into the vast shed at the bottom of the hill. There he learnt that the Peaceful Chamber existed only in the movies. The bottom line did not allow for luxuries. Naked, he was herded through a cattle race, his arms bolted to a rattling conveyer overhead.

He could see the wailing figures stretch out before him, their feet dangling over a great bloody sluice, men and women screaming and begging for mercy. Hard-eyed men paced the catwalks, lining up the bolt-gun to each temple and delivering that fatal blow with grim efficiency.

This was how Trish's mum would have gone, wailing and moaning, realising that there would be no reclining chair, no dignified attendants. And poor old Barry Werner, he was about to cop it too. He'd probably be chained up behind Trish, would watch the terror sweat run down her naked body, watch her foul herself as she realises she is about to be killed.

Rick fought back the snot and the hysterical tears, almost wishing Trish and he could die together, but glad he won't hear her screams or she his. It's a small dignity and his last one.

Even as he drew closer to his final moments, Rick realised that nowhere in that brutal abattoir did a Raijinn murder a single human. They didn't need to.



The Better To...

...Eugie Foster

In the murky, false twilight, a gutted car sat on cinderblocks in the street like a half-butchered carcass. Reese huddled beside the rusty carapace, keeping his eyes down when a scream tore the air. He pulled his hood tight around his face. Such flimsy protection against the hunters, but the colorless material shielded him, concealing the cinnamon-red of his hair and the pallor of his face.

The hunters looked for the telltale flashes of color in the drab panorama beneath them as they sped through the air — the white of eyes searching the skies, a pale brow startled upward, or, in Reese's case, the blaze of shining red.

A bolt of frosty zinc split the darkness, followed by booming thunder. He should've been safe at midday. When the overcast was streaked with gold and the infrequent shadows were short, the hunters were grounded. But the clouds had thickened, turning tawny noon into silvery dusk. Halfway across the deserted suburb, his pack bulging with goods precious as life, he'd heard the shrieks overhead.

A screech, close enough he could feel the heat from it, made him dive, curling his body around his pack. The gust from the cutting edge of a wingtip fanned him, and the grate of empty talons filled his ears. Breath catching, he veered into an alley, expecting to feel tearing razor-claws.

A gray door opened in a gray wall, and a hand, white contrast in the gloom, reached out. It caught his elbow and heaved him inside. The door slammed shut, bringing down a shroud of darkness. The hunter screamed, rattling the walls. Reese heard the crunch of claws over metal and the squeal of steel being dragged into the sky. A second later, and the crash of the car falling back to earth eclipsed even the thunder.

Fingers tugged at Reese's wrist. "Downstairs, the basement." It was a woman's voice, husky and low.

She pulled him, half dragging, half leading. Lightning gave split-second impressions of a room filled with dust and the trappings of a time before the Transformation — broken glass, cracked steel, and plastic.

He stumbled, and the woman steadied him, setting his hand on a smooth railing.

"Stairs here."

"Where?"

A candle flickered to life in a rasp of stone on steel. The blush of gold revealed flawless skin and auburn hair touched by highlights of copper, beauty that could've been on a magazine cover.

"Hurry up," she said.

At the bottom of the stairs was a large, concrete room, softened by hanging quilts, with a curtained-off corner that stank of privy. Drapes concealed all but a wedge of the single high, narrow window. A sleeping pallet lay next to an iron stove. Across from it, a stack of crates and planks formed a makeshift shelf beside a tidy woodpile.

The woman fed the metal belly of the stove with haphazard pieces of lumber.

The newborn flames reminded Reese of his dripping clothes and soggy sneakers. He clenched his jaw, stifling the clack of teeth on teeth. In the web of shadows and light, his lovely hostess metamorphosed into a B-movie specter, grotesque nose poking over the black hollows of her cheeks.

Reese swallowed. "Th-thanks for saving me."

She scowled over her shoulder. "What sort of halfwit goes running around in the rain?"

Her eyes were strangely unmatched. One was cat-slanted, sly and knowing, while the other was doe-like in its wide innocence. They gave her an oddly appealing charm, like a dog with one ear perpetually cocked.

"What sort of fool rescues a halfwit?" he retorted.

Her scowl transformed into a grin. "Fair enough." She offered her hand to him. "This fool's name is Lupa."

He grasped it. "This very grateful halfwit goes by Reese. I thought everyone had cleared out of this neighborhood."

"Most everyone has. When the hunters came, folks panicked and ran off to God knows where."

It was a familiar tale. No one had thought much of the ever-present clouds, even when the electricity fizzled out and the phones went silent; people waited patiently for repairmen and news. But the list of breakdowns and malfunctions kept growing: useless cars and generators, radios and flashlights, and ultimately, the failure of anything more complicated than a hammer — guns, wristwatches, and silicon chips alike. As everyone began to understand that the perpetual gloom was either the cause or another effect of these new times, the hunters came.

"Why didn't you go with them?" Reese asked.

She shrugged. "Hunters don't scare me. I figured they'd get tired of the place after tearing down the power lines and knocking over the business district. But it seems like there's more of them instead."

"I didn't think they'd be out in the middle of the day."

Lupa glanced at the window. "You see much daylight outside?"

"It wasn't so overcast an hour ago."

"When it rains, it may as well be night. You still get real daylight where you're from?"

"Not really. Where my mother lives, we get a brighter gloom."

She nodded. "Most of the time they stay across town. But sometimes they swoop by to drop things. After they caved in the roof a few houses down, I moved into my basement. You on your way home to your mom?"

Reese shrugged off his pack. "I'm bringing medicines to my gram. She's a doctor at the university."

"Really?" The firelight cast an avid gleam to Lupa's mismatched eyes. "Got any aspirin?"

"Sorry, no. Just antibiotics."

She turned away, thick disappointment rolling off her. "Those don't work."

"That's what people say, but a kid with pneumonia responded to a course of penicillin up north. My gram's the head of a research team trying to catalog all the post-Transformation effects."

"Impressive. Still, I wish you had aspirin. My stock's holding, but running out would be bad."

"What's the matter?"

"Rheumatoid arthritis." She pointed at her legs under her skirt. "Took out my knees and ankles before the doctors could come up with the right meds to get it under control. Then the meds stopped working, same time everything else broke down."

"Is that why you didn't evacuate?"

Lupa ignored his question. "Aspirin gets me by. God knows why it still works, but it does."

"They might be able to help you at the university. You could come with me."

"And leave all this?" She laughed. "That's sweet, but trekking cross-country and sleeping on the ground would kill me, not even taking into account how spry I wouldn't be dodging hunters."

Reese shifted uncomfortably.

"Oh, quit looking embarrassed." Lupa tugged the top quilt from her pallet and tossed it at him. "You're dripping water, and I can see you shivering. Get undressed. I'll hang up your things."

The feel of her watching made him clumsy with his jacket zipper. Reese kicked off his squelchy shoes and tugged jacket and t-shirt over his head, skin prickling in the chilly air. He wrapped the blanket around his shoulders — it smelled of sage and lavender — before handing over his wet clothes. Under its protection, he unzipped his sopping jeans and peeled them away.

"Go sit on the bed," Lupa said. "And quit looking like that."

"Like what?"

She arranged his clothes over the stovepipe. "Like you think I'm going to eat you."

Reese hoped the glow from the oven would hide his flushing cheeks. He'd never been good around girls, not even when there was phones and email.

"Uh, is this an air mattress?" It was a clumsy effort to switch the topic, but the pallet *was* soft.

"Yep. Comfy isn't it? From when I used to go camping, once upon a time."

Reese sneezed.

Lupa came over and pressed her hand against his forehead. "You're burning hot, and your skin's clammy. I've got some soup I can heat up, if you like. Help get your core temperature back up."

"Thanks."

A saucepan and can opener materialized from the depths of a crate. Without Lupa's banter to send his pulse careening, the fire's warmth seeped in, and Reese's shivering petered out. Her movements were soothing, puttering around with spoon and bowls. The scent of sage grew stronger, lulling his thoughts and weighting his eyelids.

When Reese opened his eyes, his head was nestled on a perfumed pillow, suffusing him in the clean scent of anise and crushed mint. The stove door was ajar, releasing a comfortable glimmer in the dark. Nearer than the thrumming rain outside, a counterpoint rhythm beat in his ear, like the ocean surging and ebbing. The pillow shifted, and a hand stroked his head.

Reese snapped awake. What he had thought to be a pillow was Lupa's breast covered by a thin sheet. She yawned, her eyes half-lidded, and the sheet slipped to reveal a swath of freckled skin. He recoiled, both confused and embarrassed, and found himself wedged against the wall.

"Calm down. What'd you think I was up to? You were shivering in your sleep, and I was afraid you'd catch cold."

"Of-of course. Wh-what time is it?"

"Still hours until dawn." She tugged the covers up and rolled over.

Reese lay back. The sight of her flesh — her arms, the feel of her bare legs so close to his — made lurid thoughts percolate through his head. He shut his eyes tight.

A feeble glow struggled against the open curtains when he opened them again. His mouth tasted gritty, and he was troubled by vague impressions of limbs twining like branches in a forest of naked torsos.

He was alone on the air mattress. Lupa stepped from behind the privy curtain. She was dressed in a lumpy sweater and woolen leggings. In the morning light, Reese could see what he'd overlooked last night. Lupa walked with a hobbling gait, and her legs were a wreckage of swollen knees and knotted ankles.

"You can use the bucket or go outside if you prefer," she said. "The clouds thinned overnight. Don't know for how long, but it should be safe."

"My clothes?" Reese lowered his eyes.

"They're nice and dry; hope you don't mind the smoke smell."

"Probably an improvement over what they smelled like before."

Her laughter was clear and unguarded, as unlike her speaking voice as ashes to air.

He looked up in time to catch the bundle of clothes she tossed at him. Accompanied by her giggles, Reese pulled on his shirt and slid his jeans on beneath the covers.

Reese nodded at the stairs. "I'll go outside, see what the day's like. I need to get going while the light holds."

"Suit yourself. Just so you know, there's a troop of fairies that goes scavenging around here. They're harmless if you leave them alone, but don't make eye contact."

"Fairies?" He chuckled. "Tiny people with wings and pointy ears?"

"You think hunters were the only weird things that've popped up? Before they all left, people talked about goblins in the old mines — ugly buggers with big noses and

lumpy skin — there was something in the news about angel sightings, and I remember one little girl babbling about a talking tree.”

“My gram says the hunters are a mutation or a genetic experiment. She says all the other rumors are hysteria.”

“Does she?” Lupa sniffed. “I suppose she would, being a doctor at the university and all. Anyway, since they’re a hysterical figment of my imagination, you probably won’t see them. But if you should have a bout of madness, don’t chase after them.”

Reese laced his shoes. “Why not?”

“Don’t you remember your fairy tales?” Lupa winked. “I’ll have breakfast ready when you get back, assuming the little people don’t steal you away.”

Had she been teasing him all along?

Upstairs, in the pale daylight, the outside bore little resemblance to the surreal dreamscape he remembered. Lupa’s house sat in a sleepy neighborhood with tiny front yards and the occasional ramshackle fence. Reese found the squared-off ditch of the homemade latrine. It overlooked the alley where the crumpled remains of a car lay on its side — victim of the frustrated hunters. A tiny shed, perhaps what once had been a garage, leaned at the end of the row.

Inside, power tools sat ready, covered in a glaze of dust, waiting for the day when electricity and gasoline might revive them. Among the useless debris, an unexpected treasure hung from a pair of hooks: a blue mountain bike. Elated, Reese lifted it down. He’d worked in a cycling store one summer. His job had been simple data entry, but one of the mechanics had taken a liking to him. Over lunch hours and slow afternoons, he’d taught Reese how to assemble and fix two-wheelers.

The brake wires were tuned, the pads sound, and the chain still lubricated. But the tires were flaccid, and though he searched, he couldn’t find an air pump. Then he remembered Lupa’s air mattress.

He sprinted back to the house.

“Lupa, hey!”

The thick, yeasty smell of baking bread seeped from the basement. It held a tang of ripe hops, barley, and malt.

She didn’t look up from the stove. “Did you see any fairies?”

“What? No, I found a bicycle!”

“Yeah, it’s mine.”

“All it needs is some air. Please tell me you have a pump.”

Using a ragged potholder, incongruously in the shape of a killer whale complete with toothy mouth, she opened the stove and pulled out a battered bread pan. “Sure, but filled tires aren’t going to get it rolling. Bicycles don’t go anymore — same as trains and cars.” She nodded at a wooden box. “Sit.”

Reese perched on the crate. “How can bikes not work? They’re just gears, chain, and wheels, not like an internal combustion engine.”

“How can my meds stop working? They just don’t.” She shook the golden loaf onto a wire rack. “Have some beer bread. It’s a recipe I learned from my great-aunt when I was a little girl.”

His stomach gurgled.

The bread, still warm from the stove, crumbled as Lupa cut it with a well-worn knife. She ladled soup from a pot into a chipped bowl. The dense bread was both

sweet and hearty, the bitter flavor of beer half remembered from stolen sips at adult parties.

“Good, isn’t it? These days I find myself appreciating the simple things. I heard a bird singing the other day. Listened for who knows how long as it trilled and warbled its heart out. Bawled like a baby when it flew away. This world’s a different place when you stop and appreciate it.”

Reese took in Lupa’s words with only half an ear, distracted by his hunger and his thoughts. The soup was savory and rich, certainly better than the protein bars and jerky he had in his pack.

“Since you’re not using the bike, can I have it?” Reese mopped the last dregs of soup with a heel of bread. “I could take the Interstate on it instead of picking through the suburbs, really cut down my travel time.”

“I told you, it doesn’t work. You get on and try to pedal, it tips over.”

“Could it have been your arthritis doing that?”

Lupa scowled. “Fine. If you can ride it, you can buy it.” She shuffled around the room, flinging hapless odds and ends out of her path.

Reese swallowed. “The only things I’ve got are the drugs I’m bringing to my gram, and I can’t barter those. I could do some chores—”

“Me and my knobby knees don’t need any chores,” she snapped.

“Oh.”

Her eyes softened at his hangdog expression. “Tell you what; you can owe me a favor for the next time we meet.”

“But I might not come this way again.”

“I’m not in a hurry. And if we don’t meet up again, you’re off the hook. Deal?” She closed her wide eye, leaving her cunning, slanted one to leer at him.

“Deal.”

She pulled an air pump from a crate. “But don’t get your hopes up.”

Outside, Reese inflated the tires, gauging their levels by touch. Shuffling slowly, Lupa emerged as he was finishing. She carried his pack on one arm.

“You took good care of it,” he said.

“I used to drive up to the national park and go riding on the trails, when I still could.”

Reese traded with her, pump for pack. “I didn’t mean to offend you by what I said earlier.”

She hugged him, an awkward drape of arms and shoulder. When she released him, he felt a weight in his pocket. It was the leftover beer bread in a plastic baggie.

“Godspeed,” she said.

“Thank you. For everything.”

Reese swung astride the saddle and pushed off. For a heartbeat, he tottered, fighting the locked pedals. Then his body recalled the familiar cadence of movement and balance, and the bike took off beneath him, nimble as the wind.

“It works!” he called over his shoulder. “I told you it would.”

“So you did.” She waved farewell, a lonely figure behind him.

The quiet neighborhood street led to a wide, two-lane road. A bicycle was more intimate than a car — the pump of legs propelling him faster, the handlebars singing each groove and rut to arms and hands. Two lanes turned into four, and the cluster of

houses melted behind him. Husks of cars littered the off ramp. The interstates were still in good repair, although mostly abandoned. There were rumors about them, tales of nighttime disappearances and hungry ghosts, all notions his gram scoffed at. But for whatever reason, people eschewed them, preferring to forge into fields and through residential areas.

His mother had once suggested that people had disappeared after the Transformation, taken somewhere else, or perhaps just ceasing to be. Reese could believe it today. Nothing stirred the air except the whirl of his tires; nothing moved save a shimmer of heat, rolling off the tar.

When he passed the first exit, the hairs on his arms prickled. He replayed the contemptuous words of his gram in his head and whispered them along with her: *There's no such thing as ghosts.*

The miles streamed past as he bowed his head into the wind. Reese shifted down on the uphill stretches — sometimes getting off to walk when his breath seared his lungs and his heart felt like it would batter itself free of his ribcage — and cruised on the downhill. The wind lashed his hair as trees and overgrown grass streaked by in a blur of fading green.

When the glare in the clouds hung directly overhead, Reese coasted to a stop in the valley between two sloping hills. Sitting in the grassy divider, an obsolete separation of north and southbound lanes, he ate the bread Lupa had given him and drank the water from his canteen, filled from a drainage ditch the day before. Since the Transformation, potable water was plentiful and easy to find. Tiny ponds and creeks, once stagnant cesspools or toxic sludge from chemical runoff, were inexplicably filled with clean water, safe to drink without boiling or purifying.

After lunch, Reese stretched his legs, unkinking sore muscles that had forgotten this work, and remounted. Cresting the next hill, he saw, far in the distance, the mirage-like hint of a skyline, a ribbon of gray on the horizon.

The city.

He hadn't made as much speed as he'd hoped. It would be nightfall before he got to the university. Still, he hadn't seen a hint of black wings or heard so much as an echo of airborne shrieks. And it was the rare hunter that strayed this close to the university.

The sky darkened swiftly, the brief afternoon flush vanishing behind a bank of cumulus. The resultant gloom brought tricks of sight and mind. Eerie movement bobbed at vision's edge, the hint of skeletal arms and eyeless faces becoming wind-flung debris up close.

Reese yanked his hood up, conscious of the red flag of his hair. When he had to brake hard to avoid careening into a pothole, too busy staring over his shoulder to watch the road, he realized he had to stop. He'd ride himself over a guard railing at this rate.

He was still jumpy when he reached the next overpass, but he felt safer beneath the concrete and steel, as though the pre-Transformation edifice could ward away whatever creepies might walk the night. He dismounted and huddled beside his bicycle. It was reassuring, his stalwart and trusty steed standing guard. Maybe he should give it a name.

Debating over the merits of "Matilda the Blue Bicycle of Doom" versus "Lady Blulette," Reese passed into a restless doze. He dreamed, trapped in a sleeper's paralysis,

of fiery eyes peering at him from beyond the overpass. Once, he awakened in the chilly predawn hours, his ears ringing with the sound of his own name shouted aloud.

He stared into the night. Had he dreamed it? A gust of cold raised the hairs on his arms, bringing with it a wind that whispered and chattered in his ear. Reese clutched the bicycle's frame, comforted by the metal under his palm. She was definitely a Matilda.

The next morning dawned red and stark. The sun cast a bloody pall on the mantle of clouds that clustered at the horizon. Reese winced as he levered himself to his feet. The muscles in his calves felt like someone had pounded them with a mallet. His legs were chafed raw, abraded by sweat-roughened denim. Mounting was its own torture; he groaned aloud at the punishing hardness of the saddle.

As he forced his legs to pedal, his muscles loosened. Before long, he could enjoy the sight of the cityscape rolling up, the gray skyline growing buds of dilapidated steel and cracked glass.

By midmorning, he recognized university landmarks, the far off dormitories and bell tower followed by signs broadcasting the interstate exit.

The university lay on the outskirts of the city, its compact borders marked by a stone wall — more ornament than barricade. Although easily scaled by a determined climber, it represented security to those within. The main entrance was an elaborate affair, with pillars and a wrought iron gate, patrolled by two grad students carrying crude weapons — a spear that had begun life as a shovel or spade and a rusting pole with a sharpened tip. They, like the wall, were more symbolic threat than genuine.

One of the guards waved as Reese pedaled up.

Reese recognized the man, Greg something-or-other, an MBA candidate. The social order that had evolved in the aftermath had raised the stature of medieval historians, agriculture specialists, and even doctoral philosophy students to the apex of a new hierarchy, transforming those who had specialized in economics, business, and political science into the new working class. The developing feudal order was responsible for the respect and deference others showed him, with his grandmother topping the rungs as a medical doctor and head researcher. But the implied responsibility made him uncomfortable. Did they expect him to be an heir to his gram's brilliance?

"Hey, Greg," Reese said. "My gram in her office?"

"Course. She's got a cot set up so she doesn't have to leave her lab. Where'd you get the bike?"

"She's a beauty, isn't she? Got me here faster than even a horse could've."

The other grad student joined them. Her name was Linda, but her major eluded him.

"How'd you get it going?" she asked.

"The previous owner took good care of her. All she needed was some air in the tyres."

"I mean, how'd you get it to work? I heard they'd stopped."

"This one goes well enough."

Linda chuckled. "So it does. Your grandmother will be glad to see you."

She waved as Reese pushed off, wheeling down the campus sidewalk.

The Natural Sciences building was a large, three-story structure with walls of yellow brick and ivy. A newer annex, gleaming white steel and glass, grew like a strange extra limb from its back. Originally intended as a Physics wing, Biology and Medicine had usurped it, establishing a makeshift hospital beside the sprawling research labs.

Reese propped Matilda against a wall overflowing with greenery. Within, some of the building's former decorum still lingered in the high foyer with its open skylight and marble tile, but it was mostly overwhelmed by bustle and noise. Scientists mingled with kitchen workers and agriculture students, laughing, chatting, and most of all, busy. The chemistry classrooms had been converted into communal kitchens where crops were brought in to be peeled, chopped, and simmered. Conveniently in the same place, pre- and post-Transformation, the agriculture labs sprouted new strains of red-leafed vegetation, better suited to grow in low light. It was old fashioned husbandry instead of sophisticated genetic engineering, but the goal was the same: better, bigger crops.

There was an abrupt decrease in noise when Reese passed through the heavy doors that separated old construction from new. The annex sheltered a quiet intensity, solemn as a library and reverent as a church.

Reese passed classrooms with white-clad students tending herbs and roots dangling from light fixtures. Like agriculture, medicine had been forced to return to the older remedies—tinctures, teas, and poultices.

In her office, Gram sat hunched over a worn textbook in her creased lab coat. The trappings of doctor, teacher, and scientist surrounded her — experiments in Petri dishes, a full-size model of a human skeleton in the corner, and bottles of disinfectant and gauze. Her hair was a fifty-fifty mix of slate gray and white, like the creases in her face — half laugh lines, half scowl.

When she saw him, the creases of her frown deepened. “So your mother sent you after all.”

“Good to see you too, Gram.”

She pulled him into a brusque embrace. “I hate you roaming through hunter infested areas. When are you going to tell your mother to move to the university?”

“She’s your daughter. *You* tell her.”

“Hah. That’ll be the day. How was the trip? I hear you managed to find yourself a bicycle.”

Reese had ceased being amazed by how fast news reached his grandmother, defunct telephones and intercom systems notwithstanding.

“It belonged to a woman hunkered down in a suburb. She saved me from becoming hunter chow and let me have it. Although she insisted it wouldn’t work. One of the grads at the gate said the same thing. The way everyone goes on, you’d think it had to be magic.”

Gram poked him in the shoulder with a sharp index finger. “No such thing as magic. The less that word’s bandied about the better.”

“That’s not what they’re saying on the outside. It’s not what Mom’s saying either.”

“Fear will make people grasp at whatever absurd notion the loudest, most superstitious fool can come up with. The wrath of God, the Apocalypse, little green men from Mars.” Gram snorted. “Preposterous.”

“The woman who gave me the bike said she saw fairies.”

“One of those New Age fools, probably saw them before too.” She waved her hand. “Enough. Show your gram the goodies you brought her.”

Reese slipped his pack off. “Amoxicillin, sulfanilamide, doxycycline, cephalor, and vancomycin. All the ones Mom could beg, steal, or barter for.”

Gram plucked out one of the white bottles. “Vancomycin, huh? It’s a start.” She tapped a silver bell on her desk.

In lieu of a bellhop, a harried-looking woman in a short lab coat appeared. Gram handed the pack to her.

“You must be hungry, child. Why don’t you go with Emily to get some food?”

Reese hunched his shoulders. He hated when Gram called him *child*, especially around the female students.

Emily had been a second year med student. She had a sweet, slightly plump face, with a crooked overbite when she smiled. Old enough to be a resident many times over, she seemed doomed to linger in a state of limbo as servant and assistant to his grandmother. Like so many others, her identity was frozen at the moment when the world changed.

They stepped into the corridor. “You don’t have to escort me,” Reese said. “Gram won’t let me live down the time I got lost in the library stacks when I was six, but I know the way back.”

“I don’t mind.” The silence stretched for several awkward yards.

“My brother has a streptococcus infection,” Emily said. “They have him quarantined. It amazes me, sometimes, that we ever thought these sorts of things were trifling.”

“I’m sorry,” Reese said. “I hope he gets better.”

“The meds you brought might be able to save him. If your grandmother can figure out why some of them still work.” Emily hovered by the cooking wing, a forlorn eye in the storm of activity.

“I’m sure she will. You know my gram.”

She surprised him with a kiss, no more than a brush of lips, before hurrying away.

“She’s sweet on you. You didn’t tell me you had a girlfriend.”

Reese spun around. “Lupa?”

She was the last person he’d expected to see, but there she was, her mismatched eyes glittering and amused.

“I told you we’d hook up again.” She bounced on her toes like a manic jack-in-the-box. “Don’t you want to know how I got here? Guess!”

“Uh—”

“Wrong! The Fairy Queen sent me.”

Reese gaped.

“Yeah, I didn’t think you’d believe me.” Spreading wide her arms, she spun in a circle, forcing those nearby to scramble back. “I rode a pooka! We were right behind you on the highway, ‘cept I lost track of you in the night. I called you.” She stopped twirling, grinning dizzily and wobbling on her feet. “But you didn’t answer.”

“There she is!” From the entrance, Greg pointed at them, Linda a step behind.

Lupa squawked and ducked behind Reese.

Greg stormed up, out of breath. “We caught that woman scaling the wall. I shouted and she ran.”

Lupa stood on her tiptoes, bringing her mouth level with Reese's ear. "Remember your favor," she whispered.

He wished he hadn't heard. "She's with me," Reese admitted.

Activity ceased and a hush spread in a widening radius.

Greg leaned on his spear. "You could've mentioned there was someone with you. We thought she was a looter. New refugees are supposed to check in with registration."

"Sorry."

"I don't want to go to registration," Lupa said.

"Lupa—"

"I want to meet your gram. I came all this way to meet her." She put her hands on her hips. "Are you breaking your word?"

Reese sighed. "Fine. After that, we're even."

"Agreed."

"I'll go get her," Linda called, already sprinting away.

More heads swiveled. Reese's half-formed "Wait!" died unspoken. He'd assumed he would take Lupa to Gram, introduce them discreetly, without a mob of curious onlookers. But now all he could do was fret and wish the floor would swallow him before Gram arrived.

In the new quiet, the clash of the double doors closing was like a cymbal. A path opened for the arrivals. Gram radiated impatience so strongly, several kitchen workers backed away.

"Reese, I don't have time for interruptions—" she began.

Lupa stepped around him, her hand extended. "Hi!"

Gram pulled up. "Who are you?"

"I'm Lupa. I've got a message for you."

"Are you a courier?" The hope on Gram's face erased years. "I *knew* there had to be other recovering communities. Where are you from?"

"I live in a suburb up north. The Fairy Queen sent me."

"What?"

"The Fairy Queen told me to tell you to stop denying her court."

Familiar with the mercurial moods of his grandmother, Reese saw the eruption coming but could do nothing to stop it.

"What do you mean by bringing this lunatic woman here?" Gram's voice was hard. Although she hadn't raised it, each word rang sharp. "You pulled me away from important research to blither about *fairies*?"

"Don't blame Reese," Lupa chimed. "He never saw them, and he didn't know I was coming. 'Course, I didn't know either until the queen came knocking on my door, and we had tea, and she said—"

Gram swiveled to Lupa. "As for you, young lady, grow up! There's no such thing as fairies."

"Don't say that!"

"Why not? It's the truth. What we deal in here. People outside spout whatever nonsense takes their fancy, magic and elves and whatnot, but in here, there's no such thing as f—"

It happened so quickly, Reese could do nothing, only watch as though locked in some helpless stasis. Lupa darted forward, a shard of light in her hand. The shard

was brilliant, bright as the sun he almost remembered, a sun not obscured by clouds but white-gold and burning. A second later, the sun went out, quenched in a crimson fountain.

He blinked, and the sun became a knife, sheathed to its hilt in his grandmother's throat.

Lupa struggled, held fast between Linda and Greg. Dimly, as through from far off, someone screamed.

Reese kneeled over his grandmother's body. Her blood soaked thick and hot into his jeans. There was so much of it, like a red spring pouring from her neck. The blow had been powerful, shearing through arteries and nerves, halted only by the unyielding bone of Gram's spine.

He wrenched the knife free. It was the one Lupa had sliced beer bread with. A part of him had hoped, expected even, Gram to open her eyes and sit up, like a vampire from the movies. But there were no more movies anymore, and she lay still.

Lupa's clothes were spotless, without a drip or splatter of blood.

"Reese, listen to me," she said. "This world is tottering between two possibilities like a hovering pendulum that doesn't know which way to swing. The Fairy Queen told me."

"Stop that jibber about fairies!" Greg shouted.

The university's shock was turning to anger. Scholars and students snarled behind masks of fury.

"Murderer!"

"Butcher!"

Lupa flinched. "Reese, when you got the bike to work, you did it by understanding it, by truly believing in it." Her voice turned urgent. "Bikes didn't go before. That's how fragile the pendulum is. What you're doing here at the university is pushing us back, away from magic."

Voices buzzed like angry wasps.

"There's no such thing as magic!" someone yelled.

"There is!" Lupa faced the hostile crowd. "A day ago, when Reese met me, my joints were so swollen and stiff I could barely walk. Ask him."

Reese shrank from the eyes suddenly turned to him.

"Look." She snatched her skirt aside to reveal a flawless length of leg from toe to thigh. "I can run and jump and climb walls now. The Fairy Queen cured me with a magic potion, better than anything the doctors ever gave me. We don't need doctors, don't need any of the stuff you're doing here."

"Shut up," Reese hissed.

"Look outside," she said. "Without the old woman's will, it's already darker."

In a wave, heads craned to the skylight. It was true. The clouds massed, ominous and full.

"And listen."

As though on cue, a hunter shrilled in the distance.

"She was one of the foundations of the university. That's why it had to be her. The fairies must come through. They'll protect us from the hunters and help ease us into the new ways." She shouted over the growls of the crowd. "The fairies chose me as their champion, me and Ree—"

“No!” Reese lashed out. The still-wet knife slid through her, easier than carving warm bread. It parted muscle and sinew to rest embedded in her heart.

Lupa sagged to the marble tile, no longer clean and spotless.

Reese raised his bloody hand. “I am *not* the chosen of the fairies. I am their enemy. My grandmother devoted her life to her work, to *you*. I will not let it die with her!”

Ragged cheers rose at his declaration, and arms pumped the air.

A note pealed, clear and brilliant. Another followed it. And a third. They rippled through the room, a surge of crystalline harmonics. Reese staggered, fighting to keep his feet. Around him, people swayed and toppled. With the chord still echoing, a gash of whiteness split the air, exhaling a mist of sapphire and indigo.

A pearly leg emerged, slender and delicate. White hands, long-fingered and graceful, pushed the rift wider. A woman stepped through. She wore a living dress of butterflies and moths, their wings blinking open and closed, revealing glimpses of porcelain flesh beneath. A wreath of silver garlanded her midnight hair. She was beautiful, regal, and utterly inhuman — Lupa’s Fairy Queen.

Other figures appeared behind her, wild and noble, fearsome and exquisite, but none as splendid as she. She glided to Lupa’s body, her feet passing over, but never disturbing, the spill of blood.

“You did well, little one.” Her voice, barely a whisper, pealed clear as a moonbeam in a starless sky. She bent and scooped Lupa up. At her touch, the body began to change. Lupa’s face elongated to form a muzzle, and russet fur sprouted, covering her arms and legs.

Over the metamorphosing figure in her arms, she met Reese’s eyes. Hers were still pools of blue and green, a horizon of ocean joined with azure sky.

“Thank you for your part, red hair, red heart. The brand of your obstinance was more potent than a decade of worship. By pitting yourself and your followers against us, you have declared to the listening infinite that you believe in us.”

The Fairy Queen nodded at her entourage. “And thus, we are. We bring marvels to this world and its inhabitants — unicorns to battle the dragons, cornucopias to end hunger, wonders of healing for the body, and endless miracles to renew the spirit.” She gazed at the assembled people. “Alas, none of you will look upon them.”

The rift exploded in a burst of white. When Reese could see again, the Fairy Queen and her court were gone.

Overhead, the screams of the hunters crescendoed.

Reese glared through the skylight at the dark skies and shadowy wings. He could not, would not let it end like this. There were rifles in the Athletics department, discarded and forgotten. The guns *would* fire. They would protect them from their enemies because he, Reese, willed it so.

And when the university was safe, he would kill the Fairy Queen.



Terraformer

...David Conyers

Seeding Biologist Andy Van Oyen stared into the microscope viewfinder and saw only white noise. He hoped to examine algae sampled from the heat ponds, but not with a malfunction plaguing his robotic assistant. Unless the robot quickly repaired itself, the day would be wasted servicing the machine, rather than undertaking the more fulfilling task of giving life to a planet.

“Run diagnostics,” he commanded.

The robot did not respond.

“Machine?” he gritted. “Why are you not answering?”

The huge cylindrical machine with its numerous spindly limbs gave no indication that it understood. Then it began to hum, with a peculiar reverberating grumble.

Van Oyen felt a sudden, strong urge to step backwards.

As he did, a sliver of chrome sliced the air, so fast Van Oyen thought he imagined it. He barely witnessed a valve closing on the machine’s body. He knew it possessed no such appendage. Something inside it had changed.

Hot liquid trickled from a sting in his cheek, dribbled down his jaw and neck. Reaching to touching his pain, his finger disappeared into a circular hole cut in his cheek. He felt his teeth through the hole — the machine had sampled him!

Van Oyen stumbled backwards over the rocky, frozen terrain. A howl of painful feedback erupted from the machine’s audio ports. Six pincer legs beat an aggressive rhythm across the rocks.

Van Oyen turned and fled. He stampeded through the heat ponds overflowing with the slime he had spent so many years cultivating for the New Namib Terraforming Project. In all his time on this world his robot companion had been by his side, faithful and obedient as only a non-sentient machine could be. Now it was his enemy.

He heard the robot crush his all-terrain rover. With his only transport lost, there would be no return to the project camp, some fifty kilometres distant. Micro-organisms might survive on New Namib, but higher forms of life stranded in the cold would quickly perish.

Van Oyen was a higher form of life.

Heart racing, he ran until exhaustion overcame him. He collapsed in the knee-high slime.

It took many minutes to catch his breath. It took many more to gather courage enough to turn back and see.

His silent stalker rose from the muck, deadly appendages gleaming in the cold light of New Namib's dim red sun.

"Yesterday the control boards on three coolant lines failed. They froze solid in last night's seventy-below chill. Today one of the heavy-haulers is back in maintenance, because its diagnostic circuits burnt out. The list goes on, Kyle. I tell you, the last few weeks we've been plagued with problems."

Kyle Thornley sighed into the comlink, feeling every bone in his sixty-year-old body ache. "Anything else?"

"You want me to keep going?"

In that moment, Kyle felt the thousand woes of a whole-planet terraforming project beat him. Three weeks earlier everything was running smoothly. What had gone wrong?

"Boss?"

"Okay, stop. What do you need?"

"Need?" asked the engineer. "Um...how about three mechanics? With three more I might get us back on schedule."

"Okay, I'll talk to Hollis. He can probably spare the resources."

"Thanks boss." The engineer terminated the call.

It would be difficult to secure extra hands, but as a senior project manager it was Thornley's job to find a solution. Hollis was the most efficient project manager reporting to Thornley. If anyone could manage with reduced resources, it would be Hollis.

Thornley strapped on his air compressor mask, zipped tight his thermal suit, gritted his teeth and stepped outside. Within minutes he was shaking like a ribbon in a tornado. He hated this cold planet, and its deceptive giant red sun. Despite appearing four times closer than Sol seen from Earth, it was actually colder, larger, and much farther away.

Thornley found Stephen Hollis returning to the project camp at the end of his shift.

"Steve, how's it going?"

"Kyle, good and you?"

"Cold as always. Did those new power cables work out?"

Hollis smiled. "Yeah, thanks." He nodded to the horizon where the cables had been incorporated into a dozen crust-crackers, gigantic drills two kilometres long lined with powerful fusion bombs. Hollis's team was installing them, half of each one buried in the rock, the other half skyscrapers lined up like a fence across the world.

Thornley marvelled at the sight of the crust-crackers, the most monumental of all New Namib's terraforming sub-projects. Simple in concept, in application they were challenging feats of engineering. Hundreds of these bombs had been carefully drilled into a major fault line, and hundreds more would follow, ready to blow open the tectonic plates. On that day, trillions of tonnes of molten magma would bleed from the mantle. New landscapes would form, bringing needed minerals to the surface, while the heated atmosphere would melt the icecaps, creating oceans and rivers. In

years to come, on this very spot, colonists would gaze upon a tropical ocean under the shade of lush vegetation. Hard to imagine now, but that was the design.

“It’s so bloody cold, isn’t it?” said Hollis. “I’m looking forward to my R&R break. Only three weeks and I’m away.”

“Back to the wife and kids?”

Hollis stared between his feet. “My wife and I spilt.”

“Oh...sorry to hear.”

“It’s tough on a job like this, being away from home, working long hours.”

Thornley nodded. He’d been down the same path as Hollis already, with three ex-wives and five children who didn’t know him. “I keep thinking about how far from home we really are. We’re only connected to the next human settlement through a single wormhole in orbit around that red star, invisible unless you know where to look for it. Otherwise, tens of thousands of light years separates us from our homes.” Both men examined the sky reflectively.

“Stephen, I’ve got a favour to ask.”

“Ask away.”

“Your team is the only one ahead of schedule. The only one not facing computer induced glitches. The maintenance guys are running into complications. Could you spare three mechanics?”

“Yeah, should be able to do that. I’ll send them round tomorrow...”

Hollis’ voice faded as he was transfixed by a disturbance at the project offices.

People were running, scattering from the buildings. Some screamed, apparently terrified by something neither engineer could see.

“What the—?”

A pressurized door exploded outwards from a prefab office, decapitating a technician. A project control officer staggered away from the carnage, blood gushing from red stumps where his hands had been. Flames shot from every building in seemingly deliberate trajectories.

Nearby a young woman crackled with fire. Thornley and Hollis wrestled her to the ground, smothering the conflagration with Hollis’s coat. The flames extinguished; her screams would not.

They carried her from chaos. When her head rolled onto Thornley’s shoulder, his stomach churned at her melted face.

Safe on open rocky ground, they watched the incident escalate. The project camp was literally folding in on itself. Black smoke obscured the afternoon sky.

Helen Copeland’s comlink died. Suddenly she was alone, cut off from every other terraformer on the planet.

Normally Helen enjoyed her solitary profession, searching for indigenous microbes in the rock and ice. None were to be found of course; New Namib had always been a dead planet, but she was paid to look anyway. Their project investors, Earth Central, did not wish to risk another alien plague on their newest colony. The outbreak decimating Coricancha thirty years earlier had cost them dearly in both people and credibility. They wanted New Namib to shine.

Helen sighed. The communications failure was probably not serious, but she couldn't know for certain. By standing on the cliff edge, she could see the main project camp, some sixty kilometres distant. The heads-up display on her vacuum suit magnified the scene. Smoke and flames.

Running to her quad-bike, Helen was shocked to discover Andy Van Oyen waiting for her, or what was left of him. His flesh had partially merged with her vehicle, into a chaos of skin, bones, circuits and pistons. Dozens of fist-sized spheres scuttled over him, their thin wispy legs propelling them like spiders.

Helen drew her sonic gun, a weapon normally used to disintegrate layers of strata. Focusing the beam into a tight cone, she shattered a scuttler. She disintegrated three more before the rest vanished into the cracks amongst the sharp rocks.

The Van Oyen machine turned its single human eye upon her. Teeth without lips asked, "Are you Helen Copeland?"

She nodded. She didn't know whether to try to rescue the poor man or end his misery. "Andy, what happened to you?"

"I got caught..." he struggled with the words. "An alien machine virus...broadcast through space...millions of years...they've been around...they...they..."

"They what?"

A whip-like tendril of coiled wire flicked from Van Oyen, narrowly missing her face.

Losing her courage she stumbled backwards.

He matched her pace, stalking her.

She fired, her weapon punching holes in his metallic shell. Twelve shots and she hit a power cell; the hybrid man-machine ruptured in fiery demolition.

In the smouldering aftermath the scuttlers returned, scampering over the ruined flesh-metal fusion. Even though Van Oyen was dead, they were still rebuilding him. She shot a few more.

More scuttlers appeared. More, she figured, than she could fight off.

She turned from the cliff and sprinted.

There was little point returning to the main camp now, for the source of black smoke was obvious. It was the same dark spirals as those rising from the wreckage of Van Oyen and her quad-bike.

As dusk loomed, the few survivors huddled on the edge of the decimated project camp. The ruins still bellowed black smoke into the otherwise still air. Thornley and Hollis counted themselves among six individuals without serious injury. Seventeen more suffered deep burns, broken limbs, external and internal bleeding, shock and a dozen other conditions which would eventually kill.

Taking a break from administering first aid, Thornley rested for a few minutes. He was tired. Soon the sun would vanish and he would longingly reminisce about the 'warmer' weather experienced now.

Hollis joined him. He too looked wearied, but he wouldn't sit. "Kyle, are we in trouble?"

"Of course not mate. If we can survive three days we'll be fine."

"You're talking about the next supply starship, right?"

Thornley nodded.

“Is there any chance we can contact them now? I don’t like sitting here in the cold any longer than I have to. Especially when we don’t know what will come out of that carnage.” He looked at the wreckage with a shudder.

Thornley pointed to the subspace transmitting station, little more than slag and scrap metal like the rest of the camp. “We don’t need to call. Earth Central will send someone when they don’t receive our regular broadcasts.”

Hollis shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “But it will still take three days for them to get here, right?”

“Probably...But we can hope can’t we, that they’ll move faster?”

The crust-cracker engineer looked to the ruins, sucking at his lower lip. “Boss?”

“Yeah Steve?”

“Do you realize you’re the most senior manager alive?”

Thornley massaged his forehead, fought the headache and the exhaustion his body wanted to give in to. “You’re looking to me for answers? I’m as baffled by this situation as we all are.”

“It’s not just me saying so; everyone is.”

Thornley became aware of the healthy survivors. He had not realized until this moment that their eyes fell to him for answers. Even when he attempted to outstare them, they refused to look away.

“You need to make a decision, Kyle,” said Hollis. “Even if it’s a poor decision, it’s better than nothing.”

Earlier he’d had one idea, but it was so callous he’d dismissed it from his mind. Now, when it felt like his muscles were freezing solid and his teeth wouldn’t stop chattering, the idea no longer seemed ludicrous.

“Boss?”

He cleared his throat, preparing to address the survivors. “Alright. This is what you want me to say, so I’m going to say it. We have six functioning vacuum suits, all with automedics, all currently stabilizing the most seriously injured. Trouble is, with sunset almost here, it will get so cold only six of us are going to survive through the night. If we six aren’t here in the morning, because we froze to death, then every one of us is going to die anyway.”

Thornley paused. He sensed their tension, and yet all were nodding.

“Yeah, I have a plan. You already know what my plan is. I say we put it into action, because nightfall is minutes away.”

As if to prove his point the cold red sun edged a little further behind the barren mountain peaks.

No one said another word. Six men and women silently abandoned the dead and dying, stealing vacuum suits, allowing night cold to kill faster than burns or blood loss.

Thornley took his vacuum suit from a woman so badly burnt she didn’t seem to have skin. Still conscious, her eyes shone with terror when she guessed his intention. He wouldn’t look at her while he held her ruined mouth and nose closed, easing her passage now the vacuum suit would not try to revive her.

When he sealed himself inside the stolen vacuum suit, he heard distant screams, then gurgles that were abruptly silenced.

A decapitated human head tumbled through the sky.

A headless vacuum suit, with limbs stretched three times their normal length, lumbered like a gigantic insect. The human arms and legs within snapped and tore as they bent into impossible angles.

A shape resembling liquid mercury exploded from a second suit. It flowed onto the throat of the survivor trying to wear it, before it blew out his stomach.

More wails, more cries of confusion, then someone or something fired a weapon.

All Thornley could see was the elongated suit, its new pincer-like appendages smashing and crushing the wounded.

Suppressing his panic, Thornley fought to free himself of his suit, but the seals wouldn't unbuckle fast enough. His breathing sounded like a waterfall. His faceplate steamed over from hyperventilation. He kept expecting his arms, legs and head to snap, stretch and pop.

Another vacuum suit wrestled him.

Thornley fought back, until Hollis' shadowed face in the visor gritted his teeth at him. "We're not infected Kyle!" Hollis' shouts echoed through the comlink. "You and me, we're okay."

Finally understanding, Thornley nodded.

"Boss, we have to get out of here, now!"

Without waiting for an answer, Hollis ran into the desert.

Knowing there was nothing else he could do, Thornley followed.

The two men ran eight kilometres, slowing only when their vacuum suits reported an inactive but functional ore carryall parked on the edge of a rocky outcrop directly ahead.

Looking at the vehicle from a distance through their vacuum suit's infrared and low-light sensors, Thornley finally felt hope. If the carryall was uninfected as it appeared to be, then they had a vehicle to escape the robotic invaders. When he shared his thoughts with Hollis they ran faster.

"We made it," Hollis's cry carried infectious excitement. Sprinting, he reached the rocky base ahead of Thornley and scrambled up to the outcrop.

"Be careful," the older man called.

Hollis vanished over the rocky lip.

Thornley slowed. Remembering his age, he decided a climb around to the right up the shallower rise would minimize his chances of falling.

"Steve, are you okay?"

The comlink carried only static.

"Steve?"

Still no answer.

Thornley climbed as fast as his weary bones allowed. The silent and still carryall appeared in perfect working order, but there was no sign of his companion.

"Stephen!"

Warning lights flashed on his heads-up display, indicating a sudden increase in local carbon monoxide levels. While their vacuum suits protected against atmospheric changes, he worried that he didn't understand what had caused the change.

Five metres remained between him and the ledge, a challenging climb across a narrow vertical face, the steepest portion of his journey so far. If he fell, it would be close to thirty metres before he hit solid ground. In New Namib gravity the fall would be fatal.

“Steve, can you hear me?”

Hollis stepped from behind the carrier. “Sure.”

Thornley sighed as Hollis placed his hand upon the metallic surface. “It must be new. See, the surface texture is real smooth.”

“Smooth? A carryall that’s smooth?”

A panel on the carryall sprung open, spilling hundreds of metallic tendrils flaying like whips. Engulfing Hollis in their wild dance, they snatched him inside.

The carryall fell dormant.

In contradiction to his frantic mind, Thornley froze. Shallow breaths fogged his visor. His chest pounded like the beat of an engine’s piston. The carryall had been rebuilt, from the inside out, remade by sentient machines as another tool to conquer this world.

For two minutes Thornley could do nothing, yet each of those minutes felt like an aeon. He could focus only upon his hopeless predicament until whirling, clicking noises rising within the carryall spurred him into action.

A tendril whipped from the machine, striking Thornley’s vacuum suit, almost knocking him from the ledge.

Swallowing a scream, Thornley clambered down with less care for safety than a rational brain would permit.

When he had covered a hundred metres, he looked back. The carryall had turned itself inside out, transforming into a gigantic robot with a dozen limbs and a similar number of sensory appendages. One limb held Stephen Hollis’s severed head, alive and conscious inside a transparent container. The robot was interrogating him.

Thornley wailed, and ran again into the darkness until the invader was far from sight.

Helen Copeland walked in a daze, through the afternoon and half the night. Exhaustion finally forced her to sleep, in a shallow cave within a u-shaped ravine.

She woke to the morning light cast by the New Namib sun breaking across the desert. She could see the ruins of the Secondary Camp, prominent at the ravine’s far end. Its utter devastation held no hope at all.

Despite her pessimism Helen attempted contact with survivors, but her comlink returned only squeals and rumbles. Her suit informed her that this was a type of machine code it had never encountered before.

Magnified views of the camp confirmed Helen’s fears. Robotic machines, like huge bulbous insects the size of houses, trundled everywhere. Constructed from salvaged building materials and dismantled vehicles, they worked in unison, cannibalizing the base to build more robotic machines.

It would be folly to return to camp. Her peers must be long dead or imprisoned. A rescue mission would be tantamount to suicide, and pointless if the others had suffered similar fates to Van Oyen.

She turned the way she had come and marched, hoping for a means of escape to inspire her. An hour later when she could no longer pretend, she sobbed. She might be the last human alive in the entire star system and for thousands of light-years in any direction. She no longer prized her solitude.

Rocks tumbled down the side of the ravine.

Sonic gun armed, finger over the trigger, she looked upwards, seeking whatever had disturbed the rocks.

To her relieved surprise, the intruder was a human, in a vacuum suit. He had a superficial scratch across the chest plate, but otherwise appeared intact.

“Who are you?” she called.

The man trudged wearily down the slope. “Kyle Thornley, and I’m not one of them,” he pointed towards the distant camp.

“I’m Helen Copeland.”

“I’m glad I found you, Helen.”

Feeling an emotional weight lift, she ran to the man, hugging him tight, an awkward gesture in their bulky suits. “Please tell me there are others still alive. I’ve had enough bad news for one day.”

He sat upon a rock, looking as exhausted as she felt. “I suspect not. I’m afraid it’s just you and me now.”

“Oh...I don’t...Do you know what’s going on?”

“I think we’ve been invaded, by some kind of sentient alien AI virus. It probably infiltrated our computer systems weeks ago, rebuilding everything from the inside out.”

Helen recalled the numerous problems plaguing the project of late, slowing everyone down. “Why invade this planet? I mean, we’re a small settlement. There are so many colonized worlds along the Brahma Rim Circuit better suited for invasion.”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. His eyes lost their focus. “I’m frightened Helen. Right now this all feels like a surreal nightmare.”

“You better get used to it. This is real.”

Thornley nodded. “You’re right. I keep hoping to find a way out of this, but our situation feels hopeless — it seems too hard to do anything.”

She didn’t like the implications in what he was saying. She didn’t want to die, but she didn’t want the invaders to win, either.

He looked pained, as if suffering from a crippling disease, or a wound she could not see. She was too afraid to ask in case he was dying.

“I don’t think we’re going to get out of this alive.”

She nodded slowly. In her heart she knew he was right. “If it’s really the case that we’re doomed, should we at least try to take out as many of them as we can first?” Ironically, it was loneliness more than death that she feared right now.

“How? We’ve only got one weapon.” He pointed to her sonic gun.

She didn’t have the heart to tell him the energy cells were almost depleted. Not that it mattered for what she had in mind. “No, I don’t mean this puny thing.” She scrambled up the side of the ravine. “I’ll show you.”

He kept pace as they took an easy path to the ridge. Between the crags she pointed to the row of crust-crackers, silent and still along the horizon. From this distance they looked untouched.

“You’re looking at a hundred or more fusion bombs out there, Thornley. Even if we only had one, it’s still a pretty powerful weapon.”

“But to set them off, we’d get caught in the blast. Are you willing to die like that?”

She nodded slowly. “It’s better than waiting to be caught, mutated into—” She thought of Van Oyen, and shuddered. “—don’t you think?”

Despite their exhaustion, Thornley and Helen kept marching, through frozen sand dunes and rocky valleys towards the closest crust-cracker.

Halfway, Helen’s suit sensed intruders. Thornley said they were robotic drones, scouring New Namib for human survivors. With no time to concoct a better plan they hid under the lip of a jagged rock until the cannibalized dragonfly-shaped machines moved on.

Helen couldn’t believe their luck that they had escaped unnoticed.

Gradually the crust-cracker dominated Helen’s field of vision. So close she could almost sense the phenomenal explosive energy constrained in its core. If they were successful in their scheme, detonating not one but all the bombs, then perhaps the dream to build a world paradise would still find fruition.

Ahead, dust settled around Thornley’s boots. He had stopped walking.

She looked up at him. His stance had become twisted, almost unnatural. He must have an injury he was not telling her about. “What’s the matter?”

“I’ve been thinking.”

“Is there a problem?” Was he about to tell her that he was dying, that she’d have to go on alone? “Are you okay?”

“I want you to turn back. Hide in the mountains away from the lava flows when this thing goes off.”

“What? Why?”

His mouth twisted. “Because I’ve been stupid. Only one of us needs to set off the crust-crackers.”

“We’re in this together Thornley...Kyle. Besides, I don’t want...” She almost told him she couldn’t bear to be alone.

“You’re not one of the engineers, so you don’t know how to activate a crust-cracker anyway.” He rubbed the gash across his chest, as if it hurt, a real scar burnt into real flesh.

“But you need my help. What if you’re attacked? I can protect you.” She held up the sonic gun.

“I’ll be fine.”

“But I’ve seen them in action. I know what they can do to a person. You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

He nodded, not seeming to care what she said. “Have you ever been in love?”

She was surprised by his question. “Love? Sure.”

Even through his view plate reflecting the sun, Thornley appeared unconvinced.

“Well...I’ve dated a few guys.”

Thornley was firm when he said, “Helen, tell me the truth.”

He was right to challenge. She'd spent an entire lifetime running from people, and now, when loneliness was a burden, she wanted no part of it. "No, I haven't."

He finally smiled for her. "It would be a shame if you never did. Go hide in the mountains. Protect yourself from the blast and wait for rescue."

She frowned quizzically. "Why did you want to know?"

He opened his arms wide. He looked ready to cry. "I've got three failed marriages. All of them were perfect until I ruined them by ignoring what was important, by staying away on jobs like this one for too long. Now there is no chance for me. For you though, love is the one thing in life you'll want to find and then hold on to."

Without waiting for an answer, he turned and ran across the dusty plain; abandoning her.

Fingering a scratch on the side of her suit, she wondered what he was really trying to tell her.

Thornley marched effortlessly, now that his legs were no longer flesh.

The previous night at the ore carryall, a sliver of alien metal had reached out and touched him. That was all it took to infect first his vacuum suit, then later his flesh, until two living organisms merged.

He could no longer sense the parts of him that were changed. They didn't ache with the pain of forced marching, but they didn't respond to every command he asked of them either.

A short time later the machine invaders began to talk to him, voices inside his mind. They told Thornley that he would soon submit to their will. He would forget that he was once human and fully assimilate with their swarm culture. For millions of years they had broadcast their informational selves across the galaxy, planting their code into the machines of technologically advanced societies wherever they found them. Then they rebuilt themselves, establishing outposts in the very heart of any culture that could potentially threaten their future existence.

Every memory in Thornley's mind was now imprinted on their data networks. Needing nothing more of him, they would task him one last assignment, and as his reward he would receive oblivion forever. He would welcome that end.

At the base of the crust-cracker, Thornley's human mind took a moment to admire the shadow it cast across the barren world.

When he was ready to move on, he stepped into an elevator and it began to rise.

At close to a kilometre above the dusty plains, he stepped out again. Here the winds were powerful and the altitude dizzying. The atmosphere was so thin he would have died from oxygen starvation, had his lungs not been transformed into cybernetic constructs.

He caught a glimpse of his body reflected in a glass viewing portal, saw how dramatically he had changed since Helen had left him. Arms and legs now thin metallic skeletal frames, yet with the strength of a hundred men. His torso had orbbed, rounded and contoured, and there were appendages he didn't comprehend assembling across his body.

On the horizon were the heat ponds in their thousands, where trillions of microscopic organisms still bred and multiplied, oxygenating the planet. When the

New Namib crust opened, trillions of those microbes would die, but not all. Those that survived would evolve, to discover a more vibrant and dynamic world, vastly improved for sustaining life. Heat, liquid water and oxygen, everything a living planet could ever need, would soon be in abundance.

A shame he wouldn't survive to see it.

Once inside the master control room he programmed each crust-cracker to detonate simultaneously. With the sequence keyed, the fuel cores began to heat. Soon irreversible fusion would be achieved.

He looked towards the horizon and waited, trying to remember the faces of his children.

He realized too late that he had been followed.

"What are you doing here?"

Helen was repulsed. Thornley was like Van Oyen now. His insect-like body cycled through humanly-impossible angles with too many limbs for her to track. The flesh on his face has melded into a mesh of circuits and junctures.

"I finally realized you were one of them," she said.

"You shouldn't have followed me." A metal arm extended over the lip of the railing, pointing to the mountains. "I wanted to save you. You would have been saved. The supply starship is still coming."

"Liar!"

She fired the sonic gun, punching a hole through his ever-changing mass.

His cybernetic body flinched, reacting as if it felt real pain, but it didn't slow him. "I am doing what we agreed we would do. I am detonating the crust-crackers."

It was getting hot. Klaxons sounded. The entire structure rattled in the earth, like a skyscraper precarious in an earthquake, and Helen realized this was exactly what this was.

"I figured it out. This planet isn't worth keeping for you machines, is it? I mean, what were we? A few hundred people with perhaps a couple of million tonnes of equipment and a few trillion gigabytes of information, if you don't count the crust-crackers? No, not enough for you to build a worthwhile settlement on. That's why you're detonating the crust-crackers. Not to save me but to cover your tracks; to make it look like the humans won. So you can start again."

The monster in Thornley menaced, so she shot him again.

"I thought it odd that none of the scouting robots tried to take us," Helen shouted over the rising pitch of releasing steam valves, blaring klaxons, and the grumbles of welds and joints shaking apart. "And when you left me out there, alone, one of the drones zipped right over me. It should have seen me. It did see me. By now I should be just like you."

"But you are not."

"No, I'm not, am I?"

Several of Thornley's limbs worked the crust-cracker's master control panel. Both woman and hybrid knew his actions were pointless, but he attempted to overturn the sequence anyway. She'd deliberately hid until irreversible fusion had been achieved, when the invaders would have no time to save her.

“I’m a carrier, aren’t I? You’ve finally concluded this world wasn’t worth invading, but instead of broadcasting yourselves at slower-than-light, searching for the next civilized planet to destroy, you planned on using our wormhole technology to get you around, until every single one of our colonies was consumed.”

“Is that so surprising to you?”

“It hurts — that you used me, made me an infected carrier.” She touched the scratch on her suit, remembered that she had hugged Thornley when they first found each other. “That’s why you left me behind, I know.”

It was getting hot. The temperature controls in her suit warned that they were about to fail. Her air tasted like steam, burning her throat and eyes.

“But I’m not going anywhere!”

A distant crust-cracker ignited, first as a blinding flash, then as a turbulent nuclear detonation. Millions of tonnes of rock and sand exploded into the sky and it rained New Namib earth for as far the eye could see. The wind picked up, roared at unprecedented speeds. Lava spewed in great sheets from the hole punctured in the crust.

That was just one bomb.

Helen missed the next detonation. She was too close.

Night Heron's Curse

...Thoraiya Dyer

It was not in my nature to be jealous.

Most days, I thanked my ancestors for the fleetness of foot and the gift of patience they had given me. Still, sometimes I secretly longed for a share of the breathtaking beauty that my younger sister, Night Heron, possessed.

My mother gave me the name of Swampphen, though I had been born beneath a rain of stars. I could not have been called ugly, but when I looked at myself critically in the calm surface of the Blue Pool, I saw a skinny figure with practically no bottom. I saw a square face with a flat nose and a crown of crazed, zigzagging hair.

Night Heron, however, from the age of nine, could not pass a campfire without turning men's heads. She was slender and supple. Her black hair and eyes shone. Her mouth was soft and inviting and her nose dainty and perfect.

Even when she scowled at me in the darkness of the Old Woman's cave, her face did not scrunch in unflattering lines, but in fierce aquiline beauty.

"They stare at me all the time, older sister. They never stop. I'd like to poke sticks in all those staring eyes!"

Father would have told her that mountain wildflowers did not resent the admiring glances of men, but Father had died after being buried in a rock slide last year, and whenever I spoke of him, Night Heron shivered and shook as though remembering there was nobody left to protect her. The Elders would decide who she married, now, and they would marry her on her twelfth birthday, not her fifteenth birthday as Father had once assured her. Her twelfth birthday was only a month away.

"Just ignore them," I said comfortingly. "Pretend they're not eyes, but river pebbles. Walk by them as though you were walking by the bank of a river."

Nobody ever stared at me, and it wasn't just because I had crazy hair and no bottom. They thought I had the Mother Eel Spirit inside of me, and it frightened them. Every time I went down to the creek to place eel traps, I came back with dozens of giant eels. Nobody else was lucky like I was. The men and women muttered. They thought it was magic. This year, I would turn sixteen, and nobody had asked the Elders for me as their wife.

It wasn't magic. It was just patience and observation. Nobody else watched the sky and remembered where the rains fell. Nobody else rose before dawn to run up and down the length of the great valley, checking the water levels in the pools and streams. The forest was tranquil and the run invigorating. I loved leaping over rocks and fallen

eucalypts, past sleepy bellbirds through the morning mist. It felt like being the only human alive in the world. Almost, it seemed as if I might step into the Dreaming, where monstrous talking birds and animals roamed and the world was still being formed.

I tried to tell the others where to set the long woven bags that we wedged into bottlenecks in the creeks, but they didn't want to know. Eels entered the traps as they moved from one pool to another. Because of what I saw, I knew which pools the eels would abandon, and when they would stay put. Nobody listened, though, because I was much younger than they.

That is the way of it, with my people. The older is always considered to be the wiser, no matter how smart or stupid they actually are.

"I wonder who the Elders will choose for me," Night Heron muttered as she placed tinder on the banked coals. "I hope it's not Crooked Spear. His leg is so horrible. I couldn't bear to look at him, much less touch him."

The fire flared, bringing light and warmth to the cosy space. The old women saw that the blaze was lit and abandoned their gossip in the twilight. They shuffled, single file, into the cave.

I hid my blush at the mention of Crooked Spear. He was tall and slender as a spear, but that was not why he had been named. His left leg had a bend in it below the knee, a bend that ought not to be there. It had been there since the day of his birth. He was not a fast runner, and he found it difficult to move stealthily through the trees. As a result, he had to be cunning in other ways. His throwing arm was strong. He could stay completely still, for hours, in the shadow of a tree or crouched in the waving grass. Like me, he studied things carefully before he made decisions.

Once, he told me that my weaving was skilful. Another time, he told me that he envied my morning runs through the valley, and laughed that he must be content to pounce like the owl and not run like the swamphen. On a winter's morning when game was scarce, he had even asked me where I thought eels could be found that day. Men never asked for advice from young girls. Crooked Spear was not like the other men.

"What's that?" my Oldest Aunty cackled at Night Heron. "Are you talking about Crooked Spear?"

"Crooked Spear hunts better than any straight-legged man," Second-Oldest Aunty said approvingly.

"Crooked Spear solves the Tribe's problems before they begin," said Oldest Aunty, even more approvingly. "He'll be the Chief one day."

I moved a basket of tubers to make room for all the women.

"The Medicine Man has seen that Crooked Spear must marry a perfect woman," Second-Oldest Aunty declared. "Only marrying a perfect woman can stop the curse on his twisted leg from being passed on to his children."

My fingers froze on the basket. A perfect woman? There was no such thing. Crooked Spear had to marry a perfect woman?

Oldest Aunty sat behind Night Heron and combed her hair back with gnarled fingers.

"You are the perfect woman, Night Heron," Oldest Aunty crooned. "You are the perfect woman for our future Chief."

Night Heron's mouth tightened stubbornly as she snapped some more small twigs and built up the fire.

“What do you think, Swamphen?” Second-Oldest Aunty smiled at me. “Isn't your sister perfect?”

My knuckles white on the edge of the basket, I forced myself to smile back.

“My sister is perfect to look at,” I said truthfully.

She was perfect to look at, but she didn't want to marry Crooked Spear. I wanted to marry him. It wasn't fair. Why did the Medicine Man have to make that prophecy about the perfect woman? It made my insides hurt; it made me feel like running into the twilight.

I could run like the wind. Surely that would be enough to break Crooked Spear's curse?

But the Medicine Man had made no prophecy about me.

The next morning, I rose with the stars still cold and hard on the horizon.

Trying to tell myself that it was foolish to dream of Crooked Spear when I had crazy hair and no bottom, I lengthened my stride as I moved away from the caves, following the twisting ridges through fog that retained the deep violet glow of night.

Lyrebirds called with the mimicked voices of a thousand songbirds. A gentle rain wet the drooping eucalyptus leaves. Dampness darkened their ruddy bark.

At last, the mist turned pale with the morning sun. Droplets beaded on banksias and a bedraggled kookaburra watched me flit past. Spirits seemed to hover and breathe at my back.

I paused at Sunning Snake Rock to look out over the valley. Ghost Falls thundered over the edge on the other side. Wind from the waterfall hurled the fog away, clearing a space. The fog collected again in the valley like foam from the waves of a violent ocean.

It was three years since I'd seen the ocean. Three years since our tribe had gone to the coast to trade. We were feuding with the peoples directly to the east of us, so when we travelled it was to the north as well as east. Twenty days travel took us to the Great River That Fed The Sea, where the Seven Tribes welcomed us and fed us their strange fare. Our elders gave gifts of thick pelts, sturdy spears and smoked eel. From the Seven Tribes, we received gifts of superior flints, emu-feather cloaks and ornamental shells.

Last time, my father had deemed me too young, but the next time we went, it was possible that I myself would be traded, to one of the Seven Tribes men. Perhaps that would be for the best. I would not have to watch my sister Night-Heron get married to Crooked Spear. I could start a new life with the Seven Tribes. There must be very many eels in the Great River That Fed The Sea.

With a sob, I ran on, through the rain and mist. It was thicker the further I descended into the valley; it infiltrated the trees, blotting out the world in whiteness. My cheeks grew numb. Fine rain collected on my eyelashes. Shaking my head, I tried to concentrate on the stream that babbled beside the trail; tried to guess how much water had fallen during the night and whether eels would be moving towards or away from the Blue Pool.

It was no use. I couldn't stop thinking about Crooked Spear. And then, dream-like, as though my thoughts had been made flesh, Crooked Spear himself appeared by the mossy banks of the Blue Pool. Knee-deep in mist, he seemed to be floating in cloud.

I sucked in a breath and slid to a stop, breathing hard.

“Swamphen,” he said, smiling sadly. “Have you followed the song of my spirit?”

“Crooked Spear,” I replied, clutching my chest. “I have blundered here as blind as a banded rail. I apologise for intruding.”

I spun around to go back the way I’d come, but he said,

“Wait, Swampphen.”

My heart thumping, I turned back to him.

“I heard about the Medicine Man’s Prophecy,” I blurted. “They say you must marry a perfect woman.”

“That is what they say,” Crooked Spear agreed, rubbing his short, bristly beard. “Today the Medicine Man will summon your father’s spirit, so I may ask him for his perfect daughter as my wife.”

I stared at him in speechless misery, thinking: It should be me. He should be summoning my father’s spirit to ask for me.

Crooked Spear’s brown eyes were gentle.

“You will be my sister, Swampphen. You will leave the old women’s fires and come to my fire. Does that not please you?”

I hesitated.

“It would please me more to be the mother of your sons,” I whispered. I felt shocked by my audacity. The words could not be unsaid. I wanted to run, but my legs were frozen.

Crooked Spear nodded to himself.

“I should have asked for you years ago,” he sighed. “You are strong. The Mother Eel Spirit gives you strength. You are as quick as an eel, too. I watched you run and I thought that if I married you, it would be enough to break the curse, but I wanted to prove myself as a hunter, first. Now, it’s too late. The prophecy has been made. I cannot defy the Spirits.”

I took his words into my heart and locked them there. They were the most precious things I had ever owned.

“My sister will make you happy,” I assured him, though I was far from sure. Night Heron did not want to look at him. She didn’t want to touch him.

She would grow. She would learn.

Crooked Spear looked wry.

“I suppose so. To all appearances, she is the perfect woman.”

I bowed my head, feeling hot tears on my cheeks. Then I turned and trotted away into the mist, head held high. The cold rain mingled with my tears.

When I returned to the camp, Night Heron was gone.

Oldest Aunty seized my shoulders, pinching hard.

“Where is your sister, Swampphen?”

“I haven’t seen her, Aunty,” I answered, startled out of my reverie.

“We hoped she had gone running with you.”

“No, Aunty.”

Oldest Aunty’s mouth puckered tightly.

“Then you must find her before the men discover she is missing. It would be a grave insult. She would be punished harshly; perhaps even cursed. You can run faster than anyone else, Swampphen. Run, now, and bring her back, before the ceremony at sunset. Bring her back before the ancestors are offended beyond all chance of forgiveness.”

I ran to all of Night Heron's favourite places. I ran to all the best collecting and gathering sites. I ran along all the trails that criss-crossed the mountains.

I found my sister on the trail to the north and east. It was the trail that led to the Great River That Fed The Sea.

Exhausted and angry, I barred the trail in front of her. It was late afternoon, and there was no hope of returning to the caves before sunset.

"Where are you going?" I demanded. "The Medicine Man is calling our father's spirit in a ceremony tonight. How could you disgrace your own father?"

"Father left us," Night Heron said stubbornly. "He said he would always be there to protect us, but he lied."

I shook her by the shoulders.

"It's not his fault that he died!"

"I don't want to marry Crooked Spear. I'm going to the Seven Tribes."

"You can't do that. What about the prophecy?"

"What about it? I don't care if Crooked Spear is under a curse."

I dropped my voice menacingly.

"Don't you think the Medicine Man will put a curse on you, if you run away?"

Night Heron frowned. She thought about it for a moment.

"His curses can't reach me if I run far enough. I'm going all the way to the sea. There are different spirits, there. Friendly spirits."

"How do you know they are friendly? Come back with me right now. I'm bigger than you. I can force you to come back."

Night Heron looked me up and down.

"You're my sister. You're supposed to protect me, too. If you make me marry that hideous, old, crippled man, then you don't love me. If you make me marry him, you're not my sister."

I felt strangled by the rush of words that poured into my throat. Crooked Spear was not hideous. He was not old. He was not even crippled; not really. I was supposed to protect her? I was *trying* to protect her, from the evil curses of the Medicine Man. It was because I loved her that I wanted her to go back. Didn't she know I would rather have Crooked Spear for myself?

No protest passed my lips. I looked at her and my anger drained away. She was only a child. Just a frightened child.

"I am your sister," I said softly. "I will protect you."

I put my arm around her shoulders. We began to walk.

The ocean crashed against the land.

The plump, white bodies of strange birds filled the air. The wind that blew was fierce; it scoured us with flung sand and snatched away our voices when we tried to speak.

Night Heron followed a narrow stone ledge around the cliff, heading south. High, arched rocks loomed above us. Her hair was tossed and tangled. Her full lips were chapped and

bleeding. We had taken a wrong turn, somewhere; we had not come out at the campsite I remembered with the bark huts and the sheltered ring of fires.

Still, we had moved quickly, much faster than when the whole tribe travelled together. We had reached the sea in only twelve days, and we had eaten well along the way. Night Heron had found honey, tubers and trees laden with nuts and fruit. I had trapped eels and caught goannas in trees.

This exposed headland was a different world to the bushland of our mountain home. We needed to find the Seven Tribes. On a beach, somewhere close by, I remembered eating fish, prawns, lobsters and shellfish with Eaglehawk's people, but I could not find these things on my own, and, besides, I could not take them without the spirits' permission.

The sky over the sea was dense with purple clouds that rushed towards us. I felt in my shivering bones that a mighty storm was coming, and I wondered if it was our ancestors, seeking revenge for our disobedience. I scanned the beach and the tidal rock pools, squinting for any sign of a boat; a discarded net; any evidence of people.

There was none. Night Heron was getting too far ahead of me. Edging along the ledge, I called out to her.

"Night Heron! Wait for me!"

Was it my imagination, or did I feel the rock beneath my shoulder blades trembling?

She didn't hear me. I called again, louder, cupping both hands around my mouth.

"Sister, wait for me!"

She stopped this time, and turned, and there was no mistaking the shuddering of the cliff this time. Pebbles showered down from above. Night Heron shrieked and flung her hands up to protect her head. Larger rocks fell down. I shrank against the curve of the cliff, shielding my eyes, trying desperately to keep my little sister in my sight.

A warm brown hand stole into my palm, and I glanced up to find an older woman with a necklace of iridescent shells crouched beside me. A woman of the Seven Tribes. She pressed her finger to her lips for silence. Then, she beckoned me back the way we had come.

I pointed to Night Heron, loathe to leave without her. The Seven Tribes woman nodded, smiled encouragingly, and beckoned again. When I looked again through the haze of dust and sand, I saw there was another Seven Tribes woman with Night Heron. It would be all right.

Our guides led us back to the sandy cove where Night Heron and I had first climbed down over the hill to reach the ocean. There, they breathed sighs of relief and their patient looks turned to scolding ones.

"Worse than foolish," my rescuer admonished. "Two young girls, trespassing at sacred Yi-ran-na-li, without enough sense to be silent in respect."

I bowed my head quickly; saw out of the corner of my eye that Night Heron had done the same.

"We apologise most sincerely, Aunty. We were looking for your camp. Are you of the Seven Tribes?"

"Yes," she said. "I am Crow, from Eaglehawk's tribe. Where are you from?"

"We are from—" I started to say.

"We are from far away," Night Heron interrupted me. "Very far away, and we can't go back. Ever."

Crow set her fists against her hips and regarded Night Heron levelly.

"Eaglehawk's tribe will not shelter criminals. Not even a beautiful young criminal like you."

"I'm not a criminal," Night Heron said hotly.

"With respect, Aunty," I said quickly, "my sister is fleeing an undesirable marriage."

I felt humiliated by my own lie. Undesirable? Never! I wondered what Crooked Spear thought of me, now. He must despise me. I wondered how he had felt, discovering that Night Heron had run away rather than marry him. The possibility of his pain made me ache with guilt and longing.

"Then you have disrespected your father's wishes?"

"My father is dead," Night Heron answered sullenly.

"Please, Aunty," I said, "can you shelter us?"

Crow shook her head sadly.

"Your people will come for you," she said. "I won't be responsible for a feud between our tribes. Do not try to come south. Do not try to come to our camp. That is the only advice I can give you."

"Is there a place where we can wait for the storm to pass?" I asked in a small voice. The Seven Tribes would not help us. We must live alone, here, forever, or we must move on, into unknown lands, estranged from our ancestors and the mountains who were our brothers. Perhaps we would offend more spirits in our ignorance. There would be no-one to help us; no-one to turn to.

I had made a momentous mistake. I should have forced Night Heron to return with me. Now, it was too late.

"There is a trail over the headland," Crow said grudgingly, indicating the way. "The mouth of the Great River That Feeds The Sea is on the other side."

As if she knew what I was thinking, she added,

"You must not attempt to cross the river. The shell-eating tribes there will not welcome you, either. Nor should you set foot in the Mangrove Swamp to the west. Wau-Wai, the Eel-Shark, waits beneath the waters for those who trespass on his domain. The monster can swallow a canoe in a single gulp."

Night Heron shivered.

"You should kill that monster," she said.

"Many have tried," Crow replied. "The monster's heart is said to have the power to transform a warrior, so that his inner attributes, his strength and his bravery, his true self, can be seen from the outside. Many a scarred or wounded hero has sought to be healed by Wau-Wai's heart. All have failed. Now, you must leave."

"Thank you, Aunty," I said. "You have been kind."

"I was young and foolish, once. Off you go."

I took Night Heron's hand, and drew her towards the narrow trail that climbed up onto the headland.

When we paused for breath, half way up, Crow and her companion had vanished.

Night Heron clutched her chest as though it pained her.

"What's wrong?" I asked her, alarmed.

"I can feel something coming," she panted.

I frowned.

“Something coming? What do you mean? Is it the storm?”

Night Heron shook her head. Her eyes widened. Her lips drew back from her teeth.

“Swamphen, you have to help me!”

“Help you? What’s the matter? What do you want me to do?”

“A curse from the medicine man. It’s looking for me. It’s coming.”

“It’s your imagination,” I said, though I felt sick with the certainty that she was right.

Night Heron turned and scrambled desperately up the slope. Mortified and helpless, I followed close behind her. In her haste, her bare feet slipped in loose dirt and stones. She cut her palms and her forearms on the rock, but she didn’t slow down.

We arrived on top of the headland. The wind tried to knock us back down. Across the ocean, the angry clouds boiled towards us, but Night Heron stared in the opposite direction, still clutching her chest; still panicked and short of breath.

I followed the direction of her stare. The mountains were pale shadows in the distance. The Great River That Fed The Sea lay like a silver serpent across the land. I saw the Mangrove Swamp that Crow had mentioned. Across the mouth of the river, a narrow peninsula marked the beginning of a long stretch of yellow sand which must be the home of the shell-eating tribes.

“We have to go down the other side,” I shouted at Night Heron. “We have to shelter from the storm.”

She shook her head. She fell to her knees. I tried to go to her, to help her up, but something powerful and invisible — something that moved against the wind — thrust me away from her.

Terror turned me icy cold.

“Swamphen!” Night Heron shrieked. The earth erupted around her. She flung her arms above her head, clawing at empty space, as her body was sucked down into the headland itself.

Grasses crawled over the spot where she had been, and then were still. The earth appeared undisturbed. My sister had been taken into the hill.

Sobbing, seizing handfuls of grass in the spot where she had knelt in the grip of the curse, I called out her name, over and over.

There was no reply. The sky crackled with lightning. Thunder roared in my ears.

“Night Heron,” I cried, one final time.

Then, as the rain started coming down in vicious spears of freezing cold, I had no choice but to make my way down the other side of the headland, alone.

The storm raged all day and night.

I huddled in a tiny cavity in the sheltered side of the headland, going over what had happened in my head. The curse had not killed Night Heron. She had not been sentenced to sicken and die. Instead, she had been imprisoned in the cliff.

I would have to go back to the mountains. I would have to beg the medicine man to release her.

He would not listen to me. Men never listened to young girls. Only Crooked Spear had been different, and Crooked Spear would never listen to me again. I’d betrayed him. I couldn’t face him. It was impossible for me to return.

I noticed a sudden stillness. Outside, the sun was rising.

The storm retreated with the night. It left twin rainbows behind.

Stretching out to my full height was painful after staying crouched in the cave for so long. Before me, a long rock platform divided salty ocean from muddy river mouth. Some of the dips and curves in the stone had been filled with rainwater.

I stooped to scoop some water out of the hollow. The surface of the puddle was clear and still, showing the reflection of the headland. Before I could touch the water, a beautiful face of angles and planes, seeming carved of stone, appeared in the reflected cliff.

Night Heron's perfect face. I snatched my hand back, gasping.

When I looked at the cliff face itself, I saw nothing. When I glanced back at the pool, my heart clenched. My sister's face had not vanished. Her lips formed words. I could read them clearly.

"Swamphen, help me."

Framing the pool with my hands, careful not to let my shadow interfere with the reflection, I said miserably,

"How can I help you?"

"Bring me Wau-Wai's heart, Swamphen. The monster's heart has the power to transform."

"How can I do that? I am only one woman, and Wau-Wai swallows canoes whole!"

"He's an eel. He's only a big eel that lives in a swamp. You have the Mother Eel spirit inside you. Save me, Swamphen."

The quality of the light changed. The rainbows faded into grey. Night Heron's face disappeared.

I swallowed. My throat was dry. Thrusting my cupped hands into the pool, I drank the fresh water and tried not to imagine an eel that was big enough to swallow a canoe. What Night Heron wanted was impossible. Me, catch a monster in a trap, when countless Seven Tribes warriors had died trying?

But then, nobody else was lucky with eels like I was.

Nobody else would help me to save Night Heron. I was her only chance. I was her sister. I was supposed to protect her.

Water dripping from my chin, I rose slowly to my feet. Turning my back to the ocean, I began to walk, in the direction of the Mangrove Swamp.

Autumn passed, and winter, and spring.

Three seasons after I had watched the headland swallow my sister, the great net I was fashioning was almost complete.

The sounds of the swamp were familiar to me, now. I slept in a bark hut I had made in the branches of a tree. On my morning runs, I was silent and swift. Not the roosting cormorants, nor the nesting mice, nor the cold-slow snakes were disturbed, and always, always, I watched the water.

In all the time I had lived in Mangrove Swamp, I had seen no sign of the monster — no sign but the occasional, unexplained movement of water.

Wau-Wai was there, waiting for me to make a mistake. The wind ruffling the reeds told me so, and the sea-eagles circling in the dizzy heights, and the skittering crabs that sheltered in the roots of the mangroves.

During the day, I dug up the roots of the bulrushes and caught enough small game to eat to keep my strength up. During the afternoon, I wove long lengths of bulrush string into the trap that would capture Wau-Wai. I might have tried to spear him, but spears were the province of men — and spears had already failed. Estimating the eel to be, at most, fifty paces long and five paces wide, I patiently worked on the rope eel net that would deliver him to me, and deliver his magical heart to poor Night Heron.

To avoid discovery by the Seven Tribes, I only dared to build fires at night. The fires were small. I cooked bulrush roots between layers of hot stones and set them aside to cool. They were bland and tasteless, but chewing them produced fibre for rope-making. I cooked tadpoles, turtles and snakes as well, juggling them hot to my mouth and savouring their strong, salty flavour.

After three seasons, I no longer craved the sweeter meats of wombat and kangaroo. I still missed having others to talk to, but, it would not be long, now.

Not long, before I set my trap for Wau-Wai.

The next morning was a windy morning, perfect for snaring ducks.

I should have gone on my run, but the speckled drakes that paddled around the rustling reeds in one of the larger ponds were too tempting. I wove weeds and twigs into my hair, knotting my fuzzy tendrils around them, before slipping into the water as carefully and quietly as I could.

Submerged to the upper lip in the scum-covered pond, my feet tangling in submerged logs at the bottom, I tried my best to impersonate a floating mass of debris as I made my way towards the ducks.

Ten paces away, the ducks still hadn't noticed me. They foraged greedily, squabbling amongst themselves.

Five paces away.

Three paces.

Under the water, my fingers tightened on one end of a slender stick. On the other end of it, a bulrush-root noose waited to be slipped over the neck of the closest duck. I would drag him under water and break his neck before he knew it.

I smiled a small smile, thinking: *I'll eat him for breakfast.* The smoke from a small fire wouldn't be noticed. Even if it was noticed, Seven Tribes men didn't come into the swamp.

As though my thoughts had summoned them, I glimpsed movement in the distance. Teasing, laughing, male voices were brought to me on the wind.

I froze, forgetting about the ducks. The men were speaking a language I could not understand, but they were coming close to the place where my bark hut was hidden. Inside the hut, my giant net lay in mounds and coils.

What would they do with it if they found it?

I strained my ears. I heard more laughter, hushed by a deeper voice. The ducks scrambled out of the water and scattered in the reeds. I felt vibrations in the mud beneath

me, and frowned. Deciding to follow the ducks' example, I crawled into the reeds and peered through parted tufts across the pond.

Four young men stood there. They had boomerangs and nets. They, too, were hunting ducks, but they apparently intended to do it by setting up their nets between the mangrove trees and then using the boomerangs to scare the ducks into the nets.

It was the first time I'd seen hunters in the swamp. There was no way I could retreat without being seen. Barely breathing, I watched them get to work. Under my muddy chest, the ground quivered again. The water level in the pond crept up marginally.

It crept up again, but there were no ripples; nothing that I could see.

Two of the youths climbed into the trees and began attaching their nets to longer branches that swept out over the pond. The other two splashed into the pond itself, swimming towards the other side, clearly intending to anchor the nets across the narrowest point of the body of water.

It happened before they had time to scream. A vast, cave-like mouth opened on the surface of the pond. It sucked the swimmers into a darkness bordered by teeth as long as spears.

The monster. Wau-Wai. I shrank back.

Rising with a wave that washed over the tops of the trees, the monster gave a single thrash, tearing the other two men out of the trees, before sinking into a bubbling whirlpool of mud.

The whole swamp shuddered and shook. Waves of putrid water drenched me. I clung to the reeds, terrified of being washed away; of being washed into the great eel's massive maw.

When the waves died away and the swamp became still, I shivered and cried in my clump of reeds, still too scared to move. Wau-Wai was twice as big as I had guessed. He was stronger than I had guessed, smarter than I had guessed, and more vicious than I had dreamed.

Had Wau-Wai come for those boys, or had he come for me?

If chance had not taken me out of the water in time, I, too, might have met my end. Those boys would not return to their fires to brag of duck-hunting in the Mangrove Swamp. Inside the eel's belly, lost in darkness, they would never find their ancestors.

Those teeth. Those teeth, with the sun shining on their horrible whiteness. Those teeth would chew through my net in seconds. Even if I did weave a net that was big enough, how could anything stop those terrible teeth?

"Oh, Night Heron," I whispered, hugging myself.

The water level in the pond went down, marginally.

It went down, again.

As I watched the surface of water sliding over each sodden reed, each chip of shale, each grain of mud, I realised what I would have to do if I truly intended to cut out Wau-Wai's evil heart.

My own heart sank, but I refused to turn back. I had to save my sister. This was the only way.

The giant, wooden, winged canoe that carried the White Ghost-People was anchored, again, in the mouth of the Great River That Fed The Sea.

I had seen it more and more commonly in the three years since Night Heron had been swallowed by the headland. Over the last six moons, the white ghost-people had been active, building their houses and their fires by the cave where I had once sheltered from the storm.

I did not go there any more. Not even when the twin rainbows appeared, and there was a chance of glimpsing Night Heron in the pools on the sea-shore. There were other places for me to collect stones. The Seven Tribes were friendly towards the newcomers, but I was a little afraid of them, and besides, I had no time to waste.

Ignoring the blot of the winged canoe against the blue, I kept walking on a path worn by no other feet but mine, the path between the sandstone gully and the Mangrove Swamp.

At the edge of the swamp, I rested my bag on the ground and straightened painfully. My back was tortured and bent from carrying rocks. My hands were callused and creased from holding the strings of the bag. In three years, the work had not gotten any easier.

But I was determined. At the same time, I was thorough and systematic. There would be no second chances. If I made a mistake, I would end up quivering on the points of Wau-Wai's teeth, instead of cutting through his hide for my prize.

I glanced up at the sky. It was clear and cloudless. That did not suit my preparations. I needed a month or so of drenching rain, followed by a dry spell, for the plan to be set in motion.

I could not call on my ancestors or the local spirits to help me. In this place, I was utterly alone. There was nothing I could do to speed the rains.

Nothing to do but wait.

It seemed like the tiredness in my eyes would never go away.

The stink of the swamp in my nostrils; that, too, was surely permanent. The gritty feel of mud between my toes. The burning roughness in my palms. My silence, like the silence of a condemned spirit.

Golden afternoon light glittered in the clouds. Droplets dappled the surface of the stream that ran through the mangroves; they were swallowed whole, never to be seen again, just like Wau-Wai's prey. I crouched in my bark hut, staring down at the hypnotic ripples.

Cormorants preened. Fish gulped hopefully at slivers of reed that might have been hapless insects.

Then, the rain stopped.

I glanced upwards. The sliding clouds parted. I watched the sky for an hour.

The signs were there. The sense of heaviness lifting. Ants coming out of their nests and winding in long loops around the boughs of the trees.

For another hour, I watched the sky, hardly daring to hope. Springing down from my hut, where the forgotten loops of the giant net had become my sleeping-place, I ran along the channels and the turns of the great swamp, observing everything, disturbing nothing, hope growing inside my chest.

This was it. My moment had arrived. Now, when the water level was at its highest and the river tributary running parallel was also fat and full, was time to set the trap.

At the border of the swamp, the channel it had taken me years to dig led to the artificial billabong it had taken me years to make impermeable with rocks and clay. The curving billabong was perhaps half filled by rainwater; but, thanks to my labours, despite the flatness of the land, it had not been contaminated by the slow, certain ooze of the soggy wetlands.

Not until now. When I opened the first gate — a wall of earth and stones held in place by wooden props — the muddy swamp waters began dribbling and spluttering into the billabong. Tiny breaches became a slow but steady flow. The enormous, empty space I had carved was significant enough that all the creatures in the swamp would feel that flow.

They would feel the water level falling, faster than any outpouring into the fat, flood-swollen river could possibly account for.

They would feel the water level falling, and they would abandon the old places in search of new, deeper and more secure lairs.

The artificial billabong was deeper. It was stable. It was secure.

Wau-Wai would feel the water level falling, and he would come.

He had to come.

I sat by the billabong, built by my own two hands, to wait.

Stars wheeled through the night sky, and owls hunted in the dark, but Wau-Wai did not come.

The sun rose ponderously over the mangroves, and still, Wau-Wai did not come.

Dazed, crushed and hollow, I gazed with bleary eyes at the water that still flowed, reluctantly, from the swamp into the artificial billabong.

It would not flow for much longer. Eels had moved in, that was certain, but not the giant Eel-Shark. Not the monster for whom I had toiled.

The weight of my responsibility pressed on my shoulders. Without Wau-Wai's heart, I was lost. Without it, I truly was a condemned spirit. The power of the heart was the only way to undo my mistakes. It was my only means of redemption.

Jumping up, in desperation I ran into the swamp. This was a different kind of running, though. Instead of drifting lightly over the bog, as I did every morning, I let my weight fall heavily and deliberately in every footprint.

I stomped. I leaped, and landed with all the force of my growing anger. I threw my digging tools, and when they were gone, I threw logs and showers of pebbles.

"Wau-Wai!" I hollered, wading into the duck pond. "Come and eat me, Wau-Wai. I am not afraid of you. Come!"

Nothing.

Wading in deeper, I smacked the surface of the water with the flat of my hand, startling the wading birds into flight.

"I have lived here under your nose for four years."

Smack. Smack. Stomp. Stomp.

"I have laughed at you every day and night."

Splash. Splash.

“You are old and feeble, Wau-Wai. You must be blind.”

I put my head under the water, so that the sound would travel better.

“You must be blind, if in four years, you could not find me!”

Breathing hard, my nostrils flared, my ears full of swamp water, I stamped and cursed some more.

The ground quivered. The water level in the pond went up marginally.

Screaming at the top of my lungs, I scrambled from the water and dashed in the direction of my billabong. A wave of mud and filth erupted behind me, slathering over the backs of my knees, and I felt a shadow fall over me.

I did not look back. I did not stop.

The distance between the duck pond and the billabong seemed cruelly, impossibly far. I lurched from reed island to reed island through the swamp, sometimes ahead of the mud crest, sometimes half-buried in it. The shadow around me grew deeper. A terrible, echoing, grinding sound behind me became louder and louder.

I imagined I could feel Wau-Wai’s breath on the back of my neck. The muscles in my legs shrieked with pain. I forced them on. The billabong was in sight.

Diving into the water, I swam as I’d never swum before. My arms churned. My legs kicked. Across the billabong, I thrashed in terror.

Before I could reach the other side, something massive and heavy fell into the wide pool. The wave of displaced water carried me out of the billabong. It deposited me on the bank, where I clung to a bent mangrove tree and waited with my eyes clenched shut for the wave to pass.

Only when it was gone did I dare look at the billabong.

A single red eye on the side of a turned, scaly head lay above the surface of the water. It was bigger than my two open hands, but there was a scar across the gleaming orb that made a jagged, white line.

The words I’d spoken in fury had been the truth. Wau-Wai *was* blind, after all. He could not find me when I moved without disturbing the ground.

Now, he was trapped in my billabong, and he did not know he was trapped. After a while, he sank out of sight. The water level went up, and I knew he was burrowing comfortably as deep as he could go.

That would not be very deep. The layers of stones were carefully fitted together. Elation filled me. I wanted to laugh, but I couldn’t; not until I was safely out of the monster’s reach.

My exhaustion lifted. Light-footed and light-hearted, I flew back to my bark hut. Wau-Wai was mine.

For the next few days, I hardly ate. I hardly slept. With rising excitement, I watched the water level in both the river tributary and the swamp go down. The sun shone strongly, day after day, as though it was complicit in my plan. Mud pools turned to cracked earth. The swamp and the tributary bled into the Great River That Fed The Sea.

When the water level in the tributary was well below the water level of the artificial billabong, I opened the second gate. Through a tunnel in the rock, water escaped from the billabong into the tributary.

The tunnel was big enough for the ordinary eels. They wriggled through it to freedom and a new life in the river.

Wau-Wai, however, could not fit through the tunnel. As the billabong emptied, the ground started to tremble. The monster struggled to find a way out. Every direction he turned, he found nothing but stone, and more stone.

Eventually, his enormous, snake-like body was revealed, his trembling and writhing growing weaker each day. I stood on the bank of the billabong and peered down at him without pity. How many of the Seven Tribes people had he killed?

I did not have to kill him myself. The very daylight took care of it, as did the open air. Wau-Wai was part eel, but he was also part shark, and he needed water to breathe. His gills exposed and his skin cooking in the sun, he died at midday, his eyes turning tacky and grey, a week after I'd opened the second gate.

I watched him for a long time, just to make sure.

Then, I climbed down a rope ladder and walked along his spiny back. I had cut open so many eels for smoking, I knew exactly where his heart would be. Counting the number of ribs, I decided on a spot, and started cutting into the rancid flesh.

It was a long, difficult job, but the end of my ordeal was in sight. I worked in a frenzy, using up and then discarding a dozen sharp, shell blades. When the sun went down, I reluctantly went back to my bark hut to sleep.

In the morning, the cutting resumed.

When the blade finally went through into the chest cavity, I was unprepared. Overbalancing, I fell through the hole I'd made, and found myself sitting on my bottom in an open space.

The smell was overpowering. Light penetrated through the hole.

In a watery sac coated in slime, suspended in the centre of the chest, something the size of a macadamia nut glowed eerie blue.

It was the heart. I grimaced. The hair stood up on the back of my arms and I wanted to run away.

Night Heron needed the heart. I had fought hard for it. I deserved it. Mustering my courage, I rose to my feet and stepped forward. The shell knife still in my right hand, I cut the tiny, glowing globule away from the membranes that held it.

Putting it into my pouch, I squeezed back out into the drained billabong, and turned in the direction of the headland where Night Heron was imprisoned. It was time to free her.

I left the swamp without a backwards glance. My time there was over. I felt larger than I had been before; I felt invincible.

I had won.

The headland was not the same as it had been on the day that it swallowed my sister.

The winged canoe of the white men was gone, and so were all signs of life around their abandoned dwellings, but the headland was riddled with tunnels that had been dug into the cliff.

Only the black seam that slanted through the headland had been disturbed. The Ghost-People had taken away enough coal to fill a valley. I had seen the black rocks being burned in the ritual fires of the Seven Tribes, but a fire big enough to consume what was missing should have been visible even in the mountains I had left behind.

Horrible, gaping cavities admitted the salt wind off the ocean.

“Night Heron!” I called miserably, running out onto the rock ledge, but the pools were empty and I could not find my sister’s reflection. It could not be, that I had worked so hard, for so long, only to find Night Heron disfigured by the intruders.

My tears fell onto the rock, and to my amazement, they swelled to fill one of the dry rock pools. I blinked away more tears, and saw Night Heron’s face form in the reflection of the cliff in the water.

“Swamphen,” her lips formed with anguish. They were no longer perfect lips. Jagged cracks split them. Her nose was missing. Parts of her forehead were tunnelled away.

I released an agonised cry that echoed across the waters. My fingers reached toward the pool, as though they could tenderly touch the face that had formed there; as if they could soothe her hurts and tend her wounds.

“Swamphen,” my sister said, “I cannot accept Wau-Wai’s heart from you. If I transform back into human form, I would be as the cliff-face has become; scarred and deformed. I do not want that.”

I refused to accept what she was saying. Pulling Wai-Wai’s shrivelled blue heart from my pouch, I held it eagerly out to her.

“But I did it. I did it for you. You’re wrong about being deformed. The heart will heal you. You have to take it!”

“I cannot bear to be ugly,” Night Heron answered, half turning away. Her face was even more wretched in profile. “I would rather remain imprisoned here until the end of the world. Go back to the mountain, Swamphen. You have been the best sister anyone could ever ask for. I love you. Now, go back.”

On my knees, with blown sand stinging my face, I watched the image in the reflection fade.

I found Crooked Spear by the mossy banks of the Blue Pool.

Mist cloaked him, as it had the last time I had seen him. He was still handsome. He was still focused and aware. He shackled his fishing spear loosely, his unblinking eyes following the subtle currents by the shore. I hesitated to approach him. Any man of the Tribe must strike me down, if he saw me, but I clung to hope. Crooked Spear was not just any man.

Taking a few swift steps, I knelt silently in front of him, my pouch proffered in both hands.

“Swamphen?” he asked gently. “Is it you?”

“Crooked Spear,” I replied, feeling my heart race at the very mention of his name. “I followed my sister to the Great River That Fed The Sea. The Medicine Man’s curse transformed her. I wanted to save her, so I trapped the eel-shark, Wau-Wai, in the Mangrove Swamp. Have you heard of Wau-Wai? It is said...”

My mouth felt dry. I paused to wet my lips. Crooked Spear interrupted calmly.

“I have heard of Wau-Wai. I know what is said. The monster’s heart has the power to transform a warrior, so that his inner attributes, his strength and his bravery, his true self, can be seen from the outside.”

“I had to save her. I have the heart inside this pouch.”

“You do? Why did you not give it to Night Heron?”

“She didn’t want it! She wouldn’t take it! The White Ghost-People destroyed the cliff, and Night Heron said that her beauty was destroyed. She said she could not bear to be ugly. And so I have brought the heart to you, Crooked Spear. You must take it.”

There was silence. A fish splashed in the pool.

“Why must I?” Crooked Spear asked slowly. “It was not I that slew the monster.”

“Because you have strength, and bravery, and you will be a great Chief. Wau-Wai’s heart can make your leg straight. It can break the curse on you. Like my sister was supposed to.”

My face flushed. My hands, still holding up the pouch, trembled.

Crooked Spear took the pouch. Then, he took my hands and drew me to my feet. His gaze was tender. It occurred to me that he was not going to hurt me. Quite the opposite.

His fingers traced the calluses on my hands. He tucked back a strand of my fuzzy hair. He took the heart out of the pouch and held it on his palm. It glowed steadily, making twin blue moons in Crooked Spear’s eyes.

“I am already the Chief of the Tribe,” he said. “I endured a trial set by the ancestors, and though my leg is not straight, my curse has been lifted.”

I gaped at him, at once astonished and fiercely proud.

“Of course,” I said faintly. “Of course, I should have known you had no need of a woman.”

Crooked Spear smiled.

“But I do have need of a woman. A special kind of woman, to be my wife. One strong enough and brave enough to slay a monster that no Seven Tribes man was able to slay.”

I felt giddy with happiness, even as I knew that what he proposed could never be.

“The Tribe will never accept me back.”

“The Tribe will never know,” Crooked Spear replied, and he set Wau-Wai’s tiny heart onto my tongue. “It’s time for your inner beauty to be revealed on the outside, Swamphen.”

It melted into the back of my mouth. I swallowed impulsively, and the world rocked. Losing my balance, I fell against Crooked Spear.

The next thing I knew, I was blinking at a reflection in the Blue Pool. There, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen stood sheltered in the arms of a handsome young Chief.

My mother gave me the name of Swamphen, though I had been born beneath a rain of stars.

When Chief Crooked Spear took a Seven Tribes wife, nobody complained. Rain-of-Stars was perfect, after all.

They had always said that Crooked Spear deserved a perfect wife.

Failed Experiments from the Frontier: The Pumpkin

...Paul Haines

Caleb took the knife his pa offered.

“You ready, boy?”

The blade glinted in the morning sun. Caleb nodded.

“The bigger the pumpkin, the better for scarin’ off Stingy Jack. Don’t want that miserable ghost round our place on the Eve, eh, boy?”

Caleb shook his head. That big ole pumpkin with the glowing eyes weren’t gonna scare him this year. He’d make it his own an’ light him up out on the porch to guard against the night. You could bet on that!

Pa mussed Caleb’s hair with his big fingers an’ sent him on his way with a pat on the behind, an’ Caleb thought that was jus’ fine. Near the gate, ole Tom lazed in the sun pawing the remains of a fat chestnut-coloured mouse, an’ though Caleb called out to the cat to join him, ole Tom jus’ licked his claws an’ lay there grinnin’. *Well, never mind that, thought Caleb, I don’t need no lazy ole cat to help me. I’m gonna do this all by myself then.*

So Caleb strode up the lane towards the pumpkin field, his ears full a birdsong an’ insect chirrupin’, as the mornin’ sun climbed itself up into the deep blue sky. Before he’d even got halfway, Caleb spied the biggest pumpkin he’d ever seen there in the middle a the lane, sittin’ between the cart tracks an’ a pile a horse dung. The pumpkin most likely come all the way up past his chest! He’d have to carve out its guts right here on the road.

The pumpkin lay there, swollen an’ fat with a mottled green an’ orange rind that soaked up sunlight, makin’ the air around it all flat an’ hollow. An’ by the looks of it, ole Tom already been out here, ‘cause nearby a couple more of th’em big fat mice lay ripped up dead as could be. Ha! That lazy ole Tom weren’t so lazy after all!

Then, ever so slightly, the pumpkin rocked an inch towards him.

Caleb stared, frozen. The day fell silent. He wanted to look around, to seek his broad-shouldered Pa working his muscles in the nearby fields, but Caleb feared takin’ his eyes off that pumpkin. It had moved an’ moved towards him; he was sure a that.

An’ somewhere, muffled an’ distant, Caleb thought he heard a scream.

Caleb’s bottom lip quivered. He wanted to run home an’ lose himself in the folds of Ma’s skirt where he’d only come out if the bowls an’ spoons needed lickin’ clean. Damn the pumpkin an’ All Hallow’s Eve an’ ole Stingy Jack. But if he ran

home, an' Pa was watchin' out there in the fields, he knew he'd get a beatin' an' be marched right on back to this here pumpkin. An' Caleb surely couldn't let one of the other chil'ren get hold a this pumpkin afore him. Damn pumpkin.

Pa said you could eat pumpkin, that the rich folk livin' in mansions ate 'em at their dance evenin's with pumpkin pie an' cream, but round here most folks never did. They jus' liked to carve em. An' that's jus' what Caleb was gonna do. An' maybe, jus' maybe, Caleb'd eat hisself a big mouthful a this pumpkin's guts, swallow him down an' poo him out when he was good an' done. That'd show ole Stingy Jack an' his lantern if he came a lookin' round their house!

He hefted the knife in his hand an' gingerly stepped towards the pumpkin.

And again came the scream, muffled, still distant, but still a scream an' one that ran deep in bloodcurdlin' an' terror, that warbled an' howled its way into your ears an' scampered across your brain until you wanted to curl up 'neath the sheets an' whimper till the dawn come creepin' through the window an' bought the birdsong with it to drown out any nastiness left from the night.

But the only birdsong now was the cawin' of a crow peckin' out worms in the pumpkin field off yonder.

For a second, but jus' a second, mind, Caleb thought the pumpkin was doing that screamin'. An' that was jus' about the most plain stupid thing that he ever did hear. Pumpkins din't have no mouth to scream, least not until one had been carved outta it. An' it couldn't do no screamin' then, unless...unless this pumpkin belonged to Stingy Jack hisself!

Yes siree, there was definitely somethin' wrong with this pumpkin. There was heat comin' oft it, like the heat from the kitchen stove after it burned low in the night. Not too hot, jus' nice enough to rest your hands on to warm 'em a bit. Caleb pulled his fingers back from the pumpkin's rind. He looked back at the house an' saw Pa in the field, wavin' to him. Caleb waved back. He hadda do it now; his pa had seen him.

Caleb tapped the tip of the knife on the pumpkin.

Nothin' happened.

Good, thought Caleb, pullin' out the rumpled piece a paper with a charcoal scrawl of a Jack-O-Lantern.

Caleb tapped the knife again, to be sure.

No scream, no rockin', no nothin'.

He drew the tip a the knife against the rind, tracin' the outline a where he would cut the eyes, the nose an' mouth. An' still that pumpkin did nothin'. Caleb chuckled to hisself an' slapped his hands against the rind, likin' the hard smack on warm skin. This was jus' some dumb pumpkin warmed up in the mornin' sun! An' first things first, he was gonna hafta cut the lid off a this pumpkin to scoop out its guts afore he could carve out its face proper.

He clambered up onto the pumpkin, his chest an' stomach curvin' around its rind, his feet danglin' inches from the ground an' grasped one hand around the pumpkin's knobby stem. With his other hand he raised the knife high above his head and, with all his strength, swung the blade down. The knife sliced through that puckery ole rind into the soft flesh below as if he were jus' cuttin' up cheese!

The pumpkin screamed.

Caleb sucked in his breath, heart poundin', one hand wrapped around the stem, the other clingin' to the knife stuck out a that pumpkin.

It screamed again, no longer muffled, now a piercin' shrill that shook birds from the trees an' filled Caleb's ears to overflowin' so much so he could barely think. It began to rock beneath him, jerkin' slowly along the ruts left by the carts.

This surely were no ordinary pumpkin an' if Caleb din't finish the job, ole Stingy Jack would be comin' for him for sure. Caleb gripped the knife harder, his knuckles white an' bulgin', an' began to saw slow an' steady like what his pa taught him, cutting the lid out a that pumpkin on an angle so that later on when it all shrunk up the lid wouldn't fall in.

The pumpkin screamed an' screamed, but Caleb soon figure it couldn't do no nothin' to hurt him. It din't have no arms to grab with, no teeth to bite with, an' din't have no eyes to see who was doin' this so's to maybe come an' get him later when he was fast asleep.

Caleb sawed the lid clean off a that pumpkin an' it stopped screamin' an' movin'. He carefully tossed the lid into the soft grass by the side of the lane an' began to scoop out the goopy guts on the inside, usin' his hands on the soft flesh an' slicin' out big chunks with his knife on what his fingers couldn't pry. This was Caleb's pumpkin now!

An' somewhere along the way, lost in the hard sweat a workin' under that warm sky, Caleb figured he must a cut hisself bad, because there was blood runnin' all throughout that pumpkin, but he didn't care, no siree, 'cause he beat that pumpkin good an' Caleb was gonna bring home the biggest an' best Jack-O-Lantern the county had ever seen an' Stingy Jack wouldn't come a knockin' at their door this All Hallow's Eve.

And maybe Ma would make th'em all a pumpkin pie, the biggest an' sweetest pumpkin pie that anyone, even the rich folk, ever did see!

That evenin', the kitchen filled with the smells of nutmeg an' cinnamon as Ma took the pumpkin pie from the oven, shooin' ole Tom who hung around her legs miaowin' for scraps. On the floor sat the Jack-O-Lantern, its eyes vacant an' mouth empty without the flickering candle inside yet. One a them eyes was carved a bit crooked where the knife had slipped, but no one seemed to pay no mind to that. Pa had laughed an' swept Caleb up in his arms when he'd seen him out there on the road with the carved out pumpkin. Pa carried it home on his shoulders on account a it being so big, while Caleb dragged a sack full a pumpkin flesh behind him. He'd washed out all the bloodied chunks before givin' them to Ma to bake the pie. The cut on his finger must a already healed up, because he couldn't find no wound anywheres, nope, not a nick.

"Smells good to me, boy." Pa's nostrils flared wide. He grinned at Caleb who grinned back.

"Not sure how it'll eat," said Ma. "Strangest pumpkin I ever seen, the flesh all stringy an' tough, almost like beef steak in places. Strips of ribbon an' cloth in there too. Caleb, you not clean it out good an' proper from carryin' it in that sack like I asked?"

"Now, Ma," said Pa, sharin' another smile with Caleb, "the boy done good. Cleanin' is a woman's chore anyways."

Ma cut three big chunks a pie an' placed each on a plate, dolloppin' a spoon of fresh whipped cream over the pie. "He sure did do good, that be the biggest Jack-O-Lantern I ever did see. No way Stingy Jack come knockin' round here."

There was a loud rap at the door.

Ole Tom hissed an' ran from the room.

Pa glanced at Ma, then at the door.

Caleb sat dead still, the fork full a pie clasped all sweaty in his hands. He suddenly needed to pass water real bad.

"It's okay," said Pa, noticin' Caleb's face. "That's not Stingy Jack; All Hallow's Eve ain't until tomorrow." Pa flashed a smile, stood an' walked to the door.

"Yeah, I know." Caleb stared at the table. He din't want the door to be opened. Not at all. That pumpkin had been too good to be true.

The rap on the door came again, louder, insistent.

"Please don't," whispered Caleb to his fork.

Pa opened the door.

An elderly lady in long robes strung with glitter stood there, a look a worry writ all over her face. Her grey hair were thick wound with blossom. "I'm looking for one of my god-daughters. Cindy didn't come home from the dance last night."

Caleb sighed. It was only the crazy old lady who lived near the edge a the forest. Pa said she was always off with the fairies an' that was about as crazy as you could get. He studied the piece a pie on his fork before poppin' it into his mouth.

"Why, Godmother, do come in," said Pa. He held the door open. "Perhaps we can help some."

"You haven't seen a rather large pumpkin, have you?" The Godmother stepped inside, then her eyes spied the Jack-O-Lantern in the corner of the room an' her face fell.

"Ow!" Caleb spat a mouthful a pumpkin over the table.

"Manners, Caleb!" Ma glared at him. "We got ourselves a guest."

Caleb fished out a clear sharp object from his mouth. Blood smeared his fingers. "There's glass in this here pie."

Close by, sharp an' clear, Caleb heard a scream, as the crazy old lady fainted dead to the floor.

"Damn pumpkin!" Caleb spat again on the table. "And look, Ma, that's a toenail!"

About the contributors...

Adam Bales writes while catching a train to and from work. He wonders whether his story is all about total solitude because some peace and quiet might be nice on some of those trips.

Lee Battersby is the multi-award winning author of over 70 stories, with publications in Australia, the US, and Europe. A collection of his work entitled *Through Soft Air* is available through Prime Books. He lives in Western Australia with his wife, writer Lyn Battersby, a brood of kids, and a niggling sense of doom. Visit his blog at <http://battersblog.blogspot.com>

Penny-Anne Beaudoin is a writer and editor living in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. Her poetry has been published in *The Windsor Review*, *On Spec Magazine*, *Room of One's Own*, *Les Bonnes Fees*, *Membra Disjecta*, and is forthcoming in *Doorways Magazine*. Her fiction has appeared in *Lorraine and James*, *Writers On Line*, *Quantum Muse*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *Flash Me*, *FreeFall*, *The Rose and Thorn*, *Skive Magazine*, *The Canadian Writers' Journal* and *Flashquake*. She was nominated for the Push Cart Prize in 2005. She is currently working on a book of poetry while her unfinished novel lies languishing in a drawer.

David Conyers is an award-winning Australian author of science fiction and dark fiction, residing in Adelaide. His stories have appeared in numerous anthologies, speculative fiction magazines and journals across the world, most recently in *2008 Award Winning Australian Writing*, *Black Box* and *2012*. His first novel *The Spiraling Worm*, co-authored with John Sunseri, was published in the United States in 2007 and his first edited anthology, *Cthulhu's Dark Cults*, will be released in early 2009 www.davidconyers.com

Like 99.957% of all male English teachers, **Leith Daniel** is a frustrated author. Frustrated because like 93.5% of all male English teachers, a great motivator for becoming an English teacher in the first place was all that great holiday spent writing. Ten years he's still teaching, but rarely gets the opportunity to write; holidays are never long enough. He still hopes that this, his first fiction publication, will be just one of many to come.

Thoraiya Dyer enjoys dual roles as storyteller and veterinarian, although on the whole she finds it more enjoyable to make up entertaining lies than to apply scientific fact. Certainly her two-month-old has difficulty spotting holes in her plots. Handy with the Olympic-style recurve bow, she once destroyed an arrow trying to shoot it through a small hole in an iron turkey. She disputes Edward Lear's claim that it's possible to eat sliced quince with a runcible spoon.

Jason Fischer is based in Adelaide, South Australia. He is a graduate of the 2007 Clarion South workshop, and a recent finalist in the Writers of the Future contest. He has a story in Jack Dann's new anthology *Dreaming Again*, and a forthcoming story appearing in *Aurealis Magazine*. Jason likes zombies and post-apocalyptic settings, and when he's not writing he wishes he was. He can be found lurking in internetland at <http://jasoni.livejournal.com>, and is a contributing member of the Daily Cabal (www.dailycabal.com).

Dirk Flinthart isn't dead yet. But his brain is about to shut down. His work has appeared in ASIM once or twice before. Oh, and he's got a New Ceres novella coming out. Also he's editing a really challenging anthology called *Canterbury 2100*, under the Agog! imprint. That's why his brain is collapsing.

Eugie Foster calls home a mildly haunted, fey-infested house in metro Atlanta that she shares with her husband, Matthew, and her pet skunk, Hobkin. Her publication credits number over 100 and include stories in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Interzone*, *Cricket*, *OSC's InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Jim Baen's Universe*, and anthologies *Best New Fantasy* (Prime Books), *Heroes in Training* (DAW Books), and *Magic in the Mirrorstone* (Mirrorstone Books). Her short story collection, *Returning My Sister's Face and Other Far Eastern Tales of Whimsy and Malice*, is due out from Norilana Books in March, 2009. She also edits *The Fix*, the short fiction and poetry review magazine published by TTA Press. Visit her online at www.eugiefoster.com

Paul Haines was raised in the '70s, in the wrong part of Auckland, New Zealand. Vowing to never call Australia home, he now lives in Melbourne with his wife and daughter. He survived the inaugural Clarion South 2004 writers workshop and has won the Aurealis, Ditmar and Sir Julius Vogel Science Fiction Awards for his writing. His collection *Doorways For The Dispossessed* was published in 2006. Two new collections, *Slice of Life* and *The Last Days of Kali Yuga* are slated for release in late 2008. Paul is a member of the SuperNOVA writers group based in Melbourne. <http://paulhaines.livejournal.com> <http://www.paulhaines.com>

Christine Lucas has been reading and writing speculative fiction for more than two decades. She likes to explore overlooked parts of fantasy worlds, especially the lives of the animals that dwell in them. Her work has been published in *Nocturnal Ooze*, *Ballista*, *Renard's Menagerie* and *Afterburn SF*, while other short stories have been accepted for publication in *All Hallows* and *Niteblade*. She is currently working on her first novel.

Eilis O'Neal lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she is Managing Editor of *Nimrod International Journal*. Her fantasy has appeared in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* (issue #27), *Leading Edge*, and *Wild Violet*, and is forthcoming in *Zahir: A Journal of Speculative Fiction*.

Dan Skinner lives in Saint Louis, Mo. USA. He is forty years of age and got into art as a side profession, having done model photography for years. His business partner, Nick Fichter, was a model who wanted to get on book covers as a romance model, so Dan dabbled in photodigital art and ended up being hired by over forty companies to do covers. Nick has been on over 500 covers as a result. Dan uses digital photography, Photoshop, Vue 5 and Painter. His artistic hero is Boris Vallejo.

Grant Stone lives in Auckland, New Zealand with his wife, two daughters and the new guy. To celebrate the birth of his son a couple of weeks ago, he made a Facebook page devoted to "Sleeping" and now there are nearly 300,000 fans, thereby proving the Internet is weird. Like that needed proving. Every now and then Grant throws words at the Internet on his blog at <http://d1sc0r0b0t.blogspot.com/> but they don't often stick. He's an occasional narrator on the Starship Sofa podcast (<http://www.starshipssofa.com/>).

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincerest thanks to the following contributors:

Artwork

All artwork in this issue by Dan Skinner, with the editor's sincerest gratitude!

Proof readers

Christopher Bobridge, Simon Haynes, Simon Petrie and Lucy Zinkiewicz.

Thank you to all our dedicated Slush Readers

The Andromeda Spaceways Co-operative is:

Joanne Anderton; Zara Baxter; Sally Beasley; Christopher Bobridge
Sue Bursztynski; Andrew Finch; Dirk Flinthart; Edwina Harvey;
Simon Haynes; Robbie Matthews (Editor-in-Chief); Ian Nichols;
Simon Petrie; Richard Scott; Tehani Wessely; Monissa Whiteley,
Lucy Zinkiewicz.

Special thanks to Tara Smith, Accountant Extraordinaire.