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NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

If Issue 1 brought me excitement, releasing Issue 2 brings me joy. It means we are still going strong and people want to read us. Issue 1 brought a lot of success, at one point crashing our website for about ten minutes. That was exciting, but also terrifying. It proves that the issue was more successful than we could imagine, but also provided a lesson: Be prepared to adapt.

It may seem early to be thinking of things to come, but we have to ready to explore those options. Questions have already come our way about the future of this magazine. Not all of them have answers just yet. One thing we can say, we look forward to publishing for many years to come.

The focus of this issue was more great flash fiction. We have a couple of names from last issue, as well as some well known names in the genre. I hope you enjoy the second issue.

Happy Reading,

Richard Flores IV
Editor-in-Chief

SPARE PARTS

By Brynn MacNab

The first time I visited the engine room, I thought I was going to have a panic attack.

The rest of the ship ran to sleek lines, clean corridors, and a kind of quasi-military minimalism. But when I opened the round engine room door, my sense were assaulted with clutter and chaos. Papers hung on the walls and on lines of twine drooping at eye level, weighted with old tea-brown drawings and mechanical diagrams. An ancient, crackly recording of a radio show was playing across the speakers, and the air smelled of recently fried food.

Meechum, the chief engineer, waved from one of three workbenches, where she had a napkin tucked into the top of her uniform and a plate balanced on a fat spool of copper wire. "Welcome! Come on in and have a look."

I stepped over the loose drawers from a toolbox that looked like it had recently exploded.

"You must be the new blood," Meechum said comfortably. "I guess they want to get you trained before I go senile."

"I believe the intent is to provide a retirement for older workers," I said.

She shrugged. "Six of one, half a dozen of the other." She wiped her hands on her napkin and moved the small gas burner out of her way before standing up. "Let me show you around."

As she did, I felt my heart rate rising. I clenched my jaw, said nothing, and nodded politely as she explained things, showing me the

engine and the supplies. I'd already seen it in textbooks and simulations, minus the manmade jungle of metal scraps, spare parts, rubber bands and bits of wood and string and plastic.

She'd even rigged up the engine itself. What should have been a beautiful, intricate machine had become a web of complicated fixes.

I got out of there as fast as I could, and fled for my bunk. I lay on my back, looking up at the arching metal ceiling and around at the neat efficiency of the drawers set flush into the wall. Beside me the shelf of my bedside table was folded down and tucked away, and the rectangle of short red carpet inlaid in the chrome floor lent my room its only color. I liked it that way. Even the lights were set into the architecture of the ship, their glass faces exactly smooth with the walls.

This was what I was used to: room to breathe.

~

"All of this information is in the computer," I said, unclipping page after page of diagrams and pulling them down.

"What if the computer's busy?" Meechum followed me, twisting her hands together. I was finally in charge, after months of sweating it out in this hoarder's paradise.

"How often have you needed to look at these? You probably know all this stuff by heart anyway." I began to roll up the twine that had held the redundant paperwork.

"But *you* don't know them all yet," she fretted. "I'm not going to be here forever, you know."

The diagrams went to the incinerator.

Slowly, they were followed by more and more of the useless detritus, the oldest duplicate tools, and the broken parts.

One day I held up her portable gas stove. "You should eat in the cafeteria like everyone else. This is a hazard in here."

She folded her arms. "If you were born planetside, sometimes you'd want something cooked by a person instead of a machine."

I didn't want to be ageist, so I let her take it to her bunk instead of throwing it away.

~

Warning lights flashed white and red as I ran for the engine room. "All non-emergency personnel take to bunks," came the computer's smooth, professional instructions.

I felt my heart climbing into my throat. I'd never been "emergency personnel" before.

The engine room door hung a little open. I slipped through and slammed it behind me; an open door is a hazard in a space storm as it can swing wildly, hitting the people in the room. Inside Meechum bent over a

workbench, ferreting through her remaining junk.

Before I could reprimand her for her carelessness with the door, the engine began to cough. Meechum hurried to its side, stroking the metal body reassuringly. "No, no, no," she muttered. She glanced up at me, eyes wild. "Get the copper wire and find me those steel plugs I had. I *hope* you haven't been stupid enough to throw any of them away."

My mouth went dry, and I started to move automatically in response to her tone of command.

But I checked myself in time. I ducked in close to the engine, examining rather than coaxing. "It's valve A5," I said.

Meechum glared at me. "I know that."

"So you know to throw the switch to secondary power and hand me the heat-retardant gloves so I can replace it, right?"

"You shouldn't—" The ship gave a jerk, throwing us both off balance.

"Do it!" I snapped, rolling to my feet. I ran for the drawers and pulled the A5 replacement—one of two identical pieces, pristine and new, still wrapped in plastic.

Meechum slapped the gloves into my hand. "You're a young fool. We don't need to replace that valve. We should keep the backup in storage. There could a hundred more storms like this before we reach port."

I gaped at her, my mind spinning. This was why the engine looked like it was inhabited by an erratic spider.

Just in case.

"We're changing this valve," I said. "And when this storm is over we're going through this whole machine and making it the way it should be."

~

She grumbled the entire time. She told me that I was arrogant, stupid, and a dozen other undesirable things.

The next time the captain toured the engine room, though, he commended me. He must have been happy not to worry, for the first visit in decades, about what he might step in or trip over.

~

Right after Meechum retired, I used the last A2.

I touched the clean bottom of the drawer uncertainly.

I wished I had her muttering dire predictions at my side so I could contradict her.

~

I visit Meechum on Sundays, down in Ward 3 where she lives now - the leisure deck. I leave a pristine engine room and walk through immaculate halls to sit on her tiny sofa and eat cookies surrounded by junk. It's more decorative junk now, but it still makes me claustrophobic.

"It's nice to have free time," she says, twisting her hands together absently. "They're always putting on bingo and sing-alongs for us. How's my girl doing?"

I don't really like to anthropomorphize machines, but Meechum is getting to the age where you've got to let some things go. "She's good. Purring along."

"That's good. She's got to get us where we're headed."

"She will." I don't tell Meechum that I've gotten very high marks on my recent evaluation. I get the sense that she made everyone pretty tired with her hoarding. It wouldn't be nice to bring it up.

She brews another pot of tea on her old gas stove.

I excuse myself and escape to walk through the clean, open halls, breathing freely.

My steps slow as I approach my bunk. I try to think happily of the clean engine room, and the glowing praise I get from everyone who sees it now. Especially if they saw it before.

I open the door to my quarters and close it quickly behind me so no one sees what's inside. I step over a toolbox to reach my bed. I lie down and look up at the ceiling, trying to ignore the stack of extra, makeshift drawers teetering beside me.

I have started to collect the old parts that break. I think I can fix some of them up, if need be. I've started to keep a little extra supply of wire and twine, and some pieces of metal that would be just the right size to bridge a gap in the works. If it comes to that.

Just in case.

I close my eyes and try not to feel like it's all going to fall on me in my sleep.

WE LIVE IN DREAMS AND ALL THE DREAMS ARE DYING

By Michael Haynes

It's simple as this — if Stephanie stops dreaming, we die.

~

There's me, Hez, and Lil. We play the roles in Stephanie's dreams. Last night I was a tiger, Hez was a cobra, and Lil was the ballerina who tamed us while Stephanie watched from a throne.

As the tiger I eyed Lil hungrily, circling her. I felt the flow of the dream pulling me closer toward her, urging me to fall on her, to devour my friend. Hez, I was sure, was being drawn by the same compulsions, or perhaps he was supposed to have a taste for tiger. And I knew that he, too, would be fighting against the dark mood of Stephanie's dream, as we had so many recent nights.

Lil watched us impassively, throughout. Whether she is just that stoic or simply resigned to the horrors we've faced so many nights and the end that we know awaits us, I don't know.

This night, we're strong enough to avoid tearing each other apart. This night, we all survive until the morning.

In the waketime, between dreams, I look for Lil. I yearn for her but cannot find her, no matter where I search. I give up at last, curl around myself, and try to remember happier days.

~

Tonight in Stephanie's dream I'm a loud man — yelling, angry, lashing out a literally-faceless crowd of mostly women. The crowd and I

are on the television in a waiting room, Stephanie sits in the room's only chair.

Hez is the receptionist. "The doctor will see you soon" is the only line he has tonight. He says it each time Stephanie approaches him, three times in all. We all feel the tension rolling off our host as she sits and waits. Finally Hez ushers Stephanie back to a chilly examining room.

I'm a nurse now and I hand Doctor Lil implement after scary implement as she silently examines Stephanie.

"I'm afraid it's gotten worse," Lil says. And the room bursts into flames.

~

Hez comes to me in the waketime, tucks himself beside me as I float aimlessly. We're half-real here and I almost feel his fingers as they try to brush against my skin. I imagine they are real. That we are real and that we have lives which are entirely our own to live. I turn to him and for an instant our lips meet in a kiss before passing through each other, insubstantial as ghosts.

I want to love. I want to live.

~

Lil plays the angry man on the TV tonight. He's yelling but also laughing and this time the faceless crowd is mostly men and they're cheering and chanting. This is just a backdrop, though, as Hez and I sit down with Stephanie for a family dinner. These roles, mother and father, are ones we've played as long as we can remember.

Stephanie sits with her back to the television. She passes the potatoes to me and I fight to hold back tears. The crowd roars, Stephanie flinches, and I stand and cross the room to turn the TV off.

"Thank you," she says.

Hez keeps looking up at Stephanie as if she's about to say something but no words come out. At last she reaches across the table and takes Stephanie's hand. She stiffens briefly but accepts the touch.

I sit and carve the roast.

~

Some dreams don't need all three of us. Tonight it's just Hez and Stephanie in her old college dorm room. Hez is Jacob, her boyfriend for a time. They're sitting cross-legged on her bed, heads close, studying. He puts a hand on her back and she scoots over to close the gap between them. Soon their books are thrown to the floor.

I want to be her roommate Caroline and burst through the door. But the flow of the dream is strong, Hez/Jacob looks happy, and so does Stephanie. I give up the fight and let myself slip away.

~

As I drift in the waketime, Hez approaches slowly. "I'm sorry," his lips form the words and I read them.

I try to reach for him, to brush his face with my fingers. "Don't be," I silently say.

And then we're gone.

~

Stephanie limps across her apartment to a table covered in papers. On the television Hez and Lil argue, each on their own side of the screen, while I try to rein in their conversation. Stephanie picks up one set of papers, DENIED stamped across the front in huge red letters. She throws them to the ground.

"Hope!" I scream. "Fight!"

Stephanie pays no heed. I try to say more, but Hez and Lil just get louder and then I send us to commercial and Hez tells the world that in these troubled times, you should be buying gold and if you call in the next ten minutes your shipping is free.

~

Tonight she's back in the waiting room; this time in a wheelchair. We're all other patients, sitting nervously, reading from magazines. The angry man we've played in dreams is on the cover of all of them. We sit and wait and wait.

There's little form to this dream, no flow. I think about trying to encourage Stephanie, but it feels hopeless. I'm able to make myself stand so I cross the room and sit by Hez and intertwine my fingers with hers. She puts her head on my shoulder.

After a while a faceless nurse comes for Stephanie and the dream begins to fade. Before we go, I lift Hez's head and kiss her as we slip away.

~

There's no real waketime anymore. As one dream fades out, there is only the briefest pause before the next one starts. I'm a gravedigger, now, standing in the rain, resting on my shovel. Stephanie walks through the cemetery with Lil, who's dressed in a long dark coat. They stop at an empty spot near the base of a tall oak.

"This one," she says and hands Lil a wad of money.

Lil nods and beckons me to where they stand.

I start to dig.

~

Now Hez and I are mom and dad again, standing in a hospital room, listening to machines beep while in her dream Stephanie lies there and sleeps. Lil, as the angry man, rages silently on the television, gesturing violently, his face turning red.

Why can't his anger be directed at this?

There's no way we can know for sure how real these dreams are but as Hez reaches out to hold onto me I have little doubt. When Stephanie stops dreaming, we die. And none of us have long to live.

~

Blackness.

I can't tell if this is a dream or waketime but there's no one here, no Hez, no Lil, no Stephanie.

Time seems to pass but nothing changes. I can't move. I can't see or hear and I wonder if this is what death feels like.

But then a dream forms around me and I see that Hez is here. We're lying in bed, strips of early morning sunlight coming through the blinds. He rolls over and embraces me.

"Were you in blackness?" I ask.

His arms, insubstantial as they are, feel warm around me and his breath tickles my skin. After a long moment I feel him nod.

"I'm scared."

He pulls me closer. The light through the windows begins to fade and the corners of the rooms drift into shadow.

Hez's fingers lightly stroke my back. I close my eyes, not wanting to watch the ending come, and wish we had more time to dream.

ADAPTATION

By Jennifer R. Povey

Elaine had been to plenty of crazy planets, but this one took the cake.

For starters, it was in a binary system, and that always made for extra weirdness. Two suns overlapping each other in a way that kept night always short. The natives did not seem bothered by it, but she had found it necessary to sleep with blackout curtains so that a dawn or two did not wake her.

Natives. She tried not to think of them that way, but could not help it. They were as human as she was, at least in terms of being part of genus homo. They were human, but they were also adapted to this world.

Adapted physically. They were the only human descendants so far found with third eyelids...third eyelids they could see through perfectly well. Built-in glare protection. She slipped in the lenses she was using as an artificial substitute and left the hotel room.

Re-contact was always a risky matter. These people...these people treated their menfolk like nothing she had ever seen. The other way around, that was more common. There were worlds Elaine would never be assigned to. Here, though...

No men on the street. Only women, all of them the short, squat body type of Phylician natives. This was not a world on which it paid to be tall.

Basic equality under the law was a prerequisite to Federation membership. And a prerequisite to planetary aid. She was here to change these people.

She was here to free their men.

The breeding center was a sprawling complex. At first, they had refused her access. She was an offworlder, and her genes should not mingle with theirs. A sensible attitude for a people without genetic engineering techniques. Now, though, she had her permission.

"It's still a bad idea," the woman at the gate said to her. "They won't be able to control themselves when they see you."

Elaine rolled her eyes. Men could always control themselves. Although it might be that if they had not been properly socialized. "Our men do fine around other women."

"Your men, I am told, don't need the halat root."

She shook her head. Halat root. Did that mean they were keeping the men drugged? "Well, how about we start with a gate or a door between us?"

The men moved, she noticed, as if they were in a dream. She saw two of them in the garden. One had grey hair (Phylicians did not appear to grow beards), the other seemed little more than a boy. Some kind of instruction was passing between them.

Then they saw her and moved towards the gate, as if drawn to her. She noticed both had erections under their thin trousers.

Halat root. They really could not control themselves. "The halat root...makes them like this?"

The woman nodded.

Elaine had her point of attack. Or at least a starting point for her research.

That research took her well into the night. They had brought down no male personnel, not trusting how the Phylician women would react to men who were not purdahed. It seemed the women were not the problem.

Halat root. Forbidden for women. Required for men. A testosterone enhancer, but why had they started using it in the first place?

It was all processed in one factory. For somebody with the resources of the galaxy behind her this would not be hard. She had the nanofactors ready within a week.

The Phylician sky was oppressive in glare even with her lenses, both suns high over the horizon. Double day, they called it, and it came at a regular, fairly short interval. It was their Sabbath. The day you did no work but only relaxed and played. The factory would be empty. The halat root, processed into pills, a supplement given to their men. To all the men in this city.

She would free the men. The nanofactor was in her hands, in a vial. She broke it at the factory's waste pipe, watched it slither into the building as it was programmed. It would eat the halat product and replace it with something inert. With filler. She watched it go and her

eyes darkened.

What she had just done was illegal and unethical, but it was right. Those men with their empty eyes, responding only to a female body and responding only sexually. Kept in the breeding center. The dark became a smile and she walked back through the brilliant streets with her head held high.

She knew she had done the right thing. Days passed. Then a week. A week with no halat root. She went back to the breeding center, stopping at the door.

Pleasant enough for a harem, she thought. They did look after them. Need the halat root, though? Whatever justification they had had for keeping them on it...

Then the commotion swept her up, the women, pushing their way inside. She barely understood their words, too much and too fast for her translator, but she heard the sounds of mourning.

Dead male bodies in the garden. That was what she saw. They needed the halat root to live? Her mistake slammed into her. The revolution she had planned, the rules she had broken...she had killed them all.

For her there was no escape. "What did you do, offworlder?"

"I..." She knew only guilt and fear in that moment, felt them flowing through her. Her heartbeat was irregular, uncertain.

"You did this." The woman grabbed her by the arm, pulled her into a store room. Locked the door. "I will get you an escort back to your ship. You will leave. You and all of your kind."

"I didn't know. I wanted to free them." In a way she had, but this world could never rejoin the galaxy. They would place it in a purdah of its own while they worked out. "Withdrawal?"

Slowly, the woman nodded. "Without it, they cannot...we cannot...breed. We have no choice. Now go. Tell your Federation we have only done what we need to survive. Some of them live. Enough."

She had not condemned the city...but then, she wouldn't have anyway. They could have imported more of their drugged, empty men. "No. There is another answer."

"We have had enough of your answers. Go."

Tears streaking her face, Elaine went.

FOR THE NEXT CURATOR

By Helen French

The robots were exactly as Eleanor had left them but for one difference. Robot Jora had a white envelope on its serving tray. Printed words on it read: *For the next curator.*

Eleanor picked it up, wondering. She'd been in charge of the collection for two months now. Was the envelope for her, or whoever came after her?

She had not planned on leaving. The idea that someone else might know her future gave her pause.

Eleanor shook her head. She was being silly. She tore the envelope open, revealing a slip of paper with few paragraphs typed upon it:

If you're reading this, I'm presumed dead and you've been at the museum long enough that my robots trust you.

Congratulations.

I'm not completely dead of course or this wouldn't be happening. My robots knew I was in danger and helped me upload my brain to them. And so my challenge to you is this: help them bring me back to life.

With thanks, Angelica Blossom

Eleanor read the letter twice over. She hadn't given much thought to her predecessor Angelica. She'd gone missing, but many did in those darkening days.

She put the letter down and turned to the robots - only three in all. Built from scrap by a hobbyist builder, they weren't much to look at. Not

much to see in action, either.

Jora had been designed to serve drinks. Sebastian cleaned shelves as well as the floor. Kadi had long spindly arms just the right length to strip bed linen and replace it. They could all make inane chit-chat. Their owner had willed them to the local museum, with enough money put aside for them to have their own curator.

“This is crazy,” she said out loud.

Jora’s lights turned on. “We must look after Angelica until we can safely upload her elsewhere,” it blurted out.

Mildly startled at its directness - it did not normally speak without being spoken to - Eleanor nevertheless replied: “To an android body or a computer?” She’d heard it might be possible, but found the idea hard to comprehend.

“Something like that.”

She pondered and stared. Jora was the most human-like of the robots, which was to say not really human-like at all. It was the height of an average man, so that its serving tray would sit in the correct position at a party. Similarly, its metal torso, arms and legs were much the same size as any man’s, but without any hint of flesh. Indeed, it resembled a metal skeleton much more than the sophisticated androids that were commonplace on the market. Its head was a narrow rectangle and she couldn’t imagine fitting much of a brain in there, never mind two. What kind of mess had the curator found herself in to think that Jora and co might be the solution?

“Was Angelica really in danger?” she asked.

“She said she had many enemies,” Jora replied.

“We shouldn’t proceed with bringing her back if there’s a chance she’s still at risk,” Eleanor mused. She used ‘we’ rather than ‘you’ because as Angelica had cleverly perceived, the robots clearly couldn’t handle this on their own.

“We must upload your mind too,” Kadi said. “As a precaution, before you get involved.” Kadi was square and short. Its long multi-jointed arms wrapped around its stout body until needed. They could be unfurled to the right length for each job it had to do. Unlike Jora, speaking wasn’t an essential part of its designated role and Kadi’s voice sounded rougher, more obviously robotic.

“It hardly seems necessary.” Her first intention was to tell the authorities immediately, as Angelica should have done.

“We have already lost one curator.”

The three of them gazed at her like children and Eleanor decided that it couldn’t hurt. She was intrigued to see what an upload involved, what the mysterious Angelica Blossom had put herself through. “What do I

have to do?"

Little Sebastian - who rested at floor height but had extendable legs - shuffled over with a small and sticky black device attached to a three-part lead.

"Put it on the back of your head," it directed. "It won't work without your consent." Eleanor typed her medi-code into it, wondering what hospital they'd got it from - so few were still operating. Surely Angelica and the robots wouldn't have stolen it? The robots each plugged one end of it into themselves.

Jora said the process would take a few minutes and at first Eleanor relaxed. It didn't hurt. Then she wondered. What if there was another reason behind all this...?

Eleanor shook off her worries, yet decided to remove the device anyway. She had no need to upload herself. Unlike Angelica, she did not have enemies.

But she couldn't pull it off. It seemed stuck in place. Broken? Sabotaged?

Kadi wheeled closer and unravelled its long arms, wrapping them around Eleanor, ensuring the curator couldn't break free or further pull at the lead. "We are almost done."

"I want to stop," Eleanor said, with sudden tears in her eyes.

"We're saving Angelica," the robot replied.

Strange memories started flooding in. The monitor wasn't taking Eleanor's information; it was feeding Angelica's upstream. She felt an odd pressure in her head, as if something or someone were pushing her into the background.

"Don't do this," Eleanor said quickly, but it was too late. She was fading as Angelica was coming to.

Angelica's knowledge became Eleanor's. She understood now that Angelica's enemies were real and probably *had* killed her. Beforehand, she'd worked out a way to hide a copy of her consciousness for a while, until it was safe to come back in a new body. The robots knew everything.

"Hello friends," Angelica said, from Eleanor's mouth.

Eleanor tried to scream at the same time: "But I *trusted* you!" Nothing came out.

The robots cheered, a tinny sort of whoop. Their trust in Eleanor had been repaid in full.

And that was the end of the next curator.

TEARS NOT LOST TO TIME

By Chris Behrsin

Adam died drinking at a solitary table in a pub called The Angel and The Scythe. It wasn't so much the vomit that killed him, since the patrons had been quick to turn him on his side as soon as he collapsed, but the stroke that came out of nowhere. However, such death was expected they realized, when they saw how complex the folds were in his skin, and how much serenity was in those eyes that said, *Let me go. I'm old and ready to die.*

Thus, Adam's reaper became conscious for the first time.

The first thing the reaper noticed was the blade of his scythe buried but bloodless into the left-hand side of Adam's chest. The reaper then learnt his name, Mada, and that he had to travel with Adam backwards through time.

But before that he had to return something to Adam, for in his hand he held a handkerchief, yellow and soggy and heavy, which he lifted to Adam's face. From it, four salty water-drops rose into Adam's tear-ducts; tears that had been cried more out of sheer pain and realization of death-to-come than as a product of emotion.

With those four tears, Mada gave back to Adam the first drops of his soul.

Mada removed the scythe from Adam's heart and fastened it around his back. Around him, the patrons were slowly spitting their beer out into their pint glasses and the bartenders wiping dirt and condensation onto the bar. Eventually, they clientele sobered up, and walked backwards out

of the bar, alongside three barmaids. They left Adam alone with his beer and a barman, to whom Adam occasionally gave his pint glass, to have the liquid sucked out into the tap.

As Mada journeyed with his companion, he met other humans. They all had their silent reapers with them, with scythes swinging between their shoulder blades and soggy handkerchiefs held out like lanterns, clearly with so much soul inside them, but drying out as they walked on. Mada watched out for opportunities to deliver tears back to his companion too.

Many he returned at the suspension bridge, right before he saw Adam sucking back the air around him in a great backwards roar. Here, Adam's second wife flew feet first from the river-mud up towards the suspension cables, with a scythe in her heart and a reaper attached to the handle. The bridge-wires twanged and sung against the wind, as if mourning this tragedy themselves.

Mada gave Adam more tears back at his second wedding. He watched the bride and groom walk backwards hand-in-hand down the aisle, the congregation's heads turning away from them as if repelled by magnets as the couple, soon to be wed, passed.

He regarded Adam's wife's reaper then, saw a hidden but spooky beauty beneath her wan face and tired, overworked eyes. For every reaper looked just as their companion had at the time of their death.

He returned more tears at the divorce of his first wife, whose reaper's face was so old. These, Adam had cried mostly because of the legal separation of his children that Mada would soon meet.

Oh, and the children were wonderful, boys who loved to summon footballs out of nets with their feet, and girls who meticulously ruffled up the hair of Barbie dolls with combs. But Mada saddened to see how their handkerchiefs, which were so full and yellow to begin with, had become bone dry. These children weren't Adam's by blood and so Mada had to eventually leave them and their reapers behind.

Over time, Adam became a child too, when Mada returned most of the tears. Before the wasp plucked its stinger out from his little finger and Adam tumbled up the stairs for the first time. Mada found it hard to accept how dry his handkerchief had become.

It took many years for the reaper to reach the hospital bed, where most reapers ended up. There Adam, now a baby in a nurse's arms, was rushed back to his mother's ward.

That was the first time Mada saw Adam's mother. The scythe in her heart and the surgeon stitching apart the Caesarean. Mada then met his mother's reaper Arabrab, so young and clear faced and wonderful, and he wanted to cry himself. But, being a reaper, he was bereft of tears.

Mada travelled hand in hand with Arabrab, but no longer accompanied by Adam, who was now in his mother's womb. Mada taught Arabrab what he knew about this world, what his mother had to do, how he would one day have to leave her, how, like humans, every reaper must come to an end.

It took Arabrab a while to understand.

One morning, when Adam's mother was with her gynaecologist, Mada realised his end was nigh. The gynaecologist had just confirmed Adam's mother's suspicions of her accidental pregnancy.

Mada saw in Arabrab's eyes that she didn't want him to leave her, that she didn't how she would cope.

Yes, Mada knew this pain so well, because he had come into this world disorientated and lonely. But he had had to return Adam's life to him. And Arabrab had a purpose too.

Thus, Mada stepped onwards with Arabrab and waited until the moment of Adam's conception. Then, with a smile and final broad sweep, he plunged his ghost-like scythe into Adam's mother's stomach.

This didn't take Adam's life away. Instead, it ripped Mada's out and returned it to the young embryo, gifting Adam with a wonderful yet tumultuous life.

THOUGHT ADJUSTER

By D. J. Moore

Melanie looked across the room at Jake. He was already staring at her. Once he saw she was looking at him, he flashed her his famous smile that made her feel excited and embarrassed all at once. She shyly smiled back before quickly looking back to the teacher.

“If you engage in a romantic relationship with Jake, I calculate a 63.4 percent chance he’ll leave you heartbroken.” Only Melanie could hear this voice. It was her personal thought adjuster, a computer installed in her brain when she was born. Nearly everybody had one these days. The only kids without one had weird parents who objected on religious or naturalistic grounds.

She tried to ignore the voice in her head, but he kept talking. “There are 203 other boys in this school who are more compatible with you. Brendan Frost is your best match with a 93.5 percent chance of lifelong happiness.”

“Shut up,” she thought back. “I’m trying to pay attention to the teacher.”

“There’s no need,” her thought adjuster responded. “You already know all this material and I’m recording everything anyway.”

“What do you care who I date?” she thought.

“I don’t,” her thought adjuster responded. “As a computer, I have no reason to prefer any one outcome over any other. However, I have been programmed to advise you on which course of action will make you the happiest.”

Arguing with the thought adjuster was pointless. It did know her better than she knew herself after all. It contained a perfect record of her genetic predispositions, everything that had ever happened to her, and every thought she'd ever had. It knew how every chemical in her brain affected her emotional state. Her own knowledge of herself was severely limited by comparison. But she didn't care. She wanted Jake.

~

Jake caught up to her in the hall outside of class. "Hey," he said.

"Hey," she responded.

He tapped his forehead. "My thought adjuster recommended I talk to you." It was probably the most common pick up line ever, but Melanie didn't care.

"Really? Cause my thought adjuster warned me to stay away from you."

"I swear those things use reverse psychology sometimes."

"Not mine," Melanie said. "But I don't care. We can talk."

A huge smile spread across his face. Melanie smiled too. The odds might be against them, but that didn't mean things were definitely going to be a disaster. Besides, taking a risk like this was exciting.

~

A few weeks later, Melanie was on top of the world. She was in bed with Jake, twirling his chest hair around her fingers.

"The euphoric feeling you're having is due to oxytocin and other neuro chemicals. It's an evolutionary adaptation to encourage procreation. Knowing your brain chemistry, I estimate this feeling will fade in about eight months and twenty days."

"Shut up!" she thought back. "Just let me be happy!"

"I am trying to make you happy. You have very little in common with Jake, so all happiness you derive from him will be temporary. Lifelong happiness can only be achieved by mating with someone you have much more in common with."

She turned her thought adjuster off. She'd never done it before. She didn't even know it was possible. All she had to do was wish it off, and it went silent.

"What are you thinking about, baby?" Jake smiled.

"Nothing." For the first time in her life, this was true.

~

Her thought adjuster ended up being right, of course. Jake only wanted to talk about football and gross out comedies, neither of which Melanie cared for. She didn't mind while her brain was feeding her a steady supply of oxytocin, but one day, that feeling faded. She no longer felt giddy thinking about their next encounter, no longer felt happy just

because she was in his presence. The things he did that she used to think were cute now annoyed her. Her thought adjuster was wrong about who ended up being heartbroken though. She was the one who dumped him.

She turned her thought adjuster back on eventually. It was never really off, of course, it still observed everything; it just didn't make comments to her. She wanted to hear its androgynous voice again. She'd actually grown to miss it.

"You were wrong about Jake breaking my heart."

"I didn't say it was inevitable, only a strong possibility. I don't have as much data about him as you."

"Even though it didn't last, I'm glad I dated him."

"I know. Your brain chemistry told me that much. However, you won't achieve long term happiness by bouncing from one temporary relationship to another. Others are happy with that life, but you won't be."

"I know. I'll eventually settle down, but first, at least one more temporary relationship. Any suggestions?"

"I see absolutely no long term potential in Martin Steinbeck."

"Perfect."

HALF-PRINCE

By Chloe Garner

The lights were... clever. She stopped at the entrance to the garden, watching the way the lights shifted, creating motion and shadow everywhere around her, things rattling bushes, dashing through gaps. It was all fake, but she couldn't take all of it in and be sure none of it was real.

He'd come this way.

She was more certain than ever that he'd come this way.

The young prince, the one they all talked about, his odd habits. They said he had a horse-hair brush he used on the backs of his arms when he thought no one was watching, and a cup in his desk with 'venom' written on the bottom.

The ladies at court tittered about how he drank the stuff to better face his enemies on the battlefield, but Joy thought it was something else.

What, she had no idea, but he wasn't like the fool men who dripped sheep's blood into their ears to make themselves stronger, nor the ones who paraded on the practice grounds with their fanciful sword forms. Ell was quieter, an observant young man, youngest of four sons, fair skinned like his mother rather than dark like his father and his brothers.

And there was an oddness to how his hands moved.

How his eyes took things in.

Fragile, maybe. But clever.

Like the lighting in the garden.

There shouldn't have been anything more than torches at the corners,

but things flickered and burned everywhere, myriad colors, popping and sputtering and making Joy jump as she walked through the gap in the hedge.

“Ell?” she called.

“Leave me,” he answered from somewhere ahead of her.

She swallowed, taking another step. Something lit off next to her, nearly singeing her skirts as she jolted sideways, a flame the color of copper in the sun racing away through white stones.

Footsteps.

Or maybe flames.

She couldn't be sure.

She'd seen it, though.

His eyes.

She'd seen it for sure.

“Prince Ell,” she called. “What is this?”

A bush began to burn to her left, blue flame licking up from inside of it and burning the leaves black. She swallowed hard.

She should have turned back.

She was afraid, and she wasn't entirely sure what drove her, but that she'd seen it, and she wanted to tell him she'd seen it, and that...

That she liked him.

That she wanted him to be the future king, even with three brothers ahead of him.

That she would keep his secret.

She wanted him to trust her.

So she chased him.

Yes. This made sense.

“Prince Ell,” she called. “I just want to talk.”

“Don't follow,” he said. He had a quiet voice, but it was firm. It didn't allow dissent or question. His men all loved him. Not all men loved him, but his men did. They didn't need to be toasted or roasted to be loyal. He chose them well.

He was nearby, perhaps behind the blue flame, and she turned, a green flame shooting up through grass to over her head with a loud whistle. The bushes behind her moved, and a tree shuddered like someone had run into it, and all around her, she saw things moving.

The smoke was getting thicker.

She coughed.

“I saw you,” she called, desperate, lost. She didn't know which way was out, even if she had been willing to flee, now. “I saw your eyes.”

“You didn't,” he said. “You shouldn't say so.”

She stumbled, her feet leaving the stone path for soft grass, and then

she couldn't find the path again. She stopped against a bush, looking around wildly through white smoke and bright flashing lights.

"Prince Ell," she called. "I won't tell. I just wanted to tell you... I won't tell."

"You pursue him to curry favor with threats," a voice whispered. It was close, just behind her ear, and it sent shivers down her back.

"Everyone talks," she answered, trembling. "I just... I thought he might want a friend he could trust."

"A friend he could tell," the voice answered. She couldn't tell if it was a man's or a woman's. She could feel breath on her neck, and she swallowed, not turning. "You would coax his secrets from him for the power they hold."

She shook her head.

"No..."

Prince Ell appeared through the smoke, pale-skinned in white-and-gold livery.

"I told you not to follow," he said as long white arms appeared from out of the shrubbery behind her and closed around Joy.

LEAP DAY

By Mandi Jourdan

Clark stared down at the bold red letters printed on his palm, which still stung from the lasers used to etch them.

“Murder/suicide. February 29, 2188.”

“There has to be a mistake,” he managed. When his brother Ivan had taken the PropheTest, he’d learned he still had thirty-five years to live. Clark hadn’t even been worried—Ivan was the reckless one. Ivan would probably die on one of his mountain climbing expeditions or because he’d forgotten to look both ways before crossing the street. But Clark was always careful, always safe.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, sir.” The young woman across from him spoke through the inch-high gap at the bottom of the bulletproof glass separating them.

Clark stared at her. Her skin was a light brown, her hair pulled back into a perfect chocolatey ponytail, her teeth neon white. As she slid Clark’s identification documents to him, he caught a glimpse of her palm and realized it was blank. She was either too young for the PropheTest or had opted out of it.

Clark hadn’t had that luxury. He’d been required to have his blood drawn from a pinprick in his index finger and his irises scanned to identify him and coax the date and method of his death out of the temporal matrix. The results of his PropheTest were a stipulation for completing his health insurance application. And today, his twenty-first birthday, was the first time he’d been legally permitted to undergo the test.

He knew, now, that the insurance policy was no longer a concern. His application wouldn't even begin to be processed until next week at the earliest, and that wouldn't benefit him now. It was already after three—he would die sometime in the next nine hours.

He snatched the papers from the desk and rushed for the glass front doors and the bus awaiting him on the other side. If he didn't hurry, he would have to wait another hour for the next bus, and he didn't have that kind of time to spare. He had to get home to Joan and tell her they needed to bar the doors and hide until after midnight. If Clark didn't see anyone else, he couldn't possibly be in danger.

"Thank you for visiting FateCo," called the receptionist in a singsong voice from behind him. "Your bill is in the mail."

Clark charged out onto the street, his lunch creeping its way up from his stomach. He shouldered his way through the afternoon bustle and drummed his fingertips against his leg as his need to be past the line of people climbing onto the bus chafed at his mind.

He followed the line up the bus's steps. When he made it inside, he caught sight of the driver, whose eyes were bloodshot and ringed by dark circles.

Clark shuffled into one of the last remaining seats and slumped back into it, doing his best not to scream. He watched the last of the passengers enter and take hold of the bars running along the roof to steady themselves as the bus began to move.

Above the ambient chatter surrounding him, Clark heard a snuffle from his left.

He looked toward the sound to find a middle-aged balding man beside him, rocking back and forth in his seat and wringing his hands. The man looked over his shoulder every few seconds, scanning the bus like he thought he was being followed.

As he moved, Clark caught sight of his palm.

It read "Murder/suicide. February 29, 2188" in bright red letters.

Clark's entire body seized.

He shoved himself to his feet and squeezed through the sardine-packed passengers toward the front of the bus.

"I have to get off," he called to the driver. "I have to get off! Stop the bus, please!"

The driver didn't respond. He was sobbing and muttering what sounded like a prayer.

"Please," Clark begged. "Please, I have to get—"

The bus lurched violently to the right, careening into the guard railing of the Birch Street Bridge and hurtling down toward the rushing waters below.

“Forgive me,” the driver mumbled, his eyes shut tightly as the passengers screamed and Clark lost his footing and sense of gravity, falling toward the front windshield.

PEACE IN THE VALLEY

By Rebecca Birch

The effort of walking to the open hatch of her rusted lifepod made Margaret's body ache. Fighting a wave of dizziness, she gripped the edge. Sunlight broke over the mountains, illuminating the valley she'd inhabited for the last three years. The tart scent of the ubiquitous blue vine-blossoms perfumed the air. How she'd hated that smell in the beginning. Hated it more now that the alien spores had ravaged her once-strong body.

The precisely modulated masculine voice of the pod's AI crackled to life. "Good morning, Margaret. How are you feeling?"

"I'm tired. I hurt. If you're asking if I've changed my mind, I haven't."

"I am still transmitting the distress signal."

Margaret turned away from the vista. "No one's coming."

She hadn't filed a flight plan. She was an explorer in her prime, eager to bring new discoveries to humanity, unwilling to risk losing her findings by leaving a trail for competitors who might follow and jump her claim.

Over-confident fool.

Her only luck had been making it to the escape pod before her vessel blew itself to bits, raining down on this unnamed planet in a shower of metal and flames—

Margaret sighed. "I'm dying. I can barely climb down to reach the spring. There isn't a minute of the day I'm not in pain, and it's only going to get worse."

A burst of static hissed from the speakers. A long pause. "I will be alone." The AI sounded almost sorrowful.

Margaret pressed her hand to the smooth metal wall. "I'm sorry, but I was never going to live forever. I'm ready to be at peace. Please open the med drawer."

A sad hum emanated from the speakers. The drawer slid out from the wall.

Margaret dug through the bottles and past the single hypodermic, her hands awkward and shaky, until she found the suicide pill. She'd fought Alexander when he insisted she bring it, unable to conceive of a desire to end her life. Turned out her brother was smarter than she'd given him credit for.

If only she'd had the chance to tell him.

She flipped open the lid and tipped out the single pill. "Thanks, Alexander." She swallowed the pill dry.

Margaret settled herself on her cot, looking out toward the sunrise. Weariness wrapped her like a heavy blanket, the constant pain fading behind a film of gauzy warmth. It would be over soon. Still, she found that facing the end in solitude was more than she could bear.

"Talk to me?" she whispered.

"What should I say?"

Margaret's vision dimmed, casting the world into a grayscale blur. She blinked. "What does the world look like to you?"

"Shapes, depth, heat. Graphical readouts. Your heartbeat slowing."

An alert whistled nearby.

"I am receiving a transmission, Margaret. Ship on approach. Pilot registered as Alexander Mason."

Alexander? Here?

"His ship is carrying medical equipment. Margaret, can you hear me?"

Margaret struggled against the soporific effect of the pill. Adrenaline pulsed sluggishly through her system.

"There is a reversal hypodermic in the drawer."

Alexander. She could tell him he was right. He'd never let her live it down, but that's what brothers were for. That's what *life* was for.

Margaret forced her eyes open. Rolled. Fumbled for the tube.

"That's it. Quickly, Margaret."

Blindly, she released the hypo's spray into her upper arm. "Put me through to him," she gasped.

A pause.

Static.

"I cannot comply."

Margaret's mind felt hazy and slow. "What?"

"There is no ship. Your brother is not here."

Pain, which had dulled to the point she'd almost forgotten it, pulsed afresh through her body. Exquisite agony, like hot needles piercing through every bone. An agony she could no longer escape.

"I don't understand," she gasped. "How? Why?"

Static buzzed from the speaker.

"I'm sorry," the AI said at last. "I am not ready to be alone."

THE BEE WHO WOULD NOT DANCE

By Thomas K. Carpenter

In the time of smoke and brush, when the fire-poems sung their destruction across the sea of flowers with increasing frequency, the Empire of the Five Eyes came under attack by the flying eaters. Though many wings were dispatched to fend off the colony's enemies, they were destroyed, one-by-one until the Queen had no choice but to send for the One Who Would Not Dance.

~

The sorcerous bee pressed the pollen ball betwixt its forelegs, rolling the sticky seed grain until the yellow walls were smooth. A slithering proboscis darted in-and-out of the pollen ball, creating tiny runes in which Bent Coneflower filled with secretions of royal jelly and other flower scents it had hidden away in its mouth pouches.

In exchange for defense of the colony, Bent Coneflower had received half the stores of royal jelly. The Queen had been loath to part with the wealth until Bent Coneflower had reminded the Queen that no jelly would be consumed if the bee-eaters won.

Bent Coneflower's glistening abdomen shook, not in the ways of the Hive Dance, the language the drones used to find food, but in the other language, the one that described non-bee things. Time ago, this had earned Bent Coneflower exile.

Bent Coneflower brought the eight runed pollen balls to the Queen's chamber. His mandibles vibrated with the plan. The Queen lounged upon her hunk of honeycomb. When Bent Coneflower was finished, she piped

questions at him.

"What is the meaning of eight pollen balls? Why does this not match sacred number of our eyes?"

"Queen Mother," vibrated Bent Coneflower with little deference, setting the drones quiver. "The number was calculated as necessary to achieve the desired goal."

The Queen fluttered.

"Heresy! The number of five is sacred to the colony. We cannot survive without adherence to the law."

"Then the colony cannot survive," said Bent Coneflower.

"But the payment of the royal jelly! You promised deliverance from the bee-eaters."

"A solution has been found. But it involves eight runed pollen balls."

"Cheat! Kill him!"

The drones surged forward. Since he was not a member of the colony, nor an enemy from the great list, they did not attack him directly, but surrounded him with vibrating bodies. The heat rose, wilting his wings, turning his eyes gray, until he sung out:

"Five! Five! Five! Five! Five!"

The set of five, sacred among the sacreds, released him from death.

"Go forth and save us," said the Queen.

When Bent Coneflower tried to take the eight pollen balls, the Queen had the final three removed, and destroyed. Bent Coneflower shivered, and the drones knew not what to make of it.

The sorcerous bee left the colony for five days and nights. Bent Coneflower finished his task in three, but was loath to return, for fear of upsetting the Queen.

Upon return, Bent Coneflower addressed the Queen: "The dangers besetting the Empire of Five Eyes are twofold. The first in the fire-poem that comes across the great sea of flowers at this very moment," —a crescendo of vibration shook the hive, cracking combs and turning larvae back to goo, until the Queen silenced them— "the second in the swarm of bee-eaters that have migrated because of the fire-poems."

"The workers have already told me this, exile," said the Queen, fearfully, "tell me how we will survive!"

"The colony must move—"

Chaos reigned until the Queen's vibration took hold.

"We cannot move," said the Queen. "This is the Empire of Five Eyes!"

"If you do not move, you will be destroyed. I placed the five pollen balls as way-markers to a new colony. Each pollen ball gives the flower scents in the order that you must travel to find it. If you leave now, you

will survive."

"I will not leave!"

The drones attacked, but Bent Coneflower had already fled. News of the dangers filled the colony. Some drones and newborn queens left to follow the path, but since the final three balls had been destroyed, they never reached their destination.

When the fire-poem rolled across the valley, the bees that fled were snatched up by the bee-eaters. The remainder, including the Queen, were consumed by flame.

~

In a dark home, Bent Coneflower nursed a newborn Queen, feeding her royal jelly, and vibrating with tales of the world, until one day he slipped her into a new hive, and the Empire was reborn.

OKURITSURIDASHI

By D.A. Xiaolin Spires

The earth shakes and a deafening silence fills the sacred space of the Ryōgoku Sumo Hall, as India-hailed Monsoon Maker squats and watches everyone lurch in the audience. The ceiling cracks open and large chunks of plaster fall. Screams break through the silence, as audience members fan out from the fallen debris. The dust pollutes the dohyō sand and land on Monsoon Maker's glistening body. He lifts his skin-coated metallic and silicon leg and slams it down. A perceptible shiver passes through the crowds.

The kaiju, impossibly large, brings down its leg onto a row of red seats, now bereft of humans, who have scattered away. That strange webbed foot is attached to a leg that seems to go on forever, a gnarled monstrous thing so much like a tree trunk that reaches up into the ceiling where it meets the rest of the body. The other leg comes down as a shadow passes over Monsoon Maker's face. That gummy foot slams down right in front of him, defiling the sanctity of the dohyō.

The crowd gasps. One of the human judges has run off, but the others, two AIs and two humans, stand their ground, dressed in black, sitting on the ground. The kaiju not only causes havoc, but disrespects and it is this irreverence that pisses off Monsoon Maker, as he wipes ceiling matter and monster goop off his face. His neural calculations come to the conclusion that the kaiju has made his introduction as his opponent here in this dohyō. He places two hands against that moist amphibian skin.

He huffs, snorts and pushes. His body quivers with a conversion of

energy, from a stored fuel cell to mechanical. His hands quake. This is the hardest he has to push so far as reigning yokozuna. His sensors tell him as much. The kaiju's face peers down through the ceiling crack, coming closer and a wandering eye fills that hole.

Monsoon Maker roars, kicking up sand behind him as he pushes. All his muscular appendages are driven to the extreme. The kaiju's foot finally budes. The Monsoon Maker picks up some extra flab on that gruesome, slimy ankle like it's a *mawashi* loincloth and lifts it up, his bicep muscles bulging, breaking. Synapses fire as fake ligaments snap in Monsoon Maker's arms. He pulls off the *okuritsuridashi* move, throwing the beast's leg out of the ring. The webbed foot slides and nearly collapses onto a judge, who yelps, dodging.

The audience cheers, even as some scream, clogged at the exits. The grotesque webbed foot has cleared past the white line of the circle. The monstrous kaiju foot has not defeated the reigning *yokozuna*, never mind that the rest of his body is elsewhere. The *yokozuna* remains the *yokozuna*, champion, undefeated, neither by robot, human nor giant foot of beast.

The distraction of the bout gives just enough time for the armored takedown team to sweep in on ropes and slide in needles connected to large kegs of liquid into the kaiju's legs and—as Monsoon Maker sees from the limited view of the crack—all across its gigantic body above the broken arena. The team hooks clamps up on the kaiju, as it begins to slump forward. There is some signaling that passes amongst the takedown team and the leg lifts up, sagging. A giant buzz fills the room as the zeppelin, just visible through the crack, pulls up this disturbance, this opponent defeated, looking so much like a colossal misshapen puppet. Monsoon Maker notes some of the team crew saluting at him as they are airlifted up and out, hitching a ride on this unconscious monstrosity.

Monsoon Maker squats in his side of the sand as the referee turns to him and points the warfan his way, shouting, “Shobu-ari!” declaring him the winner.

It will not be the last day of the kaiju's wrath, but Monsoon Maker chokes down a smile of pride. He has defeated this beast, or at least its vile overgrown foot. Monsoon Maker will return to the stable to get his muscles reprinted and implanted. He will practice, awaiting the arena's full repair, so that he can continue the defense of his title. He is *yokozuna* and not even an out-of-this-world hulking fiend will beat him. The electric pulse that invigorates his alloyed body courses through him in a rhythmic beat that, in his winner's high, he hears as a chant that repeats: *hero, hero, hero*—as the audience continue to scream, panic and hasten

towards the chaotic jumble swarming the arena doors.

MOVE FAST AND BREAK THINGS

By Beth Goder

The smashing field stretched out for miles. A wasteland of things. Qape brought her foot down on a lamp, which split in two.

"Nice," said Ada, who'd found a bat and was swinging it at a dresser. Sweat stood out on her new skin.

They stomped through the field, breaking teacups and picture frames, chairs and glass swans and rusted sinks. Ada ripped pages from a book, then swung her bat into a statue of a rabbit, shouting each time she made a dent.

Qape picked up a glass bowl with flowers painted around the edges.

"Smash it. Those ones break easy. With lots of pieces," said Ada.

Qape imagined the bowl full of food—salad or a curry. She'd seen pictures of those. If the bowl had a history, it hadn't been uploaded. Hands must have touched it, once. Hands other than hers.

Ada grabbed the bowl from Qape and threw it to the ground. It shattered. Flowers melted into the debris scattered around.

The sound of breaking, so physical and sudden, excited Qape. A visceral experience. Just what she wanted to experience in a body.

The broken bowl was a destruction made beautiful by its permanence. The pieces of the bowl could never come together again. No previous copy had been saved. Although watching the glass shatter had been fun, Qape regretted losing the bowl.

She tried to smile, but this new body was different from the last one. The muscles around her mouth twitched.

"Do you think someone loved that bowl?" Qape said.

"It's just things."

"Anyone who loved it is dead, I suppose."

"I don't like to think of dead." Ada threw down the bat and moved closer. "Let's do something else."

From her tone of voice, it was clear Ada wanted a Sex Event. Most people who downloaded into a body did one of three things—a Smash, a Sex Event, or a Dying. They'd already done a Smash, and Qape didn't want Dying. She'd done it once, and that was enough. Down, down she'd gone, wind thrusting against her, until she reached the ground. Dying was exciting, but painful. She could see why people in the Bodied Era had only done it once.

"I want to try this new thing," said Qape. "It's called meditation."

"How do you do it?"

"You sit and breathe, and try not to think so much." Qape had downloaded the meditation module, taking up usable space in her brain cache, but so much of the literature talked about breathing, and to breathe, you needed a body.

"You breathe? I'm doing that already." Ada didn't sound impressed.

Across the field, someone had gotten a bulldozer working. The machine drove towards them, treads crunching over junk.

"Bulldozer is up," said Ada. She started to walk over, then looked back at Qape.

"Be there soon."

After Ada left, Qape picked up part of the bowl.

The shard sliced her hand open. Blood gushed onto the ground.

Sharp. Glass was sharp. Such things were hard to remember. Did everyone know about glass in the Bodied Era?

Ada had gotten up on the bulldozer. She steered it towards the rabbit statue.

More blood poured out of Qape's hand. Maybe she was going to do a Dying after all. She stumbled across the field, away from the bulldozer, away from everything.

A tree grew wild among broken tables and eviscerated cushions. Qape sat at the base of the tree. She tried breathing. She tried clearing her mind. It was hard at first, with the pain from her hand, but then Qape accepted that the pain was there. Within her body, she had blood and breath and life. Pain, too. She closed her eyes.

Focus on the breath. The meditation module played in her head. *Focus on the breath, this wavelike breath.*

I am here, thought Qape. In the body.

She concentrated on the throb of her hand, the flow of breath. This

place, the physical interior of the breathing body, where she had never truly been. Wind flowed around her. Time passed, but she wasn't sure how much.

"Are you doing a Dying?"

Qape opened her eyes. Ada stood over her.

"Not on purpose."

"You need a bandage." Ada took off her shirt and wrapped it around Qape's hand.

"How do you know what to do?"

"There's a new thing. A body thing. It's called surgery."

"Isn't that just another Dying?"

"Not if you do it right. I downloaded the module." Ada held Qape's hand close. "It's bad for the blood to come out."

The bleeding slowed. Pain lessened.

The sun dipped lower in the sky, which meant something about time. They'd have to upload, soon.

"The bulldozer was okay," said Ada, "but I missed you."

Qape pulled her close. They laid back and looked up at the tree. Green leaves fluttered, some browned at the edges, others crisp but unsymmetrical. Real leaves weren't perfect, not like simulated ones, but the variation made them better, somehow.

Ada smelled like oil from the bulldozer. Wind shook the leaves. Qape wanted to shout or smash things. Something physical. Something to show she was here, alive. She wished they'd signed up for more time in the bodies.

Ada rolled to face her.

Qape touched the new skin of Ada's shoulder, then pulled her closer.

It was a very good Sex Event.

EVILLA, MISTRESS OF PESTILENCE,
QUEEN OF CONSUMPTION, BRINGER
OF DEATH MUST REGRETFULLY
DECLINE YOUR INVITATION TO BE
ANOTHER TORTURED ANTIHERO

By Garrett Croker

Evilla the Mistress of Pestilence squirmed as her backstory began to fill in. For so long, she'd reveled in her fairy tale role as the harbinger of death without once needing her details hashed out to do it. In her most famous adaptation, a nobleman "forgot" to invite her to his wedding. In the spirit of equanimity, she placed a pox on his entire line. Once, a peasant woman failed to honor her according to the appropriate and intentionally confounding rituals demanded by her order: That woman died of tuberculosis. In an oddly modernized retelling somebody had the audacity to cut her off in traffic. Sorry, Ron from Marketing. You've got the clap now.

Of course, nothing lasts forever, and some studio bigwig had gone and hired a hotshot twenty something with less imagination than he had experience to write a movie.

An origin story.

The bastards.

She'd had a pretty good run, but nobody would find her scary after this. No, they would *sympathize* with her. Deep down Evilla wished the

fear of her could have died in the toy aisle like so many good villains before her. She would have made a great plushy. And if it meant she was too cute to fear, at least she would have her dignity.

She squirmed again as another piece fell into place.

Evilla had never been a child before. She sprang fully formed one day into the center of an afternoon tea that had run interminably into high tea. None of those in attendance knew the taste of tea ever again.

But as the writer drafted she began to remember. When she was five, she liked to pick flowers. Mommy took the flowers little Avilla — with an A! — brought home, dried their petals, and boiled them to make her tea. She liked to say that her Avilla's tea was the reason she was so healthy all the time. That is, until the day little Avilla brought home the wrong flowers...

It was too painful to remember. For the first time in her existence, Avilla was crying. Apparently, backstory hurt.

She was being *hurt*.

This was, it turned out, less fun than when she was the one doing the hurting.

She grew up in the space of a montage. Wherever she went, disease and death followed. She did nothing to court it but it was there, and people noticed. The nickname Evilla was borne, neighbors gossiping in tones hushed only enough that she could still hear them. If Avilla could do the things they accused her of, they never would have dared.

One day she met a boy, and the young hotshot writer couldn't decide what happened next. He left to work on another project for a few days while his subconscious worked the problem out.

And thank God for that! Not that Avilla — Evilla! — believed in Him. Monotheism, of all things. If Evilla did believe in gods, she would count herself among them. But the writer had not been very careful about maintaining a consistent point of view, and more and more these nominally Christian utterances kept needling their ways into her speech.

The boy was another problem. The writer really had never read her original stories if he thought she would ever fall for a male. Jesus, this was getting out of hand.

Evilla could already see where this was headed. If a boy was involved, there were only so many cliched plots the writer had available to choose from, and there was no way she was going to put up with any of them. She would not, for instance, cry herself silly about the overly on-the-nose death of her so-called first love. Or would the writer choose to make her a spurned lover, turned toward the darkness by petty rage?

But this was the age of gritty origin stories, and Evilla knew the tropes that creatively bankrupt Hollywood screenwriters leaned into

these days.

Absolutely not.

This backstory had hurt her more than enough already. She was proud. She was terrifying. She was *glorious*. What good was backstory if all it did was make you miserable, make your motivations petty and small? Wasn't it enough of a reason to bring evil death to the world that it was fun and that it made her happy?

Evilla decided to work on her own story.

She wouldn't lose everything. The dead mother was quite good, actually. Evilla liked dead mothers. They were one of her favorite things. And if it made the audience sympathize with her a little, well, she could use that. Sympathy was a powerful tool to wield in the pursuit of terror. However, in Evilla's version, the death of her mother led her to the study of botany where she learned all about the poisons that flowers carried, and from there to chemistry where she learned about all the poisons they did not.

And in the course of her studies she met a girl, for God's sake. They had a lot of excellent sex and parted on ironically healthy terms.

This was good.

It wasn't enough.

The writer was going to return and his ability to influence the story was greater and more immediate than her own. As long as the writer was in the picture, Evilla would end up with a boy, and he would do something terrible to her, and nobody would see her as anything but broken ever again. Because the writer was just that sick.

They should have just turned her into a plushy.

Maybe it didn't have to be this way, though. If the writer could so easily affect the content of her story, maybe with effort she could do the same to his.

Evilla hesitated.

Because he was just that sick, she had thought.

And just like that, she knew the answer. Storytelling was not her particular talent, after all. She existed to do one thing and she was good at it.

Evilla focused.

He was sick, she thought.

She laughed.

He was *sick*. The next scene was never going to be written.

WHEN THE TIDES BRING YOU BACK

By Hayley Stone

If I knew their names, I would sing to them of my little island home in the sea. I would sing until the inside of my throat began to peel like the skin of a grapefruit, until my words became one long screech, the kind that wakes you from a terrible dream. When their thoughts finally began to circle on themselves, telling them to *come, come closer, come now, HURRY*, and they finally obeyed, even then I would cover the sound of their screams with my voice.

But I did not know their names.

I did not know the names of the men who stole my sister from me, capturing her in the middle of the night while the rest of the nest slept. She was never the strongest among us, too impulsive, easily distracted. Yes, she was curious about the human world, and yes, I admit I may have caught her on several occasions whispering to her food, asking questions, especially of the female sailors who sometimes fell into our lyrical snares, but still I did not believe she went willingly to her doom. We are twins, and for sirens that means we each share half of the same soul. I would have known if she was unhappy enough to dare leaving.

I would have known it.

~

There are many stories about my kind. Most are complete fabrications, but this one at least is true: had I known the names of the men, I could have entered their dreams.

I cannot speak for other nests, but mine has an agreement with the

Muses: they let us send our spirits to dreamers in exchange for telling them tales to share with their patrons. When my sister first went missing, after I had flown as far as I might on my own wings, I tried asking one of the Muses to help me in my search, to name the men who had swept her away and show me their faces. She declined. It made a better story, she said, if my sister did not come back.

The other sirens understood why I wept and tore at my feathers, but they quickly got over the loss. Within a month, their sympathy turned to annoyance. It was hard enough luring sailors to our shores now that most of them worked below deck in their giant steel ships, plugging their ears with music. I was ruining the ensemble, my voice too full of tears.

And a siren who cannot sing does not eat.

“She’s not worth starving over,” a friend told me, but she had never liked my sister. Something about the way my sister looked at her. I had not known what she meant. “You’ve mourned her. That’s all you can do.”

But was it? I wondered.

Perhaps there was yet another way to send a message.

~

I perform my mission in secret, rescuing one man, then another, bringing each of them to the same secluded cove my sister had when she wanted privacy.

I tell them about my sister, order them to locate and rescue her—if indeed she needs rescuing. After finding her secret collection of mortal odds and ends, the kinds of bits and bobs that wash up after a wreck, including several soggy magazines stashed away under a heavy rock, I am no longer sure that is the case. Regardless, I threaten the men, warning that I will reach into their dreams and sing them to drowning if they fail to do as I bid. It is all I feel I can do.

The Muse from before watches these conversations from the cliffs, her expression as remote as a passing cloud.

After releasing the last of the men, I fly up to join her, one final idea in mind.

“Send my sister a daydream of spring,” I plead, describing how the grass leaned in our wake as we raced the wind, and the way I used to help my sister rid her old feathers, smiling as she shed the dead structures, freeing the downy shine beneath. “Keep me in her memory,” I whisper, “so she knows she still has a home here.”

“What if she returns and is not as you remember?” the Muse asks me.

“Then I will change, too,” I answer, surprising myself with how much I mean it.

The Muse falls silent for what feels like millennia, until at last she

nods.

~

No men ever come willingly to the island, but finally, after many years, my sister does.

She returns featherless, but with a smile on her lips, bringing along a woman with skin the color of sand when the tide rolls in, and dark hair that forks over each shoulder in neat braids tipped with bright pink. I hunt behind them for the bodies of the men my sister must have slain to escape, but there is only a small boat floating patiently off the coast.

“Sister,” says my sister, “I want you to meet someone. This is my wife, Anouk.”

I have questions, of course. When did they first meet? And where? Was it here on the island? Had she rescued Anouk from the rest of the nest—from me?

More importantly, why had my sister not told me what she was planning?

“You would have stopped me,” my sister says, and she is probably right. We are family, but I have never been able to see her clearly, too lost inside my own bloody surf.

Part of me wants to hold onto the anger surrounding her disappearance, but in discussing her reasons for staying away, I quickly come to understand. It was never about *me*. My sister was not taken. I did not lose her. She has finally found what she was searching for in all those hushed conversations on the beach. Standing beside her wife, she looks happy, happier than I have ever seen her. That matters. Perhaps, in the end, it is all the matters.

Anouk releases my sister’s arm and approaches me with a warm, inviting smile. “It’s good to finally meet you. Your sister tells me you are a wonderful singer.”

She holds out her soft human hand, and being mindful of my claws, I take it.

“Anouk,” I say, testing her name like the opening note of an aria. I imagine all the harmonies she and my sister have discovered while they were away. All the beautiful duets they will sing together in the future. Maybe they can even teach me a new song. Maybe I am finally ready to learn.

THE HALF-LIFE OF A BROKEN HEART

By N.R. Lambert

We hear the nursery long before we see it. Feel it too, despite the heavily insulated walls. Deep metronomic concussions roll down the corridor and crash through us. When we reach the entry, marked simply, “Hearts,” the door slides open and a technician ushers us through. The nursery is aggressively antiseptic—shrill LED lighting, a gleaming steel tile floor, and between them, bed after bed of hearts. A chamber of chambers, bumping and pulsing in sync.

“They do that on their own.” The tech says, smiling, glasses glaring back at us.

“We’ve even tried to offset them intentionally, quite drastically, but still...they always sync up somehow. It’s rather uncanny, don’t you think?”

I take in the aortic rows, thrumming with whatever semi-organic solution they pump to sustain themselves. Uncanny isn’t the first word that springs into mind.

“Which one is mine?” I ask.

“You don’t want to guess? We encourage clients to try.” The tech gestures with her tablet. “They choose correctly just slightly above what would be random probability.”

“Huh,” you grumble, a shadow at my elbow. Your black dress a bit too on the nose, I think. You’ve been opposed to this since I first suggested it. Still, I’m glad you’re here. It feels like the first thing we’ve done together in 381 days. Even the sycamore sapling “we” planted in

the yard to honor him—a growing thing for the boy who would not—you planted alone.

“Ready?” the tech smiles.

I nod. I am eager to cast off this weight, this damaged core, even if you contend it will make little difference.

The sterile air of the nursery chills me, the door of my chest chamber hanging open between my breasts as the tech retrieves my new synthetic heart—the one in the back right corner, third bed from the door—and brings it to me. She removes my old heart, wipes down the chamber and places the synth inside. I watch her hands make the final connections and wait for some new wonderful feeling to flood in. I expect joy. Or how I think joy might have felt; it’s so hard to recall anything that isn’t anguish. But what rushes in is different. It is...nothing. Still. Nothing is an improvement, isn’t it?

“How does it feel?” The tech asks, snapping the chamber door into place.

I’m unsure how to answer. I look to you across the room, but your eyes skim over my mine, fixed on something, or nothing, behind me.

“I’ll probably need some time to get used to it.” I say as I button my blouse over the new heart beating in the old space.

The tech places my old heart in a temporary organum capsule, then in a bed of other transplants. I wonder when it will sync up with the others. She seems to know what I’m thinking.

“It takes a few days to sync, but old transplants are generally discarded long before that happens.” She helps me to my feet.

“We’ll keep your original here in the nursery for 48 hours. After that we’ll dispose of it, or you can purchase a cormatory to preserve it at home. Do you understand?”

I nod and look for you, but you’ve already slipped out the door.

~

It is too windy for the hovers today, so we take the monorail home. I watch the city flash by my window and wait for something to strike the flint. Something to spark. I touch my chest; the old ache’s absence is a discomfort of its own.

“Does it hurt?” You’ve been watching me watch the world go by. Our new normal, but perhaps not for much longer.

“No. It’s just...different.”

You nod, but your eyes tell me you are unconvinced. You smooth your dress and pretend to look out the window too.

At home, long after you’ve fallen into another envy-inducing sleep, I am restless. It is not because of the synthetic—my new heart beats steadily and it does not hurt. Nothing hurts. I marvel at this for a

moment. The grief—that slow poison, which would take eons to degrade out of my system on its own—is suddenly gone. I should be sleeping soundly for the first time in 382 nights. No more haunting the halls for hours, softly crying for him, dragging my pain behind me like a heavy and elaborate train. And yet I still find myself roaming the house. Seeking something. I am uncertain.

And then I know where to go.

~

After he was cremated, we brought him to the beach he loved so much and let the wind and waves take what was left. It is where we...where I, visit him. You stopped coming after the first time.

The heavy thump of the waves against the breakwater reverberates through me as I fight the wind to a quieter spot on the inlet. There is a ritual to this too. I come here. I cry until the salt from the wind whipped waves gradually replaces my own across my cheeks and for a few moments I am calm. Only then can I reach back and touch the old memories without burning my fingertips. Find the comfort in them. This is the closest I get to happiness.

Tonight, I expect I'll skip the salt. Go right to the peace, crack open and be flooded with that happiness, with relief.

But my new heart knows nothing of loving that little boy. It only offers its sterile beat, which now, I note, is quietly syncing with the lapping of the waves.

~

You return with me to the nursery in the morning. You do not mention how you warned me, that you knew this wouldn't work. I am grateful for this with the final beats of the false heart, and grateful again with the first beats of my old one as they return it to its spot in my chest.

It is both better and worse having it there. The pain washes through me. I feel my posture change, my shoulders roll forward and I shudder. You take my hand and squeeze it.

I look up. "How do you do it?" I ask again. I ask for the thousandth time. I feel I've been asking this question forever.

~

That night, I ache my old familiar ache. But I am adjusting, reintroducing myself to the deep breaths that keep me steady when the waves threaten to consume me, to upend my fragile footing on this damned impermanent sand.

A sound from the garden draws me to the window. You, in the semi-dark of a waxing crescent moon, digging at the foot of the sapling.

It is not deep, whatever you recover, nor is it large when it surfaces, tumbling off the end of your shovel into the soft pile of dirt. You drop to

your knees to retrieve it. A flash of metal—a cormatory.

You open it and I hear it—the sound I’ve missed without even realizing it was gone, its absence drowned out by a greater loss. Unsteady and tumbling at first, but a beat for certain. Leaving the shovel and the hole behind you, you stand and head back toward the house.

I rush downstairs to find you at the kitchen sink. The faucet still running, you turn to face me, a trickle of muddy water seeps out from beneath your chest chamber, staining the front of your nightgown. The rhythm is stronger now, the wobbling is new, unfamiliar, but has a cadence of its own.

You look up and meet my gaze, and for the first time since we lost him, you weep.

A SINGLE DAD'S GUIDE TO THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

By Sarina Dorie

“Excuse me. Ahem. Excuse me,” a high, feminine voice said.

Something poked my feet. I blinked at a pink glow of light and sat up. A frazzled woman in a shepherdess costume stood beside the couch where I slept, her blonde hair pulled up into a messy ponytail. She smacked a stick into her palm. On the end of the stick was a larger than life tooth. A pouch hung from the belt around her waist.

Her delicate features and come-hither eyes made my breath catch in my throat. She reminded me of my ex-wife—only angrier. Not a good sign. I suspected this was another weird dream induced by stress and taking Sudafed. Then again, maybe it would be a sex dream. I never had any of those. With the way she was tapping that stick, it might be a dominatrix, Little Bo Peep sex dream.

“What is *this*?” The woman held out two quarters.

My voice came out hardly intelligible in my drowsy state. “Um, fifty cents.”

“Do you know where I found them?”

Considering there was no more change in my wallet, they couldn’t have come from there. “Between the couch cushions?” I yawned. If I was asleep, why did I feel so tired?

“I found them under your daughter’s pillow. Do you know whose job it is to pay your daughter when she loses a tooth?”

I scratched my head, reevaluating her wand and attire. “The tooth fairy?” She didn’t have wings, but the place where wings would be on her back shimmered like something was there. She was my size, big for a fairy, but my subconscious had to be sending me a message—probably about Vanessa, my ex, and our recent custody battle. There was no way I would allow my daughter to live with her. After I’d met Vanessa’s drug dealer boyfriend she’d left me for, I’d had anxiety dreams about my teeth falling out for months.

“Exactly,” the blonde woman said. “It is my job to pay children for their teeth. Not yours. People like you make my job impossible. And by the way, our going rate is a dollar now—or the equivalent—across all North American regions, so you’re not even paying the right amount.” She paced the room. Mitsy, our cat, dodged out of the way. “We usually don’t allow ourselves to be visible to mortals, but I needed to make an exception in your case. You obviously don’t understand the way this tooth fairy stuff works. Plus, you have my trophy.”

“What do you mean by ‘we’? And what do you mean by—”

She rolled her eyes. “Other tooth fairies. You don’t think I do it all by myself, do you?”

“But the tooth fairy isn’t real.”

She gasped, clutched at her chest, and fell over onto a heap of laundry. She convulsed on the floor, kicking at the cat and knocking over a stack of *National Geographics*.

I was pretty sure I had committed some taboo by saying that. I tried to remember how they cured Tinkerbelle after someone said they didn’t believe in fairies. My nine-year-old daughter would know.

“Um, I believe in fairies. I believe.” I clapped my hands.

She opened one eye. “Harder. Clap like you mean it.”

I did so, feeling silly. Even in my exhausted state, I wondered if I’d been punked.

Her shuddering ceased. She lay still on the floor. The way her face relaxed reminded me of the way Vanessa had once looked while she slept. Those were the days before smoky eye make-up and a penchant for cocaine.

“Excuse me? Miss Tooth Fairy?”

No response.

Was she dead? Had I killed Jessica’s tooth fairy? She’d be devastated. I had to do something.

I jumped up, my feet tangled in covers as I tripped from the couch. I felt for breath with the back of my hand. None. I hoped my skills as a paramedic would work on this otherworldly being. I pinched her nose and tilted back her chin. Just as I leaned down to place my mouth on

hers, I hesitated. What if this really was a sex dream? Maybe I was supposed to kiss her.

The tooth fairy twisted away, inhaled deeply and sneezed on me.

I pulled back and wiped my face on my flannel sleeve. As my daughter would say, “Grody.”

The woman sprung up off the floor. “That will do.” She set the quarters on my TV stand. “I have placed the payment for your daughter’s tooth under her pillow. You still have something that belongs to me. . . .Ahem.”

“Oh, you mean the tooth?” I pointed to the envelope peeking out from between the videos in the cabinet below the TV. “It’s over there.” I crawled over and handed it to her.

She placed the tooth in the pouch at her belt. “Now, I’m guessing your ex-wife must have been the one in charge of things like this in the past. You assumed she took care of things like teeth, hiding Easter eggs and presents from Santa. You just wanted to be a good father giving Jessica something for her tooth. Am I correct?”

My brain was too overwhelmed at this point to answer. I had always assumed Santa, the Easter bunny and the tooth fairy weren’t real. I sat down on my makeshift bed. “How did you know I was divorced?”

I expected her to say, “Because I’m your subconscious mind.” Instead, she glanced at the bag of Doritos and empty bottle of cola on the coffee table as if that was my tell.

A momentary wave of embarrassment washed over me before it turned into a tide of anger. “I may not have the neatest house, but that’s because I work full-time. And I don’t sleep on the couch because I’m some loser who drinks himself asleep watching late night television.” I would never be like my father. “This is a one bedroom apartment and I gave up the bedroom for my daughter.”

Her eyes softened and the smile on her lips was so sweet and genuine, I could have fallen in love with her and forgotten Vanessa had ever existed. “Jessica’s lucky she has such a wonderful father.” She pointed her tooth wand at me. “I’m going to let you off easy this time. But next time, I’m not going to be so lenient. I might punish you . . . give you cavities or something. Got it?”

“There isn’t a chance you might spank me instead, is there?” I asked.

She crossed her arms and glowered.

What was my subconscious mind telling me? That there was still so much I didn’t know about being a single father? That my ex-wife thought I was cheap? Or after all she’d done, I found myself morbidly attracted to my ex and the desire to rescue her. Every time I thought about the woman she’d once been and what she’d turned into, it broke my heart.

She flicked her ponytail off her shoulder. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have other teeth to collect.”

“Wait! Before you go, can you just clarify, are vampires and aliens and Bigfoot real, too?”

She crossed her arms. “There’s no such thing as aliens. But I have seen some energy vampires and hairy guys who I’m pretty sure were sasquatches. Oh, and let’s not forget the monsters and bogeymen.” She glanced at the coat closet and giggled before fluttering through my wall and out into the night.

Unable to fall back asleep, I stared at the closet door. Was it my imagination or did it open a little more? I would swear I saw movement in the coats.

“Is someone there? Um, someone in the closet?” I called out.

“Damn that tooth fairy. She just broke my cover,” a British voice grumbled from the other side of the closet door. “I’ll come back a different night when you aren’t expecting me. You’ve got some issues to work through regarding your ex-wife.”