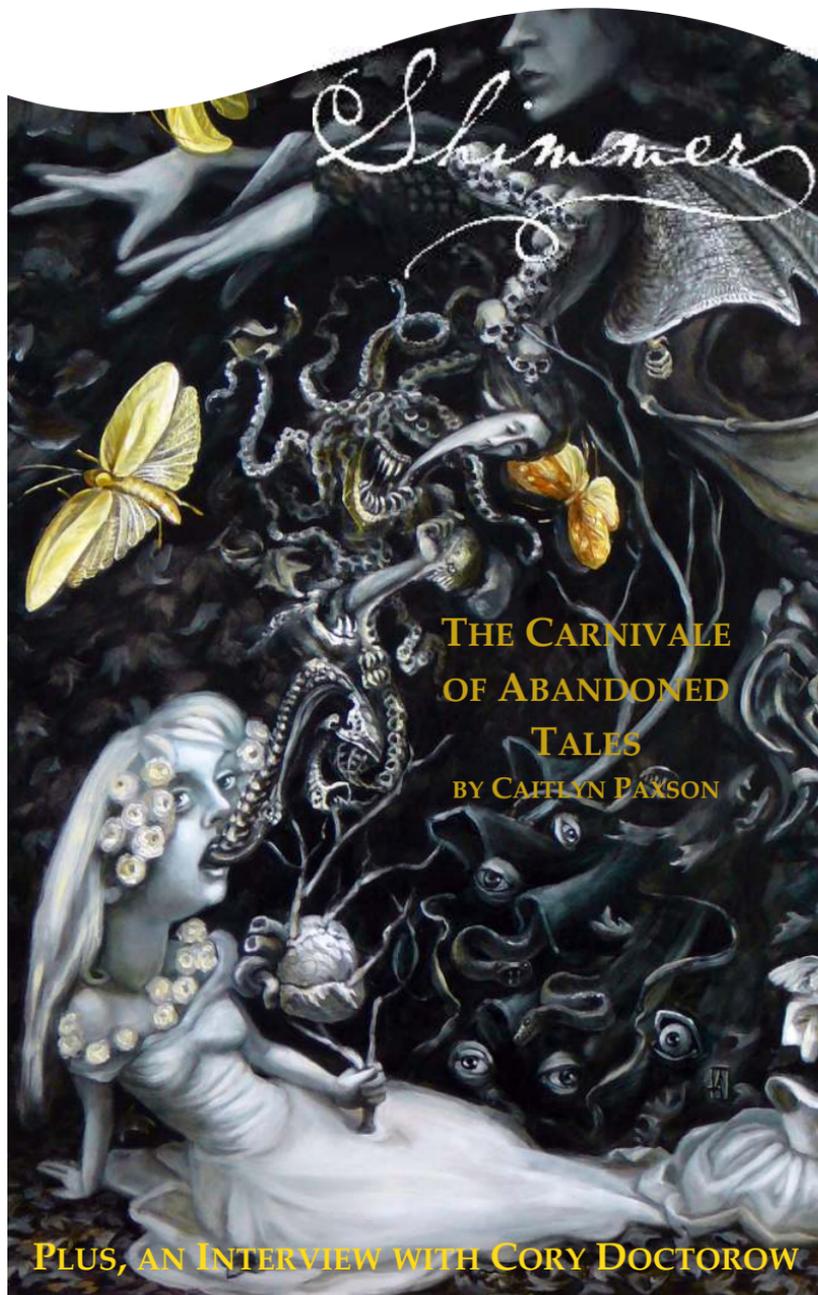


Number Ten

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Number Ten

A decorative flourish consisting of a single, continuous, elegant black line that starts on the left, rises to a peak, and then descends to the right, framing the word 'Shimmer'.

Shimmer

Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

Welcome to our 10th issue! We're celebrating this milestone with our best issue yet: we've got an interview with Cory Doctorow, and twelve wonderful new stories. Because we want as many people as possible to celebrate with us, we're making the electronic edition available for free. Let your friends know: www.shimmerzine.com



Beth Wodzinski
Editor-in-Chief

Huge congratulations to our Art Director, Mary Robinette Kowal, for winning the John W. Campbell Best New Writer award. Richly deserved—and she's just getting started. Mary's been instrumental in *Shimmer* since the beginning, so it is with great sadness that I announce that this is her final issue for us. Thank you, Mary, for all you've done for *Shimmer*.

*...we're making
the electronic
edition available
for free.*

Award-winning artist Stephen Stanley, whose work has appeared often in these pages, will be stepping in as our new Art Director, and I'm sure he'll do an extraordinary job. Welcome, Stephen!

Coming this summer: The Clockwork Jungle Book, co-edited by George Mann, our collection of steampunk animal fables.

As always, we'd love to hear what you think. Get in touch: comments@shimmerzine.com. Happy reading!

Beth

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Blue Joe

by Stephanie Burgis

Josef Anton Miklovic, Blue Joe, was twenty-one years old and playing the sax in a nightclub in Youngstown, Ohio, when he met his father for the first time.

Joe was on stage with his family band: Karl on keyboard, hunched and intense; Niko on drums, grinning his lopsided, dreamer's grin; and Ivan, as smooth and polished as a Croatian Clark Gable, playing his shining trumpet like a peal up to heaven.

Joe's brothers were as still as statues on the stage around him, and he thought he probably ought to be scared.

Smoke swirled across the tables, obscuring the waitresses in their Betty Boop outfits and the customers in their sharp suits, with dyed blondes on their arms. Ivan had hooked up with the son of a local mob boss to pull this job, and the rest of the brothers knew how lucky they were to get it. Ivan had big plans, and Joe was happy to go along with them.

Joe soared into his lead break, and at the end of it, as he emerged sweating and victorious, he met the fierce gaze of a hawk-nosed man at the back of the room, through all the smoke and the darkness. Time froze around them, and the music stopped.

"You don't look much like your mother," the man said as he crossed the room. He wore a long black coat from a different era, and it flapped around him like the wings of a crow.

Joe squinted through the smoke, watching the man sidestep frozen Betty Boops and customers' arms flung out in mid-gesture. Joe's brothers were as still as statues on the stage around him, and he thought he probably ought to be scared.

"Everyone always said I took after her," he said mildly.

"All they meant was, you don't look like that lump she married." The man reached the stage and jumped up onto it as easily as if it were only an inch high, instead of four feet from the ground. "You take after me."

Joe looked the man up and down and knew it to be true. They shared the same crazy golden eyes, the same jet-black hair, though Joe's was slicked back into fashionable lines, and the same great, hooked nose, about which Joe's brothers had always teased him.

He turned to look at his brothers now, and the man before him shook his head.

"No. They're not mine. Your mother and I had parted ways by then. But I told her I'd come for you to raise you right, when I was ready."

"And you waited till now?" Joe laughed, despite the shock. "You left it a bit late, don't you think?"

"It took time to make my way over. Do you remember the journey you took?"

Joe shook his head. "I was only a baby when we came over to the States."

"Well, I took a longer route. It's harder to leave the old country, for some."

Some. Joe didn't know exactly what the man meant, but he didn't care to ask, not with the rest of the nightclub frozen around them like stills in a newsreel. Whatever power this man had, it was obviously more than the local mob, and that was enough to scare anyone with sense.

"I'm here now," the man said, "and it's more than time. Your mother hid you too well." He fixed Joe in his hawk-like gaze. "Time to go."

"Hey, I'm not going anywhere." Joe stepped backward, crashing into Karl's keyboard. "I've got family."

"I'm your family."

"Uh-uh." Joe drew strength from his brothers' presence around him, even though they couldn't move. "I'm in a band. We're going places together. Might even break into Hollywood, if we're lucky."

His father snorted. "You're as stupid as your stepfather, if you really think that."

"I'm with my brothers," Joe said. "We're a team." He squared his jaw. "We can have a beer sometime and talk, if you like. But it's too late for you to act like a real father now."

"You'll change your mind," his father said. Anger flared deep and raw in his gaze. "I promise you. You'll change your mind."

Black, choking smoke erupted around him, making Joe tear up. He bent over, coughing...

And the music started up around him again, as if it had never stopped.

A black feather lay on the stage next to Joe's polished shoes.

Three days later, his draft papers arrived in the mail. Six days later, Joe shipped out to training camp, carrying his saxophone by his side but leaving his brothers behind.

Joe was on patrol in Germany the next time he saw his father. It was the middle of the night and he was alone on his shift when a great black wolf slunk out of the shadows and shifted into the shape of a man in a long black coat.

"Evening, Joe," his father said.

"Evening," Joe said, keeping his voice even. He kept walking as his father fell into step beside him. "Pleased with yourself?" he asked.

"Not really. It meant another long trip, and I don't care for travel."

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you got me drafted."

"You had to learn a lesson."

"If you mean you've got a nasty temper, I've learned that for sure."

"No," Joe's father said. He stopped walking and stared Joe in the eye as he intoned the words with a street preacher's intensity. "In the end, you're alone. You're always alone."

"Not tonight," Joe said. "Unfortunately."

He started walking again, leaving his father behind.

"You don't know what you're giving up," his father called after him. "I can take you away from all this, boy."

"Too late," Joe called back, without turning around.



by Tom Marcello

*And the music started up around him again,
as if it had never stopped.*

His brothers had marched down together to the recruiting office the day Joe's draft papers had come through. That was his family, all over. Sure, Ivan had had big plans, but when it came down to it, they were a team.

They couldn't argue the Army into putting them all in the same unit, but they made a bargain. All of them had joined the army bands, and they saw it as good practice. As soon as the war ended, they'd be back on the road to Hollywood.

When Joe came back on his next rotation to the spot where he'd left his father behind, all he saw was a tuft of long black fur. He shook his head and let it lie forgotten on the ground.

Joe didn't see his father for the next three years, and he didn't miss the old man, either. He marched through days and nights of war, playing his sax for the unit, until the endless German rain rusted his beautiful instrument beyond repair. He played a shoddy borrowed replacement, provided by the army, to cheer the troops as they marched into towns filled with thousands of corpses lying piled on the ground, the aftermath of successful air raids. By nighttime, the corpses had been cleared from the streets with grim efficiency, but their faces filled Joe's dreams, to a soundtrack of the jazzy two-steps he played in the army band.

The day the keys of his second saxophone rusted over for good, Joe thought he'd tasted true despair. But he was wrong. That came later, when he got the telegrams.

Karl, who played keyboard with the intensity of a man possessed by angels, who'd dreamed nothing but music notes since he was a four-year-old kid, had had his left hand shot off in an accident in the Pacific. Looked like he wouldn't be playing in any band, in Hollywood or anywhere else.

And Ivan, slick, movie star-handsome Ivan with his great big dreams for the family, was dead, killed by a German sniper as he'd marched with his band.

If Joe's father had appeared to him then, Joe might well have killed him.

But his father didn't come.

Joe played a third saxophone, so harsh and squeaky it would have pained him to hear himself play if he'd ever bothered to listen. He was with the army unit that liberated two concentration camps, and the horrors sank deep into his skin and stayed there, like the hollow-eyed stares of the survivors.

The night his unit found out that the war was over, Joe saw his father for the third time.

There was a party in the camp, everyone celebrating with hectic gaiety. Booze flowed hard and fast, as if it could wash away the memories. Joe left after the first round of toasts.

He sat alone in the darkness, smoking one of the free cigars that had been passed around the party. A small black cat crept through the shadows to sit next to him. Joe eyed it warily and didn't reach out a hand to pet it. A moment later, he knew he'd been right, as the cat shifted into his father's shape.

"Well, Joe," his father said.

"Well," Joe said.

It was hard to tell for sure in the dark, but he thought his father looked older and more haggard since the last time they'd met. The black coat billowed out over a skinnier frame, though the golden eyes were just as fierce in the hollow face.

A year ago, Joe would have killed the man on first sight. Now he just kept on smoking, too numb to move or say any more. Faint light and the sound of voices filtered out from the mess hall nearby.

"My condolences," Joe's father said.

Joe stopped smoking and looked up sharply. He couldn't read an expression on his father's shadowed face.

"They wouldn't have been here if it weren't for you," he said.

"Who?" his father said.

They blinked at each other in mutual surprise. Then his father said, "I was talking about your mother. She passed away two nights ago, in her sleep. I thought that you should know."

Joe took a deep breath. Then he kneaded his fingers over his forehead, closing his eyes against the lance of pain.

He wasn't completely numb yet, after all.

"She was a good woman," his father said. "She did her best for

you. By her standards.”

Joe nodded. He couldn't speak.

“I was thinking,” his father said. “I could take you back to see her, if you want.”

Joe looked up. “You could do that?”

“I could,” his father said. “She would have liked it.”

“Did you—?”

“I was with her at the end,” his father said. “She'd forgiven me, by then.”

Joe tasted a story he'd never know, and let it go. “Fine,” he said to his father. “Take me.”

That was the night Joe found out what it meant to be his father's son.

They flew some way as crows at the beginning of the journey, but crows weren't fast or strong enough for an ocean crossing. They turned into smoke for part of that, then caught a lift on the wings of a military airplane.

Flying in the cold, thin altitudes, half disintegrated into smoke, Joe felt the wind blow through the pain. Pure, freezing numbness overcame him, and finally, he thought he understood what his father always felt.

Freedom. He could have flown forever, and never had to touch his pain or memories again.

At the end, well past midnight on a dark, cold Ohio night, they shifted back into human shape to jimmy open the window of the funeral home and crawl inside to the room where Joe's mother was laid out for viewing.

Joe touched her cold fingers and tried not to cry in front of his father.

“She was the prettiest girl in Kravarsko,” his father said. “She wasn't afraid of anything or anyone. Not even me.”

“She turned us into a team,” Joe said. He looked down into his mother's face, calm beneath the layers of paint, and for the first time in over a year, he felt a clear point of resolution form underneath the brittle shell of numbness and the swirling, scattered layers of pain that had been hidden underneath. “She's the reason we all take care of each other.”

“Well. That.” His father cleared his throat. “I heard about your

brothers and what happened. So. I guess there isn't going to be a band, after all. No more plans of Hollywood."

"Hollywood?" Joe almost laughed as he looked up from his mother to his father's fierce golden eyes. "You still don't get it, do you?"

"I didn't cause your brother's death," Joe's father said. "But it's been some time since then. I thought you might be ready to move on." He took a breath. "I thought you might be ready to come with me, now. Now that you know what it's like."

At that moment, Joe glimpsed something he'd never expected to see on his father's face. It was fear, pure and simple...and there was something else mixed in.

Loneliness.

Flying high above the ground, you could always feel free. Now that Joe had tasted that freedom, he felt the difference himself, standing thick and heavy on the ground, weighted down by human concerns, all the cares and sorrows that his father would never know.

But that wasn't enough.

"I'm sorry," Joe said, speaking to his father gently for the first time since they'd met. "It's too late for me now. It's not your fault. But I need to get back to my unit. I've got responsibilities."

"But—"

"There might not be a band," Joe said. "But my brothers and I are still a team." He hesitated and drew a breath, releasing the anger he'd carried with him for so long. "You could come and stay with us sometime. Anytime, really. I—"

Before he'd even stopped speaking, his father shook his head. The golden gaze shuttered, but not before Joe glimpsed the raw pain hidden behind the fierceness.

"Too late," his father said, and it sounded like the harsh cawing of a bird that knows it's lost all hope. "Too late."

Three of them came back from the war: Joe, without a saxophone, Karl, without a hand, and Niko, whose goofy lopsided grin had turned into a mask of sorrow. They gathered in their mother's house and huddled together, waiting for inspiration.

Ivan had always been the one with the big ideas. Ivan was gone.

But the brothers were still a team.

Joe was cleaning out the attic one hot and dusty afternoon when he found his father's final message to him. Buried underneath the rubble of twenty years, he glimpsed the corner of a shining black leather case.

At first, he didn't know what it was. Then he lifted away the piles of old clothing that had covered it and saw its sleek rectangular lines, and his breath caught in his throat.

He undid the clasps and swung the case open.

A perfect, golden saxophone lay inside, gleaming and new.

Joe stared at it a long moment, caught between sharp, prickling emotions.

Finally, he reached out and picked up the saxophone. It fit perfectly into his hands.

As he lifted it out of the case, a black feather slipped out of the bell of the instrument and fluttered onto Joe's knee.

Joe let out a huff of breath that could have been either a laugh or a sob. A box of fresh reeds sat tucked in the case. He took one out and moistened it, even as tears blurred his vision. He fitted the mouthpiece onto the body of the sax and closed his eyes as he lifted it to his lips. He could already hear the wailing tune that wanted to be born.

Within a year, that tune would make his name in the nightclubs of Youngstown and Cleveland.

Five years from then, every jazz fan in the country would know the names of Blue Joe and his backup band—Niko on drums, grinning the loopy, lopsided, visionary grin of a man who's touched despair and been reborn into hope; and Karl, playing the keyboard like a demon with only one hand, worshipped by jazz fans everywhere for the uniqueness of his vision.

But at that moment, as Joe accepted his father's gift, he only knew one thing:

Maybe it wasn't too late after all.



The Carnivale of Abandoned Tales

by Caitlyn Paxson

“**Step right up**, step right up!” cries the Big Barker. He lifts up his top hat, and what big and hairy ears he has. “Ladies and gentlemen! See the wonders of the Black Forest! See the Tattooed Woman with her skin as white as snow and red as blood and black as night! See the horse head that speaks from beyond the grave! Be the first to witness as a little girl—no taller than your waist, sir—dances with three ferocious bears! Step right up!”

The Big Barker grins, and what sharp white teeth he has. His barking is as good as his bite, and men are drawn to his words. They are his prey, now. Businessmen and bankers and salesmen draw around and wait to be bled dry. It isn’t exactly an honest living, but it beats sweet-talking little girls all to hell and back, and that’s the truth. At least that’s what he likes to say to anyone who will listen, sitting round the caravan after closing time.

The Big Barker stands by the entrance, and just beyond him is a small tent. In the tent is a ring, with a stool at its center. On it sits the Woman with Endless Hair. She is naked, or would be. Her hair twines over her shoulders, across her breasts, down her back. It pools in her lap and tumbles down onto the floor where the ends seem to loop into each other endlessly like serpents. She sings little folk songs in an old language, and men and women clap and throw their coins. She stops singing, and pulls on her robe without exposing one indecent inch, and the people file out, satisfied that they have seen a wonder.

*In the tent is a
ring, with a stool
at its center. On it
sits the Woman with
Endless Hair.*

She reaches out her arms and gathers in the hair, pulling it towards her and up off her neck. She braids it, coils it, and tucks it away into the deep hood of her robe. The tent rustles behind her.

"The next show is in an hour," she says. Her voice is musical — the kind that can carry on the wind and charm young men from afar.

"It's just me, *lieblich*," says the Tattooed Woman. Her skin really is as white as snow, almost translucent underneath the dark tattoos.

"Oh, hello. Big crowd tonight."

"Yes. I go on in just a few minutes. Do you think you could lace me up?" The Woman with Endless Hair rises and stands behind her friend. The corset is designed to cover up as little skin as possible, and tattoos are visible from neck to ankle. She wonders how anyone can stand to be so naked in front of people as she pulls on the laces.

The Tattooed Woman sighs.

"It's on nights like this when I miss my little men," she says. "I can still see them, tumbling and somersaulting and building up into that absurd human pyramid."

"It's good that you can remember them that way." The Tattooed Woman pulls away.

"Well, I can't think of them at the end, can I?"

"I'm sorry. I'm just having a bad night." In truth, all of her nights are bad. Every time she sings, she sees her lover, with his golden hair and dusky skin, and he's falling and falling and he hits the ground with a squishing sound and blood pools out of the corners of his eyes.

"Why? Did you fight with the Barker again?" asks the Tattooed Woman.

"Yes."

"It isn't going to do any good, you know. She draws too much money."

"It isn't right, and he needs to know that we all think so. He's selling her like meat!"

"He sells us like meat every night."

"But we've chosen this. She isn't even awake."

"There are worse things than sleeping. And you shouldn't risk your place over it. What would I do if he shipped you off?"

"Make friends with Toad Girl?"

Both women smile.

The Beauty is dreaming. She dreams of a wall of thorns that winds round and round a castle like a giant serpent with many fangs. And inside the castle, everyone sleeps. Stable boys lean their heads on the warm flanks of fallen horses, courtiers lie in pools of velvet upon hard marble, and up in the eaves, the doves also slumber. Even her mother sleeps, with her chin leaning down upon her breast. Sometimes the ghosts of dead princes peer in at her through the windows. She would leave, but in her dream, she is waiting.

The Girl Who Spits Toads is not pretty. Her hair is lank, and she sags around the middle. She isn't sweet, either. But she has grown to love the toads. She teaches them to hop in a line and croak in unison and the clever ones can even stand up on their back legs.

For a long time, she hated them. She squashed them flat as soon as they fell plop onto the floor. But they just kept coming, and one day, she realized that no one but them was ever going to touch her lips. So now she loves them.

Her act isn't very popular. Even people who are drawn to rubber limbs and kittens with two heads find something unpleasant about a sad, fat girl who spits out toads. But she draws a few boys who pay their coins and laugh at her and steal toads when she isn't looking. Sometimes she looks longingly at the gold tent across from her stage. The woman inside draws her audience with her beauty, not with a grotesque trick. Men and women pay just to stare at her and admire her, and pay even more to touch her. All she has to do is dream away the days. She sighs in her sleep and men love her. Some people have all the luck when it comes to curses.

The Hedgehog Man loves the Beauty. The Girl Who Spits Toads can see it in his little black eyes. She likes him because he makes her giggle when he rides his giant rooster around the ring. She loves him because he is ugly and repulsive like her toads. Like her. She wonders

how sharp his quills are, and if they would pierce her skin.

If she had ever spoken to the Hedgehog Man, she would know that he envies her. At least she experienced a time when she was normal, if not exactly pleasant, and knew what it was like to walk amongst other people without the whispers and stares. She could pass as normal still, if she kept her mouth shut.

But the Hedgehog Man has been a freak all of his life. He doesn't look like an animal. Maybe if he did, people would think he was lovable and sweet instead of horrific. Long, quill-like bristles cover his body and when ladies see him, they cry out, because they think he stuck himself with dozens of hat pins. But they only hurt when he's clumsy and breaks one. He is careful not to be clumsy, because the pain is so intense. If he could bear it, he would rip out the quills, one by one, and be free. But he is afraid. His biggest fear is that no one will ever be able to get close enough to him to discover that underneath the quills, his skin is soft and perfect.

He does a comedy act with his rooster. For once the ladies laugh; he knows they aren't horrified anymore—just filled with pity. And because they pity him, they throw him lots of coins. He's saving up. One day, he'll go to the Big Barker and pay him, and then the Big Barker will take him to the gold tent. He'll touch the Beauty's cheek with his hand, careful not to graze her with the quills on his arm, and then he'll kiss her on her lips. And maybe then, she'll wake up. He knows she would love him, if he woke her up.

The Big Barker is certain that no one will ever wake her up. It's his job to be certain about things, to huff and puff and convince the world that they are seeing magic. He doesn't believe in magic. He believes in teeth, and axes, and dinner. He believes that he looks sharp in his suit and hat, and never mind the tail.

Without him, there would be no show. All of them would wander the world, alone and broken and without an ending. And they know it.

Sometimes, terrible things happen in her dream. The thorns creep in the windows and up the ceiling and make a tent above her bed. Outside, someone cries out. Dead princes push through the thorns

and come to her bedside, their faces and arms torn and bleeding. They whisper to her, touch her cheek, her arm, her breast. Sometimes they kiss her with their cold and bloody lips. She tries to scream, but no sound comes out.

The Raven Boy does not have the power of flight. These are things he does have: one raven wing, black as night, one arm, pale and strong, and a collection of things that are shiny. And, best of all, he has memories of flying.

People gather around him in the tent, and just before they begin to shout and demand a return of their shiny coins (because they paid for a miracle, not just another freak), he fans them with his wing and speaks of flying. They feel the breeze on their faces, and see his raven's eye view of the world, and they remember flying with him. They will dream of it, years later, from the safety of their beds.

Sometimes, when the show is packed in and he climbs up on top of a wagon to sleep, he thinks about his sister. He wonders if she smiles in her sleep, or if she wakes up at night, gasping, having dreamt of being smothered by the wings of ravens. He hopes that she knows happiness.

After his third show, he throws a cloak around his shoulders and wanders from tent to tent. He stands in the back, unnoticed, and watches as a little girl with golden hair runs her dancing bears through their routine. She cracks a whip and shouts at them, but he knows that once the show is over, she'll share her porridge with them, and curl up between their paws to sleep.

He moves on, passing by the Horse Head Oracle and the Donkey That Shits Gold. He's walking by the gold tent when he hears crying. Could the Beauty be crying in her sleep? Has she woken? He hesitates a moment, then lifts the tent flap and slips inside.

Candles cast a warm glow, turning the walls a burnt orange. The Beauty sleeps soundly, with russet hair spread out around her face like feathers. Her lips are pale.

Beside her bed stands the Girl Who Spits Toads. He watches as she reaches out and pinches the sleeping Beauty, hard enough to leave a bruise. Toad Girl is crying, and every few moments, she chokes on

her tears and coughs, and a toad slips from between her lips and falls to the ground with a squish.

“What’s the matter?” asks the Raven Boy.

Toad Girl wipes her nose on her sleeve, spits another toad, and frowns at him. “None of your business, krahe. Go away.”

But he walks closer. He tries not to step on any toads, but there are rather a lot of them on the ground.

“Whatever it is,” he says, “I don’t see how it could be her fault.”

“Because she’s so beautiful, she must be good!” she snaps, or would have snapped, if a toad hadn’t tumbled out in the middle.

The Raven Boy reaches his hand into his pocket and a shiny coin slips into his palm. He found it on the ground yesterday, and has been polishing it against his vest all night. “Would you like something pretty?” he asks. Girls are much like ravens, he has learned. They like pretty things and chatter, but not intestines, and never eyeballs — that is important to remember.

But Toad Girl knows about gifts, about the kind of people who offer them. And the people who don’t. She shakes her head, and turns away from the Raven Boy and towards the Beauty. She wonders what would happen if she pricked the Beauty with a pin. Would she wake? Would she love the Toad Girl, and be her friend? Would they braid each other’s hair? Would the Beauty laugh at the Hedgehog Man and mock him for loving her?

She doesn’t notice when the Flying Boy leaves. But she does notice when the Big Barker comes in. He is impossible not to notice, with his big ears and his long nose and his dark red suit. He growls at her, and she shrinks back against the wall of the tent.

“Toad!” he growls, clenching his teeth. “I’ve seen pigs with cleaner ways than you!”

She tries to murmur an apology, an excuse, anything. But all that comes out is another fat toad.

“Clear your mess out of here and do it quick. There’s a customer coming.”

She nods her head, and quickly falls to her knees, grabbling toads by their round middles and cramming them into the pockets of her pinafore.



*The Raven Boy reaches his hand into his pocket
and a shiny coin slips into his palm*

by Sean Stone

“And Toad,” he says, as she glances up at him, trying not to tremble. “If I ever catch you in here again, I’ll bite the legs off your little warty friends, one by one. And then, I’ll chew off yours.”

The Big Barker leaves the gold tent. He grinds his teeth as he walks, but smiles at the patrons he passes, as if he doesn’t want to bite their faces off.

The Beauty is his little lamb and his darling girl. She is cream and flesh and perfection. She sighs in her sleep and the coins rain down like drops of blood upon the snow. He needs her. They all need her. And damned if he wants toads like that girl leaving their slime on her flawless skin! And damned if he’s going to let some slut with a lot of hair tell him how to run his show!

The Woman with Endless Hair has finished for the night. After a certain hour, the only patrons left are hard men who aren’t looking for a song and a miracle. Maybe some girls don’t mind their burning looks and rough words, but she refuses to climb down so low.

Hooded and cloaked, she winds through the tents. She knows that the Tattooed Woman has two more shows, and sometimes the crowd gets rowdy. So every night she waits backstage with a knife tucked into her sleeve, ready to help her friend if the need arises.

As she passes the Horse Head Oracle, she nods to it out of habit. To her surprise, it speaks.

It whispers her name, and its voice is as soft as the rustle of straw.

“Good evening, Falada,” she replies. It must have been a beautiful animal, once. Now it is flea-ridden, and its eyes are glassy.

“Oh, how I would weep if I could shed tears,” it whispers.

She is puzzled. Falada speaks to patrons rarely, and to the rest of them even less. The Big Barker would have thrown it out long ago, no doubt, if it cost anything to keep.

“Do you see some great misfortune?” she asks.

“Tonight she will wake.”

“Who will wake?” She knows the answer even as the words leave her lips. “How will she wake? Who? Who will do it?”

But Falada is silent, with eyelids lowered. No breath rustles its whiskers and makes its once velvety muzzle warm. It is a dead thing once again.

The Woman with Endless Hair touches the knife in her sleeve, then turns and runs. She runs for the gold tent so quickly that her hair tumbles down from its coils and streams behind her like a cloak. It catches and pulls on things as she passes, but she does not feel it. She thinks only of the Beauty being free, free to fly away from her prison at last.

Her dream turns dark: darker than her chamber within its wall of thorns, darker than the bleeding princes and their empty eyes and sticky lips.

It is the Fairy Woman come to curse her again, with a cloak as black as night that wraps around and around her bed. The weight crushes against her chest where the Fairy Woman crouches and runs rotten fingernails across her arms, her neck, her cheek.

“Why?” she tries to ask. She needs to know. But only a faint gasp comes forth. Her fingertips are warm and slippery as if they bleed. But she cannot lift them to her face to see if they are red with blood. She cannot move, she cannot breathe. She hopes she will die.

The Fairy Woman hisses something in an ancient language.

“Wake up, cursed child.”

And then the Fairy Woman leans over her face, with breath as cold as frost, and kisses her perfect lips with teeth like arrows.

The man is an easy mark. He has doe-eyes and slow reflexes. Once upon a time, the Big Barker would have eaten him and his granny too. Now, he takes the man’s money: enough of it for a kiss, enough of it for more than a kiss. It’s always for more than a kiss at this hour of the night.

The man enters the tent and thinks he is alone. He does not see the Woman with Endless Hair, where she stands in perfect stillness against a golden curtain. He does not hear the sniffing of the Girl Who Spits Toads who crouches under the bed. He does not smell the sorrow of the Hedgehog Man who peers in at him from a hole in the tent, and he does not feel the hair stand up on his neck, warning that a predator awaits outside, an old wolf who longs to taste his blood.

His senses are for the Beauty alone. She is perfection, with pale skin like fresh cream and small hands that lie peacefully at her sides. His fingers tangle in her russet hair and he remembers the first time he kissed a girl and whispered words of love. He leans over her and his arm rests upon her breast, pressing down and feeling the softness of her. He runs his fingers along her neck, then along her cheek, and he does not see that her fingers have begun to bleed as if they had been pricked by thorns or spindles.

The Girl Who Spits Toads watches the blood as it drips down to the floor. She catches a drop on her finger and opens her mouth to taste it. But a toad tumbles out and looks at her longingly, so she lets the gnarled creature lick the drop from her finger.

The toad deepens to a dark red, and bursts into bloom. The Toad Girl gasps in delight and holds the perfect rose to her cheek.

The man who has paid for Beauty does not hear the Toad Girl's gasp. He hears only his own heart, thudding in his chest. He leans closer yet and gently, so gently, he kisses the Beauty on her perfect lips.

Her eyes open with a flutter. They are black and deep, like forgotten caves, and the man draws back. And then she begins to scream.

It is the deep and anguished cry of one who has wished for death.

The Hedgehog Man slashes through the tent, using his arms like knives. He falls to his knees by the Beauty and tries to take her hand in his to comfort her. Her black eyes fix on him and she screams again, throwing her head back and covering her face with her hands, streaking blood across her cheeks.

She is afraid of him.

If he had woken her, she would not fear him.

He turns on the man who dared to kiss his Beauty. The man is staring at the Beauty with his hands over his ears, as if he could block out the screams. He does not see the Hedgehog Man fling himself forward. But he feels it when the razor quills pierce his skin. They fall together, united.

The Woman with Endless Hair, who knows what it is to suffer and long for an ending, stumbles forward, brandishing her dagger in her

right hand. Her other hand she raises to her mouth to stop herself from answering the Beauty with her own wail. She looks in the Beauty's eyes and sees the madness there, sees that there is only one way for her to be free.

She raises the dagger above the Beauty's perfect breast.

But the Big Barker is there to stop her. His eyes burn amber as he wrenches the knife out of her hand and throws it to the ground beside the bed.

He shoves her away, and she falls against the tent wall. But she regains her feet quickly and throws herself at him, beating at his fur with her fists.

"Let her be free!" she cries, pounding at his huge chest that can hold enough breath to blow down houses. "She isn't yours to keep!"

He catches her wrists in his huge hairy hands with surprising gentleness.

"She stopped screaming," he says.

They turn together and look upon the Beauty.

Red streaks run down her cheeks, and one red gash crosses her throat like a ribbon. She is still, and her bright blue eyes stare into nothingness.

Beside her stands the Girl Who Spits Toads. Blood runs down her chin, and she is smiling.

The smile spreads across her face and illuminates it. Her face smoothes, her hair grows and curls, and she stretches upward. She is beautiful.

But then her eyes darken, deepen, and turn to black. She closes them, and collapses onto the ground.

The Flying Boy has watched it all from a perch in the dome of the tent. Now, he jumps down, gently, landing beside the Beauty Who Was.

He brushes her face with his wing, smoothing away the streaks of blood.

"She is dead," he says.

There is a moan from the Hedgehog Man, where he lies entangled on the ground.

"No," he says, "She cannot be dead. I love her." He pulls himself away from the man he has killed. And as he pulls, his quills stay fast

in the other man. He cries out as they are yanked from his arm, his chest, his leg, but he does not stop.

When the quills are gone, his skin is as bare and smooth as snow on a hillside.

He goes to the side of the Beauty Who Was and leans over her. He is about to kiss her, to try to bring her back. But the Big Barker stops him and pulls him away.

"She's gone now, Hans," he says. "Let her be peaceful." Hans, who is no longer the Hedgehog Man, begins to weep. "I've killed someone," he says.

"So have I," says the Big Barker. He turns away from the Beauty Who Was. "Time to pack it in. By morning, we must be only a memory in this place."

The Flying Boy crouches beside the Girl Who Spat Toads, who is now a Beauty. He brushes her with his wing.

"She is sleeping," he says.

"Yes," says the Big Barker. "There is always a Sleeping Beauty. She dreams us all."

Before she leaves the tent, the Woman with Endless Hair kisses the Beauty Who Was on her forehead. "Maybe I'll leave, too," she whispers. She covers the dead girl with a blanket, and walks away.

She's dreaming. She has wings as black as night that sparkle in the sunlight with a sheen that is almost blue. Below her stretches an expanse of fields that shimmer like spun gold and rivers that rush along wherever they will in an intricate system of bends and curves. She soars with the wind tossing back her hair and a smile on her perfect lips. She flies away into the horizon and disappears.



A Painter, A Sheep, and a Boa Constrictor

by Nir Yaniv

Translated from the Hebrew by Lavie Tidhar

"Please, draw me a sheep," he said—he looked just like you—and I thought, oh my, the kid makes demands. I would have liked to be in the desert, beside the broken remains of my airplane, or anywhere else for that matter. But no—we were both in the space port, I who was thrown like a discarded tool from the bowels of a trading ship, and he, who had seemed to arrive from nowhere.

"I don't know how to draw," I said.

He handed me a box. For a moment I thought he was asking for a donation.

"I don't have money, kid."

He didn't answer. I looked at the box again and saw that it was sealed. And then I understood. And was amazed.

"Dear God, where did you get a Maker machine?"

That's what they called Creators at that time, and they were expensive. Not the kind of toy that you expect to find in the hands of a six-year-old kid; one like you, for instance.

It gave the request a different, new meaning.

"Please," he said and put the box in my lap, "draw me a sheep."

"I don't know how to use this thing," I lied. "Where are your parents?"

*"Please, draw me a
sheep," he said, and
I thought, oh my,
the kid makes
demands.*

He looked at me with a sad, tender look in his eyes. I wanted to help him. Maybe, I said to myself, I'm getting softer with age. Weird kid. In some strange way he looked like he never had parents. I look that way too, and indeed I never had any. That's why you don't have a granddad and a grandma, kid.

At that time, programming a Maker machine wasn't such a simple affair. Certainly not when attempting to create a living thing. Only a very few were both able and allowed to do it by themselves, while for me and my kind, as if in response to the very evidence of our ability, it was forbidden. The punishment: death.

Even touching the box could put me at risk, but in the service corridor where I lived there were no security Eyes. That's why I chose it.

The kid continued to look at me.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go find your parents."

I began to walk away but he didn't move. I didn't want to leave him there, and if I got caught using force on a child... "Do you want me to buy you a toy? Or something to eat?"

"Draw me a sheep."

He was too strange, and I was too tired. And without security Eyes, without witnesses, I began to draw — to create. But not a sheep. I wanted to scare him. I'm not scaring you, am I?

The snake crawled slowly out of the box. Its head was gigantic, out of proportion to its thick black body. It hissed.

The kid smiled.

You like snakes, right?

Even then no one was scared of a boa constrictor any more.

The kid's smile didn't change when the snake twisted and began to die aloud, the result of my hurried, messy drawing. It might have been an indication of what was to follow. I pointed the Creator and erased the snake, separating it into a pile of ash on the floor.

"A sheep," the kid said. "Please."

Too strange, too tired. Too kind. I began to draw. Not a real sheep, but the ideal of a sheep. A sheep from legend. A creature soft and woolly and gentle. And there she was, white curls of silky wool, and a quiet baa, and a light hint of musk.

The child's smile grew, and he turned his head away from me. One movement, a fraction of a second, but I, still absorbed in the act of creation, noticed the movement of the muscles, the slight bump under the skin, the exact tint of the eyes, and knew.

I knew he was no different from me. That he had no parents. And I knew that he didn't find me by accident. That bump is a transmitter, and those eyes... and the punishment for unauthorized creation, for me and mine, is death.

There will be many who would claim that me and mine deserve death, and who would be happy to settle the claim with no accusations of murder. How can you catch someone like me, if not by using someone like me? A drone? Drawn?

I would have liked to ask the child what he thought but time was of the essence, and in any case I was unsure he could have replied. It's easier to manufacture them that way. Maybe I will ask you, one day. Time was pressing, and I pointed the box at him. Erase.

His body sank in silence while the sheep looked on. Soon only a pile of ash remained.

After a while I erased the sheep, too. I cleaned the floor, collected the ash into the box.

And then, alone, I sat down on the floor and drew you.

Shall I draw you a sheep?



One for Sorrow

by Shweta Narayan

It was Dougie found the first feather.

He was out of Lainie's sight for ten seconds while she did her little ritual of freedom, stopping on Skene Street just out of sight of the school to pull the daft, throttlesome tie off and stuff it in her bag. When she looked back up he had a glossy black feather as long as his arm. It was green and violet where it caught the light, shiny like an oil slick.

Boys.

"Put that down," she said. "It's probably got germs."

"Auld woman," he said scornfully. Then he ran off down the street shouting, "Lainie's an auld wifie!"

*If Mum was angry
when Dougie got
home alone, that was
Dougie's fault.*

Lainie shrugged. If Mum was angry when Dougie got home alone, that was Dougie's fault.

She watched him dwindle into a tiny, distant doll and thought how lovely it would be if he really was that small. She could put him in her pencil case if he wouldn't shut up, or maybe squish him. "Ach, sorry Mum, didn't see him."

The little doll stopped. Lainie frowned. It'd be just like Dougie to twist his ankle or stub his toe, then be whinging all evening. She started walking faster. Then Dougie looked up, his face pink against the granite houses, and he said something. There wasn't anybody there—but no. When Lainie squinted, patches of grey split away from the pavement, from the houses, and turned into a shawl over a patched jacket over a long skirt. The witch.

Lainie started running.

It was Beltaine one year—unco many years ago, this was—that a young man went looking for the fairies at dawn. He was a canny lad,

he was; canny enough to go to Sidh Chailleann, and canny enough not to climb the mountain. He walked instead along the banks of Loch Raineach, and there he saw three lasses bathing naked. The water was snowmelt, mind, and it was gealt, but none of these lasses so much as shivered.

He stood long in the shadow of Sidh Chailleann and watched them, while the sun drew higher and turned the loch to molten gold. They were like as triplets to his eye; pearl women, with laughing black eyes and hair shimmering black against translucent white skin. They were jewels set in the rippling gold of the loch, giggling and chattering and calling to one another, sending arcs of bright water splashing every way they could. They were fairies at play.

Lainie watched Dougie as she ran, watched the doll grow into a real boy. He was smiling. He would. Trust Dougie to be feart of his form teacher, but not of the auld witch bent over him like a vulture, like a stormcloud, her shawl fluttering practically in his face.

Lainie had seen the witch before. They all had. It was Sarey MacDonald said she was a witch. Sarey knew things. Em had said she was wrong, that the witch was just a fey auld grannie. But Lainie didn't know any grannies who appeared out of nowhere and loomed over wee boys like they were dinner.

Not that she had done anything to Dougie. Yet. But she was talking to him, noticing him as she never noticed Sarey's group when they pointed and whispered. Lainie tried to run faster.

"Shite!"

The stupid girly heel on her stupid girly school shoe gave way, and she tumbled to the ground, skinning her knee and the heel of her hand. "Shite, shite, you bluntie Lainie..." She blinked back tears and sat up, sticking her hand in her mouth.

The witch was gone.

Dougie ran over. Easy for him; he had boys' shoes. And he hadn't been in trouble after all.

"Are you all right?" he asked. His face was scrunched up.

"Just sore." She stood up, painfully. "And there's a muckle great hole in my stocking, and it's all over blood. I would have been fine, too, if you hadn't run off like a wee daftie."

"I wasn't in the road."

"Aye," she said, "small mercies." She shook her head. "And you talking to the witch!"

"She's no a witch, just a grannie."

"She's not, then. Sarey says."

"Sarey's the daftie, then. Em says different, and Auld Maggie's nice. She gied me 50p."

"Why did she—hey, where's your feather?"

Dougie beamed at her, smug as only a brother could be. "That's what she gied me 50p for," he said.

He was a canny lad. He wore his jacket inside out so that the fairies could not properly see him. When they left the water he followed, walking close behind, close enough to touch their bonny backs. But remember he was canny; he kept his hands to him until they reached a big old oak tree. Three fine cloaks made all from feathers hung from its branches. Gleaming black they were, with patches of lustrous white in front and glints all over like caught gold or sunlight, and they were fair soft and warm.

He knew they were, because he stole one.

Mum was angry with Dougie for running off, but she scolded Lainie too. "I'll have no child of mine spreading claik," she'd said sternly. "Witches. What bletheration. You'll be giving this Maggie an apology, my lass, if you're wanting your supper—and if you cannot tell when Sarah MacDonald is spinning tales, it's time you were finding other friends to listen to. Whatever happened to Emma?"

So back went Lainie after tea, up Skene Street and down Rosemount. It was still light out, would be till almost nine, but it was mizzling and she wanted to get back into the warm. She didn't see Auld Maggie. The witch might be melted into the rain haze or the grey houses, watching Lainie, watching, and silently cackling. It was

easy for Mum to call it bletheration. Lainie was creeped all down her back. She limped into the park, looking around.

There were feathers in the grass. If the witch had given Dougie 50p for the one feather, she might turn up for a few more. Lainie crouched, keeping her skinned knee off the ground, and picked up soft grey-brown fluff and long white feathers. Had a baby pigeon fought a goose here? Lainie grinned, filling her hand with slightly draggled down.

“Are you wanting to line a nest, lass?”

The voice sounded like someone that smoked too much. Lainie glanced up. Grey skirt, grey jacket, hair silvery under a grey shawl with a ragged edge. Lainie fell back on her bum. She flushed, expecting the witch to laugh; when there was silence, she dared another look.

Auld Maggie’s skin was like one of those cracked vases in the museum, white with fine lines running all through it, marbled with veins. Her eyes were black stones set deep into the porcelain, and her lipless mouth the largest crack of all. Lainie imagined someone putting flowers in Maggie’s mouth; they turned into feathers, black and white. Colours had no place near the witch.

“Well, then?” asked Maggie.

“I was — they’re for you.”

Maggie gave a witchy cackle. “Were you thinking I’d gie you 50p for each wee bit, then? Your brother has more gumption.”

Lainie got to her feet. She still had to look up at Auld Maggie’s face. “How do you ken he’s my brother?” she asked.

“See’d you watching over him then, did I not?” Maggie said. “Aye, and ordering him around. And I seen you run over to keep him from the auld witch’s glamourie, too.”

Maggie’s voice was mocking, bitter; frightening in a way that had nothing to do with magic. Lainie stepped back. “He’s — not supposed to talk to strangers,” she said.

“And some are stranger nor others, eh?” Maggie waggled a finger in her face. “I see more than you wee girls think I do. Aye, and I hear more too.”

Lainie stood her ground this time. She took a hard breath. “Aye well,” she said. “Sorry for that.”

Maggie's hand dropped and she blinked, onyx eyes disappearing for a moment into the pottery face. "Sorry?"

Lainie shrugged. "Mum said to apologise for calling you a witch."

"Ah," said Maggie. "And so you were wanting to bring me a handful o' down." Frown lines appeared on her face, deeper cracks shaping her forehead.

Lainie shrugged again.

"The bairns been cheeping and tittling about me for years, lass. So tell me this: what's a sorry mean?"

The other girls had circled and stared and grouped and giggled when Lainie was new. Before Em. She imagined years and years of that, and she could not find a single thing to say.

"Away with you," said Maggie. "You can thank your mum for me."

Lainie turned away, feeling daft, and realized she was still clutching feathers. She said to the air, "Are you wanting these?"

"If they're unmarred," said the air, "and if they're black or white, then I'm wanting them."

Lainie looked around.

"But not for nothing, na? I'm no thief." Maggie reappeared.

They saw him when he stole a cloak. Two lasses grabbed their cloaks, but the third walked towards him. He took a step back.

"Are you feart?" she asked. She was even bonnier, close to, but her voice was harsh and loud. "You should be. Gie me back my claes."

"I'm not feart," he said. "I've a cross around my neck, and salt in my pockets. Are you kelpies?"

"Do we look like horses, then?"

His mouth opened, then closed. He shrugged. "Gin I give you back your cloak, what will you give me?"

"I'll do you no harm, nor my sisters neither. And that's better nor you've earned."

"Ach well," he said with a smile. "It's worse than I'm wanting. Will you give me a kiss?"

"Aye, if it's a kiss you want. Now gie me that."

He tilted his head, his smile growing wider, and he ran his eyes over her face, her breasts, her belly. "I'm no gype, bonny lass. You agreed so fast, I'm thinking you'll give more. Will you lie with me?"

"Aye," she said, "if I must. Though there's pleasanter ways to be asking for that, you ill tricket mannie."

He laughed. "So bold a tongue you've got, lass. Will you cut it out?"

Her eyes widened. "Why would you be wanting me to?"

"Why is my concern. Will you?"

She paused a long moment before nodding. "Aye," she said again. "If I must. Only gie me back my cloak."

He shook his head. "'Tis a precious thing indeed, if you'll do all that. I've a fancy for trying it myself."

She stood stammygastered as he flipped the cloak around his shoulders, turned into a magpie, and flew off into the sky.

Lainie stared. "I didn't say you—how do you do that?"

Maggie cackled.

Lainie could feel the heat in her cheeks. "I don't want money."

"Aye, I know what you're wanting."

"Aye, my supper! Look, just take them."

"Answers." Maggie cackled again, then sat, creakily, on a bench. "You can hide with the wee bitches for a time, lass, but you've too many questions for that crowd. Sit down, see's your feathers, and ask."

Lainie realized she was staring. She dropped all the feathers in Maggie's lap. "Are you a witch?" she asked. "How do you..."

"Do that?" Maggie picked up one white feather. "This'll buy you one answer. I'm no a witch." She took another and added it to the first. "This'll cowp you another. I'm no a worldlike woman neither. But it's not so hard. Folks see what they're thinking to see."

"What does that mean, not a worldlike woman?" asked Lainie. "What do you want feathers for? And why only black and white? Why not just buy them at the shoppie?"

"Aye, you're full of questions. See these feathers, they won't buy you so many. This one's brak at the quill, and half this down is no good. That's too brown, and that's too grey." She sorted the feathers in her lap, letting most of them flutter off in the wind. "I'll gie you one more

answer, aye? I could get them from a shoppie, sure, if it was play-acting I wanted. There's no power to things you buy in a wee plastic baggie."

"But—"

"If it's more you want," said Maggie, "bring me more feathers, and I'll tell you a story. Now off with you, lassie."

Lainie stood up. With what dignity she could gather together, she said, "My name is Lainie."

"Aye," said Maggie. "I ken."

He was a canny lad, aye, but no so canny a magpie. He flew up, up into the sky, till the fairy lass could see the sunlight glent on his feathers; and she was no the only one who see'd that.

He never saw the hawk that swooped down to pick him out of the sky. She see'd it, and though it meant her precious cloak was gone, she laughed.

Lainie started looking for feathers. Most were brown, some mottled in delicate, startlingly beautiful patterns. Those she admired, turning them round to see them at different angles, before she dropped them with a sigh and looked for black ones, or white.

Maggie appeared at odd times to give Lainie a sentence of story for every two or three feathers, then fade out of sight, leaving Lainie to mutter and find more.

Sarey MacDonald saw her one day. "You're not coming to the shoppie, but you can talk to the smelly auld witch?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

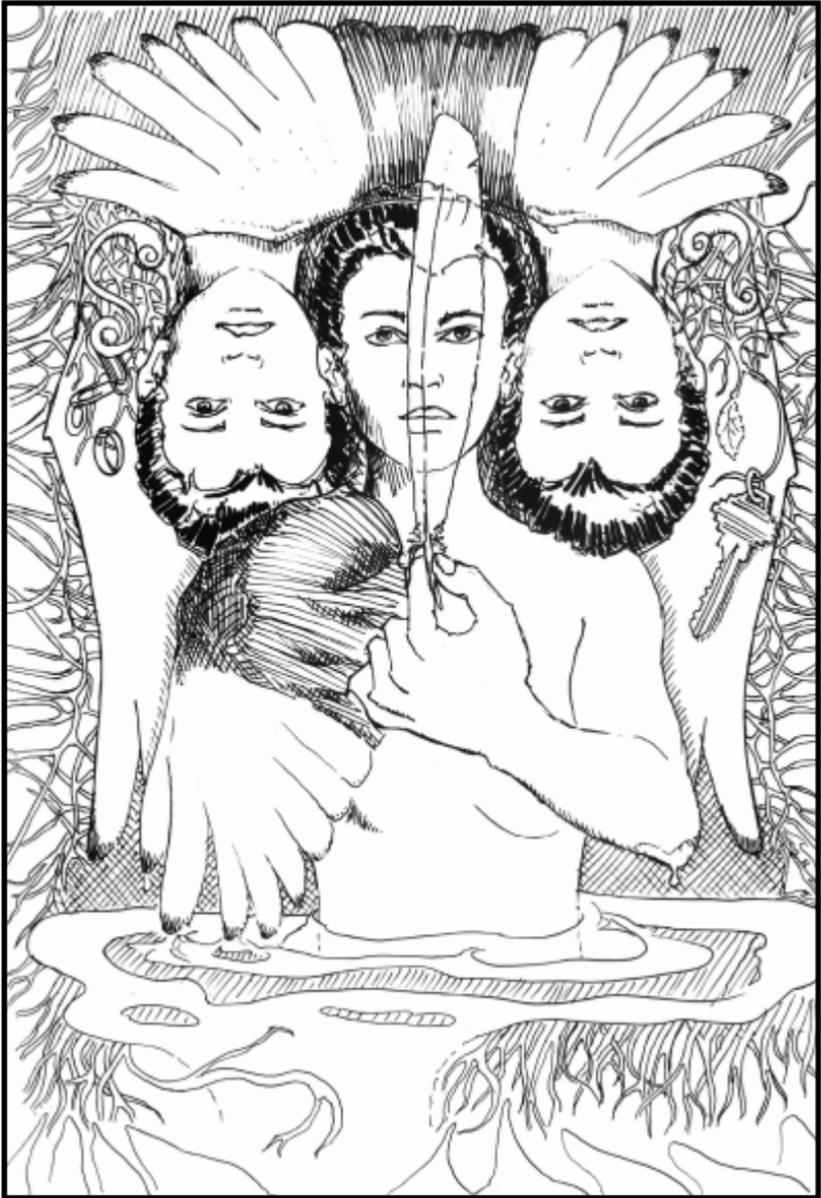
Lainie looked at her toes. "Sorry." Her hands felt dirty with the feathers she'd picked up, and she rubbed them on her skirt.

"We didn't really want you anyway," said Sarey. "You're weird."

The other girls snickered.

Mum found Lainie crying that night. "It's all right," she said. "If it's feathers you're wanting, I'll take you to the falconry."

"**Nobody's ever sain** 'fly low, fly lang' to that one," said one of the lasses to the others. They all laughed, harsh and crawling, and startled the birdies from the oak.



by Chris Howard

He was a canny lad, aye, but no so canny a maggie.

But when they stopped laughing, two of them had cloaks and one had none. They were quiet a moment, which was a long time for bird fairies; they kent they were no longer three sisters together, but twa and one.

“Well,” said the twa, “we’d best be gaun.”

“Aye,” said the one. “Fly low, e?”

The others laughed, but nor long nor loud. One pulled a black feather from her cloak, and the other pulled a white feather, and together they gied them to their sister. “Keep them by,” said one. “We’ll be seeing you,” said the other. Then with a flutter of cloaks they shifted and were flewen away, aff o’ the tree and over the heather.

Dougie watched her filling a baggie with feathers. “You said they were dirty,” he said.

“Aye, likely they are.”

“Why didn’t Em come?”

“She was busy.”

“She’s no your best friend any more, is she? She doesn’t like you any more.”

“Shut up.”

“Serves you right for going off with Stupid Sarey.”

“Shut up.”

He barely paused. “How much is she giving you then?”

Lainie fought to keep her temper. “Nothing. She’s telling me a story.”

“Ach, Mum tells stories for the asking.”

“Maggie has different stories, e?”

“Well,” said Dougie, “I bought sweeties.”

Holding the feathers in her fist, the third sister sat bare-scud as a baby on an auld tree stock.

There was a falconer that day flying his hawk near Loch Raineach, and they caught a magpie. See this magpie, he was an odd one; most are black and white, but this one, he had a siller cross at his neck.

The falconer thought this was queerie, to find the mark of the

Lord on a magpie's throat, and he was thinking maybe it was a sign. That's when he heard birds cawing with the creek o' day, or maybe, he thought, it was laughter. He went looking where he heard it and found nor birds nor laughter, but only a lassie all naked. Her white skin was covered only by long straight hair, black as the shadow under the auld oak she sat by. She looked up with bird-bright eyes, and he thought he had never seen so lovely a lass in his life.

Belike he hadn't. The fey are bonny or uggsome to mortal eyes, but never middling plain.

He watched her eyes, so large and bright, with wiry black lashes all around; he saw them crinkle in puzzlement at him, then find his hawk and widen in fear. He smiled at her. "Nae lass," he said, "You've no cause to be feart. Fiona will not harm you, nor I won't neither."

She tilted her head. "I've nothing left you could take from me," she said.

Sarey's group found her the next day. "Oh Lainie," Sarey taunted, "how's your new friend, the daft auld witch?"

Lainie barely heard their laughter for the pounding in her ears. "She's no a witch," she said, "and she's no daft."

"Is she no teaching you love spells, then?"

"Don't be stupid."

"What a pity. With your face—"

"Sarey can't help being stupid," said Em from behind Lainie. "She was born that way."

Lainie whirled around. Em was Em, as ever—patched uniform, mascara, purple streaks in her hair.

"Oh look," said Sarey. "It's the mental case."

"You came back," said Lainie. It was a daft thing to say, but she didn't care. Nor she didn't care that she was grinning fit to crack her face.

"Aye," said Em, grinning back. "Sisters do that."

"**I'd liefer have** something to give you," said the man, and he took off his jacket and held it out. "You'll be chilled, lass. Here."

She wasn't, but it was a nice jacket, so she took it. It was made of

tweed in varying shades of brown, and it looked like the feathers of the hawk called Fiona. She wrapped it about her shoulders. It did not turn her into a hawk. Aweel, at least it hadn't turned her into a sheep. "What should I gie you for it?" she asked.

He looked aghast. "Gie me?" he said. "For simple courtesy? Lass, who's been mistreating you so? — Aye, it's plain as porridge someone has. Are you beholden to him? No?" He smiled. "It'll be well, then. I'm thinking the Good Lord showed me here."

She misdoubted it; but he was a braw lad and smiling at her, so she smiled back.

His smile grew bedazzled for a moment, but then he shook himself. "Any gate, I can give you protection... but well, we haven't even been introduced, na? I'm Andy McRae; what's your name, lass?"

She looked at him, looked down at the black feather and the white, and whispered, "Maggie."

"Maggie," he repeated softly. "Bonny Maggie, I've no got pretty words, but I'm wanting to take care of you."

She blinked up at him.

He pulled a siller ring off his pinky finger and held it out to her. "Will you marry me?"

She nodded, her eyes fixed on the ring. "'Tis shiny," she said.

"**You married him?** You didn't even know him!" They were in the little park. A man in a business suit was on the phone just on the corner, so Lainie tried to keep her shout down to a whisper. It came out strangled.

"Do you think I'm a black and white birdie then, lass?"

"Well, you're no black and white, anyway."

Maggie tilted her head and looked at Lainie. The sun caught in her eyes, turning them overbright, and she was so like a bird that Lainie burst out laughing.

Maggie snorted. "Aweel. She'd nowhere else to go, ken. And he was a good lad."

"Was it you, Maggie?"

"Your mum would be calling that bletheration," said Maggie.

"I'm telling you a story, e? About a lass named Maggie. 'Tis a common name."

Lainie sighed. "All right then. Was 'she' happy? Did the other magpies come back to see her?"

"Aye, sisters do that. They both cam to see her, for years. Two for joy. And she was happy, lass. She and her Andy never had bairns — she couldn't carry human babies — but they lived happily ever after, growing old together. Only —" Maggie looked away, at the distant grey houses. "Only, see, ever after is no as long as it seems when you're young." She looked back at Lainie. "He was mortal," she said. "He died. And even canny birdies can be gotten by the hawks. Came the day only one of her sisters came to visit."

Lainie caught her breath.

Maggie smiled a little. "That's what it means, growing old. Used to be there were more than three of them, once upon a time. Now there's only one."

"One for sorrow."

"Aye."

Lainie looked down at her baggie. "Is that it, then? Is that how the story ends?" She glanced at Maggie. "Or... did she maybe make herself a new cloak of feathers, after he died?"

Maggie cackled. "You're a canny wee lass," she said. "But there's more to it than you wat. She made one before he died."

"She was wanting to leave him?"

"Ach no, she wanted both. Him and the wind in her wings."

"What happened, then? Did it no work?"

"Cat got into it. She made a second. It got the feather mould."

"How awful."

Maggie smiled at her. "Aye," she said. "She was fair gunked. But in the auld tales, ken, third time's the charm. I'll show you something."

She pulled a big canvas baggie out from the folds of her skirt. It was grey. Of course.

"Is that all feathers?" asked Lainie, awed.

"Aye, in a way." Maggie tugged on something, and it spilled out of the bag. Feathers, yes, with hints of multicoloured thread and

something shiny peeping out between them. Maggie shook it out.

It unfurled, wing-like, into a long cloak, black with bright white patches in front, lined with down, at once glorious and tacky. Some of those perfect feathers were much longer than others, so they stuck out, and that was definitely old tinsel tying them together.

"Every piece found or traded for," said Maggie softly. "Kept its virtue, see, not like you'd find in a shoppie. And it'll be done today, I'm thinking." She took a spool of thin silver ribbon from her pocket and started pulling feathers out and tying them into the cloak. "And it Midsummer's Eve today, that's chance."

Lainie watched Maggie's deft fingers for a while. "If you can do it," she said eventually, "could someone else? The mannie that stole your cloak, he wasn't fey. If—someone else—made a cloak..."

"It'd be a lass that sees more than most, e?"

"And maybe her friend, too?"

For a moment, Maggie looked like the cat that got the cream. Then she crumpled into herself, her fingers slowing on the cloak. "Who knows, Lainie," she said, sounding merely old. "Might be I'm just a daft auld besom gone wandering into her own tales."

Unsure what to say, Lainie looked down.

Maggie attached several more feathers before she said anything more. Then, "We'll see now, lass. 'Tis done. And look what I've got left." She held out two feathers, one black, one white, then pressed them into Lainie's hand. "One's for your sister," she said, the crack of her mouth widening in a smile. "Keep them by."

Lainie blinked at her hand. The flash of sun on feathers brought her eyes up; a magpie flitted close. She pointed, turning to Maggie. "Is that—"

But the auld woman was gone, and there were two magpies, crawling and chattering and chasing each other up to the roof of the nearest house.



The Bride Price

by Richard S. Crawford

We all thought Signe was never going to come back to school because she's, like, all dead and stuff, you know, but when junior year starts, she's right there with us in home room. But she's all pale and gross looking and no one wants to sit next to her because her skin is like all slimy and blue and she has all these gashes all over her. There's this one on her neck that like goes all the way around, and the stitches are really big. Plus she has this lame haircut that's like a barrel on top of her head with these two white stripes that go from her face all the way to the top.

So no one wants to talk to her, right, so I go up to her and I'm all, "Like, what happened to you? Didn't you like die or something?"

And she's like, "No, I just got married," but she's all gloomy and stuff when she says it. I don't know what her deal is.

So I'm going to be all excited for her because she's all like married now but the bell rings then and we have to go to Mr. Pretorius's biology class which sucks ass.

Halfway during class, Shelley pokes me with her pencil, and she's like, "Hey, Elsa, what's up with Signe? She's all weird today."

So I'm like, "Duh, she got married over the summer."

And Mary goes, "No, I heard she died over the summer. From rabies. Isn't that gross? That's like a dog disease." She's got this look on her face like she's going to barf.

"Well, then, why's she all like alive and stuff?" I go. "And, like, you're not allowed to get married when you're dead."

"You can in this state," Shelley says, and because her mom's a lawyer, she knows it's true.

"Like, what

happened to you?"

Didn't you like die

or something?"

But then we have to all shut up because Mr. Pretorius throws an eraser across the room and hits Mary in the face with it.

So we all sit in class while Mr. Pretorius teaches us about homunculi, which are like these little people in jars or whatever, and then the classroom door, like, bursts wide open and in walks this giant guy with bolts in his neck and stitches all over him like Signe. And this giant guy's all like, "Grrrrr! Arrgh!" and wandering all over the place and we're all screaming and stuff.

Then this other guy comes into the room. He's this weird-looking guy who's skinny and pale and he's got this greasy black hair. And he goes over to the giant guy and he goes, "Quiet there, old friend. We'll figure this out."

"Grrrrr!" goes the giant guy.

And Mr. Pretorius goes, "Victor! What is the meaning of this?"

The skinny guy doesn't say anything but looks around the room until he sees Signe and then he's like, "You! Miss Oh So Perfect! You have to come back with us right now!"

Signe's all pale and gross already but when this giant guy comes in she gets even more pale and grosser and now she's like shivering or whatever. She goes, "No, Victor. You can't make me go if I don't want to. You don't own me."

"Oh, but I do," Victor goes, and he takes this piece of paper and he unfolds it in front of all of us. "This is my receipt. I paid plenty of good money to your parents for your corpse when you died. I own at least sixty percent of your body."

So I'm all, like, "Hey! You can't own another person. That's, like, slavery! And slavery sucks or whatever."

And he smiles and says, "It's called a bride price. Signe's parents aren't complaining. They used to live in a double-wide trailer next to the cemetery, and now they have a nice apartment downtown. With a swimming pool."

I think that's pretty cool, because I've always wanted a swimming pool, and I'm about to say that to Signe when Mary goes, "That's totally unfair! You can't be married to Signe! Did she even get to say no?"

"Oh, she's not my wife," Victor goes. "Signe is married to my old

friend here." He points at the giant guy who's standing by Mr. Pretorius's desk and growling.

We all go, "EW!" because the giant guy's really gross.

Mr. Pretorius should be taking charge here but he's not. He just goes, "My God, Victor! You've really done it! You've created a bride for your monster!"

Victor goes, "Yes, I have. Now come, Signe. We must return to the castle."

Signe acts all bummed but she stands and picks up her books, and goes over to the giant guy, who kind of smiles and tries to hug her but his arms are too stiff and he ends up just sort of squishing her.

But I'm all mad now because Signe's parents sold her to Victor without her permission just because she died and now she has to be married to this giant freak. So I stand up and go totally Amnesty International and I say, "You can't take her! Everyone's entitled to a free education in our country!"

Mr. Pretorius gets mad and he's all, "That will be enough, Miss Lanchester. Sit down immediately."

I'm all nervous now because Mr. Pretorius is so creepy, but Mary and Shelley both stand up next to me and they cross their arms, and it's total girl solidarity. "We're not letting you take her," Mary says, and Shelley goes, "Yeah!"

Victor doesn't care, though, and he's like, "And what are a bunch of girls going to do about it?"

And then Marty, who's totally hot, stands up. He goes, "If you try to take Signe out of here against her will, you're going to have to go through the whole football team as well." And I'm so proud of Marty that I can barely speak.

Victor gets all mad but he knows he can't do anything because now us girls and the whole football team's against him. But he sighs and says, "Very well. Signe shall have a proper education. She is rather young, I suppose. However," he goes on, "you will, young lady, return to the castle immediately after school. No clubs or games, and definitely no sports!"

"What?" I shout, because Signe was a totally awesome cheerleader and the team needs her and I am totally counting on her.

And Victor's like, "Well, she must care for her stitches. Signe's in a very delicate state." But before we can say anything else he turns and goes out of the room.

After Victor and the giant guy are both gone, Mr. Pretorius tries to start lecturing again, but everyone's still all excited, so he just gives up and sits and starts writing in this huge notebook.

Signe comes up to me and Shelley and Mary after class and goes, "You guys are awesome, you know?"

I don't know what to say because the whole thing is so weird. But I smile and when she hugs me I hug her back even though she's all cold and slimy.

She's totally going to be on the squad this year, no matter what that creepy old Victor guy says. And maybe it's kind of mean but I can't wait to see Coach Clive's face when she sees how Signe's gross skin clashes with our cute new uniforms.



Jaguar Woman

by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

She forgot how to be a jaguar but the knowledge sometimes returns in her dreams and she wakes to the dark room and the shape of the man next to her and the distant smell of jungle and night.

Bound inside the stiff dresses, under layers of velvet, ruffs, embroidered roses, it is easy to forget how to shift her shape, how to move sleek and elegant on four legs.

They speak new words to her and the words drive away the words she used to know. They even give her a new name and she watches as her old name is trampled under the hoofs of their horses. The magic is lost.

The bearded Spaniard says little to her. He prefers to kiss her and mount her and have her pour his drink for him.

But the priests speak often, furiously. They show her drawings, they explain. The priests have images of martyrs drenched in blood, holding their own heads on a platter, their bodies pierced by arrows.

The priests make her kneel before their blessed Virgin and pray. She has prayed to others before and it is not so difficult to pray to new gods. It is more difficult to have lost her name. Even more difficult to have lost the jaguar shape.

But she does not remember much about those times either. It must have been years ago. She's been the Spaniard's mistress for an eternity. It has been like this forever, eating at his table,

*The priests have
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drenched in blood,

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on a platter, their

bodies pierced by arrows.

sleeping in his bed. Although it must not have been forever; she remembers there was a time when she could barely understand him and now his words are clearer although his meaning is the same.

Around the city she looks for other jaguars. The familiar faces have vanished. Perhaps she imagined it all.

In dreams her lord-father's white house is bright and real. She walks through that house and watches the jaguars lying on the floor, their yellow eyes smiling. The youngest daughter of the Abode of Jaguars sits with her brothers, their tail twitching and their fur shimmering.

Her brothers have been skinned.

Her white house was razed.

She is a jaguar no longer.

The Spaniard brings her trinkets. She would like to push them aside, but playful cat that she was and still sometimes is, she tiptoes around the table, watches the objects. When she was a jaguar she ran through the jungle without a single sound disturbing the singing birds and the frogs, the snakes and the caiman. She would hunt the tapir, her teeth piercing its skull.

His latest offering is a hand mirror. It shines blindingly under the sun and then she turns it and observes her eyes.

They are dark. They are pretty. But they are not jaguar eyes.

She sobs and he does not understand. He thought it would make her happy. His fingers disentangle themselves from her hair, pulling away brusquely and he's gone.

Their bedroom is small and it is stuffed with all his things. His clothes, even his furniture intimidates ... his smell lingers. He's forced his whole world into the tiny room and she must stand with her back pressed against the wall, without enough space to take more than two steps, tiptoeing around the objects he loves.

There's so much of him in the room, in the house, that even when he's not there he's still near, fingers gripping her arms, mouth against her mouth.

He's caged her.

That night she tries to sleep at the very edge of the bed but he pulls her towards him, locked in a firm embrace. He will not let her go.
He will never let her go.

Yesterday she smashed the mirror. When it shattered the mirror laughed and she laughed with it.

There was a woman in the mirror but it was not her. She remembers her face differently. It was a face with strong jaws, sharp teeth, yellow eyes.

The woman in the mirror would not be able to climb up a tree or let out a fierce growl.

She tells him the mirror broke; an accident. He says he'll buy her a new one.

She doesn't want another mirror but he insists and she must accept in the way that she must accept all things from him. There is no room for discussion. He speaks kindly, almost lovingly, but he jams the words down her ears, sneaks his fingers under her skirts, demands in whispers.

She cannot ask. She cannot plead. There is nothing left to barter with.

She forgot how to be a jaguar but the knowledge sometimes returns in her dreams.

Today she opened her eyes and felt the jaguar shifting inside her skull.

In the dark she can feel the jaguar clawing at her and wanting to tear its way out through that delicate human skin. She bites her lip and draws blood. She scratches her belly, her nails tracing chaotic patterns of lines and swirls.

It stops suddenly, pulling back like the tide.

She is back in the bed, with the man next to her, and the smell of wax and leather overtakes her. The jungle is gone.

But now her eyes glint in the dark and she knows.

Tomorrow she will cast aside that wretched human body. Tomorrow she will regain the jaguar's shape.

Tomorrow she will pounce upon her sleeping lover. She will choke his screams with her weight. She will bite into his neck and chest. Her teeth will pierce through flesh and bones. She will tear chunks of meat and watch as his blood spills onto the bed, then drips gently down to the floor until it becomes a lake and it swallows the whole room.

She will swim in that lake just as she swam in the waterhole under the shade of the trees.

Tomorrow she is a jaguar again.



Firefly Igloo

by Caroline M. Yoachim

The house next door to Marta's had an octopus living in the hanging basket over the front porch, right where a plant should have been. The backyard had a fence made of pine trees and every night a green glow came through the cracks between the trees. Grownups said that Marta's neighbor was a witch and that she hated children, but Marta knew better than to always believe what grownups said.

Marta's yard never glowed green and the hanging baskets had plants in them, which was boring. So one night, while her parents were watching TV, Marta climbed up the fence to where the trunks weren't packed quite as close together. She squeezed through to the other side and the bark scraped her arms. She picked a splinter out of her elbow and hopped down.

The witch was in the yard. Marta hadn't planned on that.

"Get out of my yard," the witch said. For a witch, she looked disappointingly ordinary. She wore all black, but it wasn't fashionable like it was in the magazines Marta's mom left in big piles all around the house.

Marta didn't want to leave, so she looked around the yard for something she could talk about. Grownups could often be distracted by conversation.

"What's that?" Marta pointed to a glass dome on the far side of the yard.

The witch pursed her lips and squinted. "Go away."

"No."

"Your parents will worry," the witch said. "Go home."

*The witch was in
the yard. Marta
hadn't planned on
that.*

"They won't worry." Clearly, the witch had not met Marta's parents. "And I'm not going."

"It's a firefly igloo," the witch said. Marta assumed this meant she could stay. She walked over to the glass igloo.

"Isn't it a little big?" Marta asked. She'd never seen an igloo, but she'd seen fireflies. Fireflies were the size of her thumbnail. The igloo was big enough for Marta to fit inside.

"It's magic. You wouldn't understand," the witch replied.

Marta waited, hoping the witch would say more, but she didn't. Marta stayed anyway. Anything was better than going home and watching her parents watch TV.

The witch glanced at Marta one last time, then pressed her hands against the igloo. A white light stretched up from the top of the dome and into the stars. Bright green dots flooded in from all directions, swirling down around the beam of light until they found the igloo.

"Fireflies," Marta whispered.

"Hush," the witch said.

Fireflies landed on the dome, firing their lights in bursts of green. The witch lay down on the grass near the entrance of the igloo and stared inside. Marta moved closer to see what she was looking at.

Inside the igloo, light from the fireflies crisscrossed every which way, and in the middle of the dome was a little girl, made entirely of firefly light. Her clothes were green, her hair was green, even her skin was green. Her voice was the buzz of firefly wings. Marta couldn't hear what she was saying.

Marta watched for a while, but this was boring, like watching TV.

"Do you do this every night?" Marta asked.

"Yes."

"Can you make her real?" Marta asked.

"No. She was real before, a long time ago." The witch sniffled, which Marta thought was very un-witchlike of her.

"Why do you do this?"

"I'm lonely. I can't lose her."

"She isn't real," Marta said.

"Go away," the witch said. This time Marta went. She was

worried about the witch, though. It didn't seem right to spend so much time with a girl who wasn't real.

The next day, Marta wanted to ask her parents what to do about the witch, but they kept telling her to shush so they could hear the TV. She tried unplugging the TV, but her parents got mad and told her to go outside. It gave her an idea, though, for how to help the witch. She climbed back over the tree-fence and crawled into the igloo. There was a funny bump on the ceiling where the beam of light had come from, and she pulled on it until it came loose.

The witch came outside.

"What are you doing?" she screamed.

"I'm real. I'll sit in the igloo, and you can teach me magic. Then you won't need the green girl anymore."

"I loved her," the witch said. "I don't even know you."

"She doesn't need you," Marta said, "but I do. Nobody ever talks to me at home."

The witch lay down on the grass, like she had the night before, and stared at Marta through the tunnel.

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

Marta wanted to know everything. This would be way better than TV.

"Tell me," she said, "how you get that octopus to live in the hanging basket."



The Fox and the King's Beard

by Jessica Paige Wick

A long time ago, before there were paved roads, lived a human king who was very proud of his beard. He went so far as to call it one of the glories of his kingdom. It was thick and it never tangled; also, it was a beautiful red. His pride was all the stronger because nobody could really argue against it. His beard was just as fabulously red as he said it was.

One day the king made a mistake. He bragged that his beard was of such a glorious red that, beside it, even the fox king's brush was dull and shabby.

*He bragged that his
beard was of such a
glorious red that, beside
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shabby*

The king of foxes learned what the human king claimed and he was not pleased, so he flicked his red tail and called a court of foxes. They came from the hills and the woods, from the fields and the moors, from the farmers' henhouses, and from the lands beyond the twilight border.

When all the foxes were assembled and twilight trembled against the flank of night, the king of foxes asked which fox thought himself cunning enough to teach the human king a lesson. It was Jack Fox who stepped up to the task. He licked his sharp teeth with his pink tongue and set off to

learn what there was to learn of the human king's lands.

The human king's lands were primarily occupied by sheep and cattle, with birds and horses coming in third and fourth. He claimed

quite a few forests and even more woods; however, his kingdom was mostly moorland. Indeed, the human king's grandfather had been a smuggler king, and many were the secret ways across the moor for a smuggler.

Jack Fox liked the land so much and grew so distracted by its many beauties that one of the wild horses stepped on his tail. He yelped and the horse, who was whiter than goat milk, reared in surprise and galloped far away.

The next day, Jack Fox found the same horse caught in a thicket of nettles. Usually the horse would have been able to leap the nettles, never in danger of even a small scratch. But as it happened, the horse had a stone in his hoof that had badly bruised his foot and he could not stand to put even the slightest weight on it. Jack Fox watched the horse struggle. Then he said, "Horse, if I help you, will you do me three favors?"

The horse said, "I don't really see how you can help me, fox."

"Jack Fox," the fox said.

"Jack Fox. I'm caught, and you're so tiny that you're barely as long as my tail." To illustrate how true this statement was, the horse gave a little swish of his tail.

"But if I help you," said Jack, "will you do me three favors?"

"I suppose so," the horse said. "I'm really thirsty; I've been here all morning and the rain just soaks into the ground. My mouth is full of mud; even the flies have given up on this terrible place."

"Good to know," Jack Fox said, and then he streaked laughing away and soon disappeared into the bracken.

Next, Jack Fox came across a farmer whose name was also Jack. Alas for the poor farmer, he was not renowned for his perception or his intelligence; indeed, most of his friends thought him rather stupid, although solid, dependable and courteous.

The farmer didn't notice Jack Fox until he cleared his throat, *ah-ah-ahem*, and said, "Pardon, sir. How would you like to be a rich man, at your ease, with the most beautiful princess in the world knowing your name, and you a great personage at the king's court?"

Jack the farmer gawped for a second and then said, "Why, I would like that very much, Mr. Fox."

"There's a horse," the fox said. "Stupid thing. All white. It's caught in some nettles; if you help it out, and do just what I tell you, the king will know your name very well indeed."

"Are you tricking me?" Jack the farmer asked, after a moment of heavy thinking.

Jack Fox picked his teeth with one claw. "A trick?" His ears pricked up, the very attitude of alert innocence. "Do you mean—a lie?"

"Yes," Jack the farmer said.

"I am not lying to you," Jack Fox replied.

Upon hearing this, Jack the farmer was perfectly satisfied. He followed the fox to the white horse and soon had the white horse free. The white horse was shy and limped away as quickly as he could. For many weeks, neither horse nor farmer heard from clever Jack Fox.

Then one night Jack Fox appeared to the horse smelling of fires and spices, and he said, "To pay me back, I want you to do three little things." First, Jack Fox convinced the horse to let him glue a slender spear of white wood to his forehead. Jack Fox flattered the horse, saying that the spear made him look very virile and that it made him stand out from all the other shaggy ponies.

When Jack Fox appeared to Jack the farmer, the only advice he had for the farmer was to keep his axe sharp and to make a name for himself as a hunter of animals—as long, of course, as they weren't foxes.

And why hadn't the horse and farmer heard from Jack Fox for all those weeks? And why didn't they hear from him for weeks after he'd convinced the horse to wear a horn on his head and the farmer to become a hunter?

It was because Jack Fox had gone to the proud, red-bearded king's court disguised as a young man with coal-dark hair and cold black eyes. When he stood in front of a torch with the light shining through his hair, its dark was a red sort of dark. When the light hit him the right way, his shadow was the shadow of a fox; nobody noticed this, however, because he was very finely dressed and had a romantic history and many stories.

Principal among the stories he was often called upon to tell was the story of the unicorn; before Jack Fox, they had never heard of a



by Adam Doyle

*When the light hit him the right way, his shadow
was the shadow of a fox...*

unicorn, which may seem as fabulous to you and me as a unicorn itself, but is nevertheless quite true.

He described it as a fleet white creature, horse-like, but as beautiful as the stars; he said the main difference, besides it being magic, between a unicorn and a horse was the horn that grew out of the unicorn's forehead. He said that, for the men who were lucky enough to bring a unicorn down, the horn was the greatest of treasures; even the Pope wanted one. It would bring a dead man back to life and could heal any wound or sickness. It purified water and made poison drinkable. Furthermore, Jack Fox said that he had heard stories of a unicorn in the bearded king's land.

Principal among the people who asked for this story was the king's young daughter. She was beautiful, but had determined from an early age that killing things was very wrong, and she would not touch so much as a scrap of meat unless it could be proved that the animal it had belonged to didn't mind. She subsisted mostly on tea and fruit, rampion and cheeses, and while she loved all animals, she loved best the wild horses of the moor.

Jack Fox in his human mask spent more time with the princess than was necessary, because, after all, she was very beautiful. He often told her of the beauty of unicorns, of their secret sorrow, of their rarity, of how they were drawn to maidens as bees were drawn to flowers.

Now, the second little thing Jack Fox had asked the white horse to do was, when it could run swiftly again, appear at dawn and flee before any who tried to come close. The white horse did this (all the while thinking that foxes were even stranger than the owls had said) and word got back to the king's court. The king thought at once of putting together a unicorn hunt and, of course, he asked Jack Fox for advice.

When the princess heard what her father planned, she was so against it that she became ill. She wasted away like a tallow candle. Although she retained her beauty, it was a changed beauty. When the court doctor told the king that he did not think the princess would recover while the unicorn was hunted, the king replied, "When I've taken the unicorn's horn, she'll recover whether or not she wishes to;

I love my daughter, but clearly she's a spoiled brat. Animals eat each other. Even the hounds hunt the unicorn."

With every outward appearance of contrition, Jack Fox visited the princess' sickbed. Of course, he also *appeared* to be a man.

He said, "Princess, I can't help but think that I am the cause of your decline. Please, what would your father think?"

"You *are* the cause," she said. "Why, oh why, did you have to put the idea of a unicorn hunt into their heads? Now they won't rest until they've murdered the poor creature."

"It's very hard to catch a unicorn," Jack Fox said. "They're very quick. Still..." He hesitated deliberately. "The hunt has been getting closer. The horned horse hasn't a hint of how close we've come." He threw a knickknack at the curtains and said, "Hark, I think I hear your guards; I should go. But be comforted: when the unicorn is dead, the horn might bring to life any number of injured beasts and heal up birds with broken wings. Etcetera."

The princess lay in bed for a time, and then she drank some cool, clear water and splashed what was left of it on her face. She had listened to the talk of the hunt, and knew where the unicorn was usually sighted; she determined to go there, slipping from her bed and the palace as a thief might slip, successful and laden down with treasure.

What the princess did not know was her father, the king, had expected this. There were no guards to stop her, but as soon as her flight was noticed, the hunt was quietly gathered, and her progress was tracked.

The air was so full of mist that the moor was gray, a dim outline, and both rocks and trees only became clear when they were a few feet distant; it was no great difficulty for Jack Fox to slip away from the hunt, take to his four-footed shape, and streak off to gather Jack the former farmer, now Jack the hunter. Jack the hunter had heard many things about the unicorn hunt, but hadn't yet partaken; he knew, or, anyway, Jack Fox had told him, that the day he joined would be the day the unicorn was taken, and then he would be rich and called great names and known forever in that place—

He could hardly wait.

The third thing that the fox had requested of the white horse was, as you may have guessed, that when he saw a particular sort of lady in the moor, he was to go to her and put his head in her lap and sleep for a time. The horse wasn't very sure about this idea, but he had agreed, and so: when the mist began to clear, and the princess found the white horse with the horn on its head chomping on the grass, he resolutely went over to her and made as if to put his head in her lap.

The princess was charmed, and she stroked his head and murmured soothing things, and stared at the horn in wide-eyed wonder. He was soothed and, in fact, couldn't move until he'd slept and fulfilled the rest of the fox's request.

In the meantime, Jack Fox had lead Jack the hunter to the rocky place where the princess and the horse with a horn on its head were resting, and he told Jack the hunter to bide a while until the king and his men were there. "Trust me," Jack Fox said, "for you'll soon be well-known to the king and all his court."

"The princess, too?" Jack the hunter asked.

Jack Fox only smiled, and then was away to rejoin the unicorn hunt. He cautioned the king to quiet, and the king stroked his gloriously red beard, and the huntsmen circled round the princess and the horse and the hunter until they were very close.

All this time, Jack the hunter grew more nervous. He fingered his axe and his palms sweated and he grew tired of waiting. Finally, the king broke through the mist and his daughter saw him. She said, "Oh, no. Unicorn, you have to run!"

The horse had never met a unicorn, but was startled by the sudden appearance of other men and began to get up—alas, the horse did not get up quickly enough, and Jack the hunter, realizing it was his time, suddenly loomed up and brought his axe down on the horse's neck with a mighty chop! His strength was such that the axe went straight through the horse's neck and his enthusiasm for the task was so great that, unthinking, he also brought the axe straight through the princess's lap—and cut off her knees! Blood poured everywhere, and the princess screamed and screamed until she'd bled to death.

The king's heart leapt around in his chest like a fish on land, but he kept his head and said, "The horn! Someone, quick, give me the horn!"

Most of his men were too shocked to act, or too engaged in keeping the hounds under control, but not Jack Fox. He gripped the horn and pulled it from the horse's head, then he handed it to the king.

The king put the horn to his daughter's knees, but the flesh and bone did not knit, and the blood did not go back into the veins. He thought that perhaps he was doing it wrong and he pressed the horn into the wound, but still—nothing happened. It was then that he looked closely enough to notice that the horn was nothing but pale wood carved into the shape of a horn. He turned on Jack Fox in a fury.

"You lied!" he roared. *"You lied to me."*

But Jack Fox was no longer there in the shape that the king was familiar with, a dark-haired man with cold black eyes. He was there shaped as a fox, and the hounds were baying like mad, quite put out to have been tricked for so long by a fox.

"Tell me one thing," Jack Fox said, grinning. "Is the red of your daughter's lap more glorious a red than the brush of the king of foxes?"

Then, before the king could reply, Jack Fox streaked away as swiftly as he could on his little black paws, which was swift indeed, and he was soon lost to the mist. The king was so grief-stricken that it was a full hour before he told his men to loose the hounds. By that time Jack Fox had got clean away. And that is why fox hunting was popular for so long in the king's area of the world: because the king was determined to make the foxes pay for their trick.



Interview with Cory Doctorow

By Jen West



Cory Doctorow seems to be everywhere these days. A prolific Internet personality, Cory edits the popular weblog Boingboing.net, writes several columns, works as an activist for electronic rights and writes science fiction/fantasy novels. His latest novel, a techno-Orwellian YA story called Little Brother (Tor), was released in April 2008.

West: What was the inspiration for *Little Brother*?

Doctorow: I worked for many years at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit civil liberties

organization headquartered in San Francisco. EFF fights to ensure that the freedoms we enjoy in the real world survive the transition to the digital world—keeping privacy, free speech, due process, and similar ideals alive on the Internet. I worked in a variety of ways for EFF, from scrapping at standards committees to briefing the FCC to helping to kill a bad UN treaty and replace it with a good one.

Many people seem ready to throw away our freedoms today—both in the real world and the digital world—to “fight terrorism.” Fighting terrorism has become the catch-all excuse for every pipsqueak authoritarian with an axe to grind. It’s the reason we get busted for taking pictures in the subway, carrying a bottle of medicine onto a plane, or objecting to being fingerprinted and forced to show ID just to move around the world.

Every institution is under pressure to spy on its stakeholders, from libraries to public transit systems to colleges and ISPs. The message of the day is “Keep your eyes open for suspicious stuff,” and that means that anyone behaving outside the ordinary is subject to being stopped, questioned, arrested—or worse (for example, a Canadian citizen named Maher Arar was on a plane that was diverted to the USA; on landing, the DHS mistook him for a terrorist and kidnapped him to Syria, where he was tortured for *two years* before being released).

Today’s kids are the most surveilled, most controlled generation in the history of the world. There’s no public space left for kids to play in unregarded, and every place they find that can be theirs is shut down or demonized as a pedophile’s dream come true—this despite the minuscule, infinitesimal proportion of attacks on children that come from strangers they meet on the Internet, and the overwhelming majority of attacks that originate with relatives, friends of the family, teachers, coaches, and other people who we treat as safe.

Walt Disney World has instituted mandatory fingerprinting for visitors to the park and the last time I was there, I argued with the guy at the turnstile about this. A little kid standing behind me piped up and said, “No, no, you have to be fingerprinted, we all have to be fingerprinted.”

It froze the blood in my veins. It’s one thing to worry that Disney is training our kids to want to be little princesses or whatnot, but that’s a pale shadow of my concern that Disney will train my daughter to grow up to be a happy citizen of a police state.

West: The title *Little Brother* coupled with the themes of invasive surveillance and extremely limited privacy are clear parallels to George Orwell’s *1984*. How much was *Big Brother* an influence for this story and where do the similarities end?

Doctorow: I think the biggest difference between Orwell’s outlook in *1984* and my own in *Little Brother* is our approach to technology. Orwell pre-dated the widespread popularization of grassroots electronics (and, obviously, computers). *1984* is, fundamentally, a

book about how technology gives the state the advantage over its citizens. I think it's still true that state-deployed technology puts citizens at risk (viz., the NSA's warrantless wiretapping program, which managed to illegally wiretap the entire nation)—but it's likewise true that technology presents innumerable opportunities to citizens to assert their freedom from the state, such as cryptographic privacy tools. I'm an unabashed techno-triumphalist, because technology has given me so many opportunities to exert leverage far above my individual weight that I can't help but believe that it will be the key to attaining lasting liberty.

West: This story could very well have worked as an adult novel. What drew you to writing this story for young readers?

Doctorow: A bunch of my friends had written young adult novels and were having the best time. My friend Kathe Koja had been a famous horror writer who'd written very graphic horror, and she decided to write these very spare, almost Hemingway-esque young adult novels. And the experiences she described were just so cool, writing for kids who read not just for entertainment but to try to figure out the way the world works. The feedback she got was so blunt and honest that she was really, really, really excited, and she let her horror novels go out of print.

The other thing is that I was going to write a book where the technology really worked, where it was real technology. I thought young adult was a good genre for that. In young adult fiction, there's an honorable tradition of talking about how technology works — unashamed lectures — and I really like that mode. [Robert Anson] Heinlein was a great proponent of that. When I was a kid, I found out a lot about how finance and politics and so on worked through books like *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*. My book is sort of a radical, political *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*. So young adult seemed like the right genre.

West: With warrantless wiretapping, invasive electronic surveillance, and the fear of terrorism so prevalent today, in your mind, how much of this story is a cautionary tale?

Doctorow: It's not intended as a cautionary tale about the risks of technology in the hands of the state: it's a cautionary tale about the risks of citizens' unwillingness to use technology to assert their liberty. The state will always seek out ways to turn technology into systems for control, but the real risk is in citizens failing to use technology to fight back.

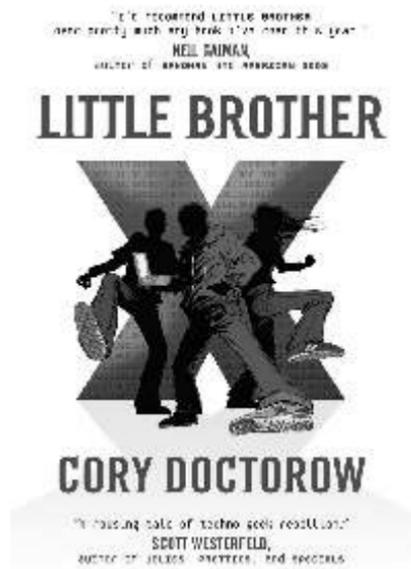
West: What kind of feedback have you received from both young and adult readers?

Doctorow: So far, all enthusiastic!

People love to find out more about how to take control of—and evaluate and wisely consume—the “security” measures that increasingly control our lives. If I can figure out how to beat a no-fly list [a secret list maintained by the U.S. government of people who are restricted from flying on commercial aircraft for travel in the U.S. (Wikipedia)], then so can terrorists, so no-fly lists aren't making us safer. The fastest way to prove that is to publish the methodology for beating the lists. I'm not really worried about the public response—I can predict who won't like this, and I'm glad to be on the other side.

West: Congratulations on becoming a father. Do you think parenthood might change how you write or what you write about?

Doctorow: Absolutely: I feel like I've got a lot of skin in the game now—like my personal life is directly and immediately affected by the way that society treats young people. When I hear about devices like the Mosquito (an anti-child weapon that uses high-pitched sounds inaudible to adults to discourage children from gathering), I feel a really non-theoretical, atavistic anger. When I'm pushing my



daughter around town and she suddenly starts crying, I wonder, “Is some bastard terrorizing her with a Mosquito?”

My writing is my outlet for my passions, worries, and concerns, so I’m already finding my subject matter and outlook changing.

As to changing “how I write,” well, inasmuch as having a baby has meant large shifts in my working schedule, it sure has changed things. Still, I’ve finished two novellas, a short story, 20+ columns, and a couple feature articles since she was born in February, so it’s pretty do-able.

West: You wear many hats — novelist, columnist, activist, husband, father, to name a few. How do you balance it all? When do you sleep?

Doctorow: I do a lot of stuff — I’m on a lot of advisory boards, I’m on some boards of charities, I do all this activism stuff, I write Boing Boing, I write six columns — and yes, this stuff takes up a lot of time. What allows me to do all this is that it’s all part of the same thing. I think the job of a science-fiction writer is to figure out how technology is changing society, how it might change society in the future, and sometimes to even influence how technology is changing society. But that’s also the definition of a tech journalist, a columnist, an activist.

One question I often get is, “How much time do you spend on Boing Boing?” Depending on how you calculate it, I either spend all of my time or none of it. Every time I run across something relevant to anything I do, I write it up for Boing Boing. So in addition to making it searchable, and having people comment on it, and making it clearer, putting it on Boing Boing is powerfully mnemonic for me — it means I remember it. These are sometimes like pieces of a puzzle that I don’t have the box art for. I find these pieces lying around, and I put them on Boing Boing so that I’ll know which pieces I’ve got — and every now and then I’ll find a corner piece, and a whole piece of the puzzle snaps in.

Little Brother was very much like that. I had a flash of inspiration, and I went home and wrote the book in eight weeks, from the day I started to the day I finished. Technically it’s a very research-intensive

book — there's a lot of factual and technological material in it — but everything there, I had already written about on Boing Boing. So I'd been collecting this stuff on Boing Boing without knowing what it was for.

I know a lot of visual artists who work this way — they have boxes of stuff that look like they should go into something someday, but they don't yet know exactly what. My friend Roger Wood, a sort of mad clockmaker, has boxes and boxes in his flat labeled "doll parts," etc. Boing Boing is like that, but machine-searchable.

That said, I don't have much of a social life.

West: How many writers does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Doctorow: Two. But they have to be really small. And well-lubricated.



River Water

by Becca De La Rosa

In Allison's garden there grew a tree of little oranges, delicious in summertime, veined with white, like palm-sized marbles. Allison's garden was a treasure trove before the ferry ride. The long grasses, windswept, kept their secrets.

Allison sat under the orange tree where rind littered her lawn. It was already autumn. The orange tree reached down into the earth, questing for water and sweet minerals. Allison thought of the underground cradling its roots like thin fingers, a handshake or a hug. She began to cry.

*Her tears should
have made four
rivers, but no water
came.*

There was no salt. The first tear Allison cried was an O, open mouth or wide open sky; the second an F, like a wolf's snout when it snarled. J: wolf curled up, heavy head on its paws. A: wolf stretching in a bristle of fur, or one sharp fang.

Her tears should have made four rivers, but no water came. Allison cried every letter of the alphabet.

When it had grown dark around her and her orange tree she wiped her eyes, gathered up the neat and pointed tears in the scoop of her skirt, and took them inside, to dry like timber in drawers, boxes, cupboards. All winter long she used them to build this story.

In the beginning there was no orange tree. Allison drove a taxi through the city, delivering passengers neat as care packages to the airport, hospitals, nightclubs, important meetings, their lovers' beds. Her car wore a strip of light on its head, a beacon or a flamboyant hat. All night long it flickered on and off like a lighthouse. Allison made up elaborate soundtracks for her passengers, carefully chosen, although her passengers mostly did not notice. She constructed stories in their

honour and told them under her breath. Allison could fit whole epics into each car journey. Once a young business man must have heard her whisper to herself; he said, "Pardon? Were you talking to me?" Allison shook her head in the rear-view mirror. "I said some people should be banned from the roads," she told him, and admired his enthusiastic hearing. Allison knew the best paths through Dublin. A map of the city fit in her head like a mathematical tree, always growing, spreading out branches and fractions; the Coast Road was a multiplication table and a tree trunk, and Dalkey Island and Ireland's Eye were strange symmetrical fruit falling off into the sea, and the cigarettes she held between her fingers were smoke signals and her heart was an X-marks-the-spot. Allison had not been lost in years.

The wolf hailed her taxi cab on Portobello Bridge late at night. "Where to?" Allison asked. The wolf smelled of pine needles and bonfires and burnt sugar, wind and smoke and silt, and his eyes were teacups full of lightning. The wolf said, "I can show you the way to the underworld."

Eleven days before, Allison had drunk coffee from a Styrofoam cup while her sister Sofia lay in a hospital bed, asleep like a fairy tale princess. A nurse with candy-pink hair brought Allison a packet of digestive biscuits. She gathered all the flowers from her sister's bedroom in a black bin bag and replaced them with ivy. The doctors said her sister might be in a coma for years. Allison would train the ivy to curl around Sofia's body, so she could sleep in a cradle of green; maybe the ivy would find a way into her veins, up those labyrinthine tunnels and into her heart, where it would beat a delicate rhythm and teach Sofia to love calcium and magnesium and earthworms. And when Allison's sister woke up her eyes would be green, her tongue brown. They would climb Killiney Hill together and let moonlight soak into them until they turned into trees, two good oak trees, like vital organs linked with ivy strong as arteries.

"**There is no** set fare for a trip to the underworld," Allison said. The wolf smiled for her, a broken window. "There never is."

"I'll keep the meter running," Allison said.

"You are a sweet thing," said the wolf. "As sweet as an orange."

When Allison's sister Sofia turned twelve, Allison took her out on a midnight cab ride around the city. She packed a feast of bite-sized food: cheese cubes, dried figs, salami, olives, squares of ciabatta, apricots, plums, tiny chocolates, and watched as Sofia peeled and ate one apricot, reverently. They drove up into the hills of Dalkey, where rock stars and famous actors inhabited their sprawling sideways houses like hermit crabs. Allison parked the car beside a stone wall. Around them and underneath them tiny lights spread out into the ocean. "This is the city of Sofia," Allison said grandly.

"It is not," said Sofia. "It does not belong to me. Not even on my birthday."

Later, on the drive home, Sofia curled up in the front seat with her head in Allison's lap. Allison could not keep her eyes on the road, could not stop herself from staring at the delicate points of Sofia's ankles and wrists, the blue of her fingertips, as though she had been shovelling snow, this tiny girl wading through snow, her skin dripping icicles; in the city of Sofia it was always cold. The structure of the body did not have a beginning, a middle and an end. The human skeleton had no simple answers; there was no place for fiction between the pelvic bone and the cranial ridge. Allison wanted to draw her sister a map, tie a string to her finger, tell her a story that would live in her ribcage forever, like a yellow bird.

Doctors untangled the ivy from Sofia's fingers in her hospital room. "Stop," Allison said, "it's important, she needs it," but they paid her no attention. Allison brought a sleeping bag and camped next to Sofia's bed. Her parents came and went again and left no footprints on the floor. "Let me tell you a story," Allison said to her sister's sleeping eyes, and she did.

"You are sick," Allison said. "You're lost. Your heartbeat isn't even a whisper. It could be years you spend like this, it could be a hundred years, or you could die tomorrow. You're so weak, Sofia. If you die, I will leave the hospital. I'll tie a piece of ribbon around my finger and

go down to the underworld. There are guardians. I will pass them. There are rivers I will sail across in my taxi cab. I'll find you, and we will drink tea with brandy for our strength and our nerves, and we'll drive back home. That's how the story ends. We drive home. We drive and drive."

So Allison and the wolf went down to the underworld. They sped across the East Link Bridge, the taxi blinking like a Christmas light. "The ways down into the underworld are twofold," the wolf said loftily. "Would you prefer the easier way or the better way?"

"I'm not taking any chances with Sofia," Allison said. "I want to do everything right."

The wolf nodded, as though satisfied. "Then we will drive to Howth," he said.

Allison kept silent on the long drive. She tried to think of her sister when she was younger, healthier, not a pebble sucked by salt. It didn't work. Even as a baby Sofia had had the ascetic look of a monk or an empty house. Allison used to worry that her sister was growing younger instead of older: her life diminishing backwards, always smaller, less and less history, less and less skin and bone.

Allison and the wolf drove into Howth, out to the foot of the hills. They drove down to the underworld.

Sofia hadn't even opened her eyes to die. She didn't have that common decency. Allison sat at her sister's side, growing furious that Sofia would dare to slip away without a fight, that she could be so selfish. Her heartbeat never faltered. It trickled out. When those electronic lights stopped blinking, Allison shouted, "Code blue! She's coding!" because it seemed right, but the doctors didn't flock in to shock Sofia with paddles or stab a needle full of adrenaline into her heart. They took Allison's parents aside in the corridor. "We're sorry," they said. "The intracranial injuries she suffered were too severe. We couldn't save her."

"You didn't try," Allison said. The doctors just shook their heads sorrowfully.

Allison did not cry. She sat in the waiting room and made friends

with a sad teenaged girl whose mother had cancer. She told her a story. Allison's story was about Sofia, the way all her stories would be, then and for the rest of her life. In the story Sofia slept in a morgue drawer and turned into salt. Sofia dreamt of a salt mine. A bird with green feathers sang her a song that had no words, but made her cry and cry and cry, and her tears washed out the salt mine and her body became the oceans. Sea anemones sat in her skull like breathing flowers. And when she woke up she climbed out of the morgue drawer and walked across Dublin in her winding sheet. She grew fat on cured ham and olives, married a chef, and told all her daughters how she had melted like a salty snowman to become the oceans of the world.

"There are four guardians to the underworld," the wolf told her, scratching the back of his neck.

There are four guardians to the underworld. Their names are Plexus Choroid, Brachiocephalic, Corpus Sterni, and Cobelli's Gland. They have fiery fingertips, lacy mouths, flowers sprouting from their gleaming skulls. They do not carry swords to guard the gates of the underworld, but they do carry battered copybooks for transcribing love songs. The four guardians are in love with each other. They write songs like Nick Cave on their Yamaha keyboards and sing like Leonard Cohen working an electric sander, a chain-smoking boy soprano, the queen of a honeybee hive.

"You must give them a reason to let you through," the wolf said.

Allison pulled her taxi up at the gates to the underworld, which were like the gates to an abandoned farm, weeds sprouting through rotten wood. She rolled down her window and the four guardians slid towards her without moving their feet. They had ink stains at the corners of their lacy mouths. They had been writing.

"My sister is dead," Allison said.

The four guardians hissed. "Trite," they said. "Very trite. Usually a lover or a spouse, but not at all original, not at all inspiring. We have heard it before."

Allison chewed her lips. "I have a fare," she said. "I have to take him to his destination."

"We already have a ferryman," the four guardians whispered. "There have been countless stories about him. We have no need for another."

Allison stepped out of her car. The guardians watched, impassive, as she lit a cigarette, as she curled the smoke thoughtfully between her fingers. "Let me tell you a love story," she said.

The four guardians hummed like a jazz organ, teeth rattling in their mouths. "This is the way we love each other," they said. They had tears in their many eyes. "This is what we have been trying to say. How did you know the way we love each other? How did you tell our story for us?"

"Let me find my sister," Allison said.

"We do not believe that we should let you through," said the guardians, "but we have songs to write, now that you have helped us understand what we want to say. We will be busy. Our backs will be turned."

Allison climbed back into her taxi cab. The wolf curled up in the front seat, head tucked between its legs. "Well?" he said.

"Where to?" said Allison.

Sofia used to ride horses. The horses lived in a farm in Eniskerry, and were named Plexus Choroid, Brachiocephalic, Corpus Sterni, and Cobelli's Gland. Sofia went to class in smart trousers and a hard hat, to jump over fences and tiptoe through dance steps in a sand-floored arena. Blue ribbons decorated her wall. She loved the tame horses, so used to skittish children and the weight of the saddle, but what she really wanted was something wild, something that breathed smoke. She wanted to speed over Howth Summit and plunge down the rock face and come up frothing. The thinner she grew, the faster she rode, even when her riding instructors told her that she had to be careful, she was going to hurt herself. Sofia pared all the posters and ribbons off her bedroom wall one day while Allison watched, leaning against the doorframe. What are you doing? she asked. Sofia said, making room. Room for what? New tricks? Empty packages of pills lined up in armies? The kind of sadness that craved speed? She would not let

on. Sofia peeled herself like an orange. Too small, Sofia rattled around her bedroom in the middle of the night, tiny and tight as a marble inside her skin, in that abundance of space and bare white walls. Sofia rode faster and faster and was so reduced that she could not keep up. Corpus Sterni shied at a tall jump and Sofia did not scream. They pulled her crumpled body from where it nestled beside the stone wall. They sent her wailing off to the hospital, alive, but only barely. Breathing, but only barely.

“How did you convince them to let you through?” the wolf asked curiously.

Allison navigated her taxi cab through the gates of the underworld. “I told them a story.”

“They have heard all the stories.”

“Not this one,” Allison said.

The wolf hunched its shoulders. “War story? Trick story? Love story? Cautionary tale?”

“Love story.”

“All stories are love stories,” the wolf said. “All stories are tricks and cautionary tales. The guardians of the underworld have stood at their posts long enough to hear first-hand of Orpheus and Eurydice. You are no Ovid. You are a taxi driver.”

“Yes,” Allison said.

“You bring luggage to airports.”

“Sometimes,” she agreed.

“Well?” he said.

Allison raised her eyebrows at the wolf. “Well what?”

The wolf settled back on its great slate-grey haunches. “Are you going to tell me or not?” he said.

Allison said:

There is a boy named Andrew who runs away from home. He runs away from a hospital bed and a hollow feeling. With all the money he has saved up, he pays one month’s rent for a tiny bedsit in the city, where damp turns all his teabags into compost and rain slides in under the windows to surprise his sleeping head. The



by John Belloti, Jr.

"Let me tell you a love story," she said.

central heating dies in the middle of winter. Andrew has never had much faith in anything bigger than himself, but he learns to have faith in cold. He sleeps fitfully every night, feverish with cold, dreaming that his limbs freeze together and he is forgotten in his apartment for weeks, discovered as a glacier, turned into someone else's science experiment. The landlord tells him that this is Ireland, not the Antarctic, and to buy an electric blanket. Andrew takes to drinking whiskey from a silver flask. It tastes like a bad Christmas, but it moves the cold away from his skin and inward. He drinks his rent; drinks his shopping money; drinks the crisp fifties he pulls from an anonymous purse on Henry Street. Andrew is drunk when he breaks into the department store after midnight. He means to steal emeralds, sapphires, diamonds, three gifts for a baby king, but he doesn't. He falls in love.

Andrew has never seen anything like her. She is good meat with all the right spices, a glimpse of the sky between car windows, river water. Her name is Ellipses. Andrew walks her proudly down Grafton Street. He takes her home. "Tell me your story," he says, after he has made her comfortable in his bed, made her a cup of strong mouldy tea. Ellipses says:

I lived in the department store all my life. They starved me, I was so hungry, but I worked all day. The Household Department was my home. I made the place a cocoon for pots and pans, clothes horses, mannequins brandishing wooden spoons. I dreamed of maps and keys.

Ellipses has four round feet, black as coals. Her mouth is a rectangular slot breathing hot air. Her paint is scraped and tarnished, scars knocked into her white skin. Ellipses would never win a beauty pageant, but her heart is good and warm in Andrew's bed, and her smile is wonderful.

There are some kinds of love that feed on heat, and some kinds that grow heat like seeds grow shoots. For Ellipses, Andrew stops drinking whiskey. He gets a job in a biscuit factory and brings home chocolate-covered digestives and ginger snaps in cardboard boxes. Ellipses keeps the house neat and warm, trundling about on her four wheels, trailing her electrical cable like an unfortunate tail. She

sometimes misses the department store, the other radiators and the quiet mannequins with their slow dreams all spread out behind them like feathers, a wedding dress, fine cloth; but she loves Andrew's hot little heart, so tucked away, and his smile, and how he says she's beautiful. Andrew thinks she's beautiful. He watches her sleep in the middle of the night, listening to that sweet purr. He is cold without her.

Winter passes. They are not without their problems: cranky sometimes in the early mornings, Ellipses burns Andrew's hands as he reaches for her. Andrew sometimes gets drunk and shouts, half-crying. But they know how to make up, and they are sweeter than before. Outside in Dublin city, ice falls away. Breath stops fogging like smoke. Tentative snowdrops tilt up out of the ground. And Ellipses is afraid. Will Andrew still love her in warm weather? Or will he grow bored of her heat in his bed and wheel her back to the department store to hibernate until autumn? She can't ask him. She's too frightened. All night long she lies awake with Andrew's hand on her back, whispering her love in a gurgle, a murmur, hoping somehow it will work into Andrew's dreams. I love you, I love it here with you, we have been through worse things than summertime. One day in April Andrew comes home to find her crying. "Don't be silly!" he says, surprised. "How could I ever leave you? You kept me alive. You will keep me alive. I would do anything for you, Ellipses," he says. "You know that. I'd move to the Arctic Circle if it would make you happy, but we could move to the Sahara Desert and I'd still love you. I'd follow you to the department store if you went back. We could sleep in the basement with the cardboard boxes. I would love you anywhere. Here, Ballyfermot, Moscow, the underworld. I would follow you to the underworld," he says. "All the way, no matter how hot it was. I would love you from the inside of a forest fire."

The wolf sniffed, and said, "I've heard better."

Allison drove through the underworld. Tall trees grew in the distance at either side, and they drove through a field of cropped grass, punctuated by low stone fences connected to nothing, or

fences built up from parallel bars, hollow tubes of metal.

The first river was not a river. An empty bed stretched across the field, shallow and dry and paved with a handful of flat rocks. Allison was entirely unimpressed. She said, "I drive across this?"

"Yes," the wolf said. He stretched slowly, claws spread. "How did your sister die?" he asked.

Allison eased the car into the river bed. "She had anorexia," she said. "She was so sick. Our parents didn't know what to do. They couldn't have done anything, anyway. Her hair was falling out, you know that? But she was at her riding class and she passed out while she was jumping and when the horse bucked her off she smashed her skull against a wall. She was in a coma for days. I would have—there's nothing I could have done, either," Allison said. "Other than what I'm doing."

"What was her name?"

"Her name was Sofia," Allison said.

The second river was made of fire. It fell across the field in a tumult, roaring and panting like a lion, blurring the edges of things. "I can't drive through this," Allison said.

"You're right," the wolf agreed. "Driving a taxi cab through a river of fire? Impossible. You'd better turn your car around, drive back through the first river, drive back through the underworld, tip your cap to the guardians, and drive back up to Howth."

Allison said nothing. She rolled up all the windows, took a deep scorching breath, and drove forward. Smoke burned her eyes, and she cried, but not much, no more than a trickle. Her throat ached. Her lungs ached.

"Why are you down here?" the wolf asked.

"What?"

"Down here, in the underworld. Why did you come?"

Allison turned to look at him through the smoke. "Isn't that obvious?"

"No," the wolf said. "No, not at all. There are many things you could want out of this. You could want to die, to join your sister, and that is certainly something we can help with. You could want to turn back time, to save her before her last days. Or," the wolf said very

softly, “you could want to bring her back. Which is the most dangerous thing to want, the most difficult thing to achieve. You are sweet, but you are young, and very naive. You don’t know how things work down here. You barely know how things work at home.”

“I can figure it out,” Allison said.

The wolf sighed. “No,” he said. “You can’t.”

The third river was a real river, clear water like the answer to every thirst in the world. Fish and tiptoeing anemones, dark brown moss. The drowned lived in the river, too, and as Allison began to ford her car across, she heard the drowned sing:

Drift, drift, drift, drift,
driftwood, driftwater,
swallow the waves
as they swallow you over.
Sing, sing, sing, sing,
singsong, kingfisher,
sing to the drowned
in the bed of the river.

The drowned were thin and boneless as reeds or seaweed. Their harmony sounded like fog horns, like stones skipped over water, like drowning. The drowned had names like Fisherman, Sailor, Lover, Shelley, Buckley. Their hair drifted in and out with the tide. They had skin the colour of fish bowls when the light shone through them.

They sang:

We are the kings of the river boys,
the river bed, the river dead,
we will take your beating heart
and plant it in our flower bed.
We are the kings of the river’s chest,
the river’s best, the river’s vault,
we’ll watch you melt and melt and melt
and lick like deer at salt.

“Once,” the wolf said, ignoring the songs of the drowned, “a man

went down to the underworld to bring back his lover. He bartered with the guardians for a poem, crossed the four rivers: the river of air, the river of fire, the river of rivers, the river of earth. He discovered his lover. His name was not Orpheus. Hers was not Eurydice. He had the self-discipline not to glance over his shoulder, and so his lover followed him up to Howth, and back to their home. He was happy for a day or two. His lover, though, had come back changed. She was cold, and did not say much. She spent most of her time in the garden, planting herbs, shrubs, little trees. She came to bed with dirt clinging to her hands and feet. She refused his advances. The songs she sang were strange, and she had learned, somehow, to harmonise with herself, so she sounded like a choir singing in a minor key. She cried and cried. The man grew afraid of her. Do you know what he did in the end?"

"No," Allison whispered.

"He stabbed her with her garden shears. He sent her back to the underworld. Sometimes after that she came to decorate his dreams, with nasturtiums and rosemary." The wolf shifted in the passenger seat. "You can learn many things in the underworld," he said. "But you can only take one thing back with you."

The fourth river was the river of earth. A burial mound, a cultivated garden. Orange trees grew in forests; delicate things, like anatomical systems. This is where the dead lived. Allison saw them all, dressed in green smocks, armed with trowels and seed pouches, getting their hands dirty. She saw Sofia. Sofia had round cheeks and strong legs and ivy spiraling around her arms. She was digging busily.

The wolf laid his heavy head on Allison's knee. "You are a storyteller, working with letters. You know how these things work." He said, "You can take one thing back."

Howth village lit up the night with shop lights and streetlamps. Allison played cello music on the car stereo. Her taxi still smelled of wolf, dirt and moss, the underworld. People in the streets hailed her with a raised hand, but she ignored them all. "This is the way it happened," Allison said, to the orange tree in the passenger seat. "I

went down to the underworld and came back with you, though you are not my sister. My sister knows I love her wherever I am. Wherever she is. I will plant you in my back garden and protect you from the cold and eat your fruit. I'll plant your seeds and build a forest and live there."

The orange tree says nothing. Illuminated, brightly lit, Allison and the orange tree drive across the skeleton architecture of Dublin. They drive and drive.



What to Do with the Dead

by Claude Lalumière

At first, people had no idea what to do with their dead. If you just left them lying around, they started to stink, not to mention all the vermin they tended attract. So that option was ruled out pretty quickly.

Not everyone came up with the same solution to the problem.

*They didn't kill the
baby—they just cut
the flesh of its left
thumb and let a
trickle of blood flow
into the water.*

The People of the Islands

The Islanders, surrounded as they were by water, naturally thought of giving their dead to the ocean. They weren't sure what the Ocean God would think of that idea, so every time they dumped a corpse into his domain they appeased the god with sacred songs and the blood of an infant. They didn't kill the baby—they just cut the flesh of its left thumb and let a trickle of blood flow into the water.

Their rituals did the trick, and the Ocean God accepted the dead of the Islanders. Since the corpses were now his, he decided to put them to good use. He asked his daughters to gather the freshly dead and bring them to his workshop. It was strewn with the body parts of dead fish, which had been accumulating for ages. All this time, he'd been trying to figure out what to do with the dead fish!

So he went to work ripping bodies apart and patching them up again, only not as they were before. He mixed fish parts with human parts. Some had fish heads and human torsos. Others had fish tails but human heads. Some had flippers for feet, but human hands—and even more bizarre permutations. The Ocean God tried every

combination imaginable. The problem was: they stayed dead.

Some of the god's patchwork creations were ugly and scary-looking, but others were imbued with an ethereal beauty. One was so beautiful that Tsurseaa, the Ocean God's youngest daughter, dreamt of it every night, imagining herself kissing its smooth torso, tonguing its gills, rubbing herself against its flippers, feeling its fins dig into her flesh, running her fingers through its hair.

Tursesea had never been taught the difference between the living and the dead. One morning, unable to contain herself any longer, she kissed the beautiful patchwork creature.

And it came to life.

Tursesea was so alarmed when the beautiful creature stirred that she swam away and hid, fearing her father's wrath for her interference with his experiments.

When the Ocean God noticed the patchwork creature, he asked it how it had come to be alive.

The creature said, "Your daughter Tsurseaa gave me the kiss of life."

The Ocean God beamed with pride. "What a clever girl!" Then, addressing the creature, he said, "You are the first of the merfolk, and you shall henceforth be called by the name Tritus."

Meanwhile, Tsurseaa was hiding, or thought she was. It's impossible for water creatures to hide from the Ocean God, so he reached out and brought her into his presence. Not knowing what had transpired between the patchwork creature and her father, Tsurseaa trembled with fear.

But her father reassured her, instructing her to kiss all of his patchwork creatures.

Tursesea, relieved that her father was pleased, obeyed. But some of the creatures were hideous. In those cases, she closed her eyes and imagined she was kissing Tritus, the beautiful merman who had inspired that first kiss.

The People of the North

The Northerners had their own clever idea. Since it was so cold in their land, why not simply burn the dead? That way, they thought,

not only would they be rid of the corpses but the process would also generate some much-needed heat.

The Cold God, however, was jealous of the bodies his brother the Ocean God received from the Islanders. Maybe he could make his own creatures from corpses.

Here's what he did. First, he built a giant skeleton out of ice. He waited for the next time the Northerners tried to cremate one of their dead. When they did, he snuffed out the flame of the funeral pyre with a fierce and freezing wind, and then stole the body. He brought the corpse to where he had built the ice skeleton. Then he cut open the dead body and took out its heart. He punched the dead heart until it once more started beating. He placed the reanimated heart inside the rib cage of the ice skeleton. He removed the other innards and inserted them in their proper places within the icy frame.

Then he peeled the skin from the corpse and stretched it until it fit over the giant ice skeleton. To protect the skin, he placed a layer of sticky snow over the whole thing.

It turned out that the frost giant had a huge appetite, and that he preferred human flesh over all other meat (although he ate any animal he encountered).

This annoyed the Northerners, of course. Not only were they in danger of being killed and eaten by the frost giant, but he also consumed the animals the people themselves depended on for survival.

One giant wasn't too bad, but, if the Cold God kept this up, the Northerners would be wiped out.

So here's what they did the very next time one of them died. First, they built a decoy funeral pyre in which they burned a straw dummy rubbed in animal fat. The Cold God blew out the flame with his freezing wind and stole the dummy. Meanwhile, the Northerners cremated the real corpse, and before the god realized his mistake it was too late: the dead body had turned to ash.

To this day, the Cold God keeps trying to steal the Northerners' dead, but every time he falls for the same trick. Not the smartest of gods, that one.

The People of the East

The Easterners settled on burying the bodies of their dead in the ground. That idea made the Earth God happy. He ate up the corpses and shat out rich soil for the Easterners' crops.

That was so easy! Let's move on to the people of the West, who didn't have it quite so easy.

The People of the West

The Westerners didn't like the notion that their dead would be forever lost to them, so they invented the art of taxidermy. That way, they preserved their dead in perfect condition. They could keep them around for family meetings, weddings, religious services, and things like that. Best of all, because they were dead, they never argued or bored people with their opinions.

After a while, it got pretty crowded with dead people, but the Westerners didn't mind. The more, the merrier, they said. They were always saying things like that. Talking in aphorisms and such. They thought they were clever and funny, but really they were just boorish.

The Trickster God decided he would teach the Westerners a thing or two about being funny. So he breathed life into all the stuffed dead people. By then, there were more dead people than live people in the West, and the dead were famished. They hadn't eaten in ages. It didn't take long for them to eat up all the food. All that was left for them to eat was the living people, so that's what they ate. There was lots of screaming while that was going on.

And then there were no Westerners left. And no food either. In time, with no food to eat, the reanimated corpses wound down and just stopped moving or doing anything.

If I were you, I'd stay away from there.

The People of the South

All that talk of food! I'm starving by now. I can smell tonight's stew...mmm. Time to wrap this up.

Here in the South, we had the best solution to the problem of the dead.

We eat them. Pretty simple, hey? We chop them up, and in they go, into the day's stew. No fuss, no trouble.

No god's ever bothered us about it, so we figure it's all good.

Grandpa was big and fat. Should be quite the feast tonight.

Okay, maybe sometimes we don't wait for people to grow old and die. My sister spotted a boat near the coast today. After dinner, we go hunting.



The Spoils of Springfield

by Alex Wilson

They call us uncivilized. Decayed. Prone to violent outbursts, because apparently hunger is just another base, primal need which the Unspoiled have transcended in the uncounted hours since my own expiration. Apparently an entire industry of eating—from the farm, to the butcher, to the flash-freezing factory, to the market, to the oven, to the fork for every purpose (and for every purpose a fork) to chewing before swallowing—has replaced the somehow less practical sinking of one’s incisor into a neighbor’s unsuspecting cranium. Or perhaps the portion of my brain whose purpose is to remember such things was the first to rot.

*The world serves at
their living,
breathing pleasure.*

No great loss. Because meat is meat. And part of their infrastructure of consumption is an online service offering to dropship the uncooked brain or carrion of any number of succulent non-human beasts (packed in dry ice instead of skull, but whatever) to any Unspoiled address on the planet. The world serves at their living, breathing pleasure. They need not hunt, nor kill, nor even gnarl through skin to get to their food’s creamy center. Meat comes to them in neat, plastic packaging, with flesh pre-stripped for their convenience.

Perhaps this is the unrotten portion of my brain talking, but that sounds rather okay to me. I shall take up residence at such an address, if only to prove we, the Decayed, are not so different from the Unspoiled. I shall eat as they eat (after one last meal in which I’ll eat *as we eat* the previous residents of said address).

I shall wear their Unspoiled skin, and not chew it—no matter how delectable it smells, or how soft it feels against my gums—for I have much more restraint than they give me credit

for. And where is it written that one must be forever averse to change, just because he no longer breathes, or has a soul, or has that portion of the brain which tells it not to bite everyone at every opportunity?

Still. Gummy bracelets? *This* is what's become of the land of the living? This malleable rubber which teases like leather between the teeth but leaks in the throat like chemicals? One would never see a *Decayed* child with such pastels, warning prey of her presence in the dark. Oh, that's right. Unspoiled children need not hunt for their own food. It comes to them wrapped in plastic and teeming with corn syrup. How silly of me to forget.

But Unspoiled children *do* hunt. This much I learn in my first hour among them. They just ring the doorbell first.

I know now that I should not have answered the door so soon after getting dressed. But this is what they do. This is how they live. By choosing to take residence among them, I have eschewed the *chewing of flesh* for the more civilized *answering of door*. These are the expectations the Unspoiled have for one another, and I shall make every effort to abide by them.

But it would be nice to know in advance the etiquette involved when their gummy bracelets tear through my screen door uninvited.

The pastels decorate a pubescent Unspoiled forearm. Silly me, I was under the impression that doors offered some sort of suburban protection, but here the screen frays at but the hint of her fist. It fails even to slow her punchpath upwards and into my Unspoiled nose, an appendage I'd hoped would seem less foreign to my attacker than it does to me. She better not have knocked it out of whack; it took long enough to center on my face.

I'm not sure now what the Unspoiled child would have done had I not opened the door to receive her violent greeting. Entered the house uninvited? Seen the entrails of the Unspoiled corpses upstairs, the prettiest of whose skin I now wore as my own? Up until this moment, I rather appreciated how so many Unspoiled doors in the suburbs remained unlocked. Yet their xenophobia and desire to build a wall around them for safety has a sudden appeal to

me that I did not suspect. The reader should note how quickly my perspective has widened in the first mere minutes of this experiment.

I grasp for the doorframe to steady myself, and, in doing so, accidentally slice the tender flesh of my palm on the severed, mesh-metal screen.

I fall forward. I feel another blow to the face, this one from the foyer carpet, which does little to cushion the hardwood beneath. And the carpet itself is not as soft as it looks. The Unspoiled don't fall down so much as this, I suppose. I shall strive to do better. Perhaps this is why I've been punched in the first place. Perhaps this is punishment for conduct unbecoming an Unspoiled.

I look up to see this Unspoiled girl in pigtails—she'd introduced herself as “Sally from across the street”—rewrapping a metal chain around her knuckles. I had not noticed this chain before, with all the rubbery-looking jewelry and faux Goth ink on her delicious forearms.

She opens the now-useless screen door and steps into the house—my house, though I've only lived here an hour. I had not the chance to grow attached to the screen door. It was torn before I knew it as my own. I feel we might have made great friends, it and I, and now I shall never know.

“Now, now, Mrs. Martin,” Sally says, all business. “Every year you give three hundred dollars to the Minuteman Middle School Booster Club. All you've gotta do *this year* is give me *five* hundred dollars, and you never have to pay again. Everybody wins.”

I try to stay focused on what I know. Apparently my name is “Mrs. Martin,” and this Unspoiled child isn't told “No” often enough. But the reader should note *I am* passing. When I eat Mrs. Martin's brains tonight, it shall be as part of a dinner celebrating this triumph, and not because I'm digressing to the Decayed self I've all but put behind me.

“And how is that better for the Unsp... for this *booster club* if I never donate again?” I ask Sally. Oh yes, we can speak. A common misconception. We can also stand on two feet for hours at a time, and refrain from eating our young on Fridays (I say “can”; Decayed life

does afford certain freedoms). Yet so long as the media chooses to portray us as monsters, I fear we shall never earn the right to vote. Or to eat the media.

I roll over onto my back. It burns my Unspoiled cheek, to rub against the carpet. I'm probably bleeding. I stick my tongue out and lick the side of my mouth, just in case. I taste nothing but the salt on my skin. Which is quite good, but not as satisfying as an iron-tinged speck of blood. Ah well.

"Not. My. Problem," Sally says. She scrunches the flesh of her face in disapproval. She grinds the heel of her sneaker into my hand. "I'll be in high school next year. Duh."

I wonder whether *I* was ever so young, so Unspoiled. There are bits and pieces of the old brain left, though I'd rather not admit that to my colleagues, if it's all the same the reader.

I do remember punching a great many things before my expiration. It's a completely different set of motor-skills, animating one's dead muscles versus moving living tissue by nerve endings and the flow of oxygen in the blood, but you can't have everything. Someone should tell that to Sally.

"I don't know where my checkbook is," I say. I bend my legs so both feet are flat on the carpet. "Come back in an hour?"

"Lick my balls," Sally says. "You want me to leave so you can give some other cow my commission?"

Sally makes as if to kick me in the neck, but I'm ready for her this time. I catch her foot with my cut hand, and then scramble to get off the floor. Somehow she keeps her balance. She kicks me in the face with her other foot. God knows where the Unspoiled find their momentum. I lose my grip—along with all semblance of control—and hit the back of my head on the floor. I hurt, which for some reason bothers me more as an Unspoiled than it ever did as a Decayed. I hope Mrs. Martin's skin doesn't bruise easily. I doubt I'd fit in Sally's.

"That's not being a friend-maker," she says. She sighs as if collecting herself, and then daintily steps over me into what I figure is the immaculate kitchen of one Mrs. Martin. "Let's see if we can't find that checkbook, shall we?"

There's banging and rattling in the kitchen. By the time I get back on my feet and catch up with Sally, the contents of about every drawer and cupboard are poured onto the lime-green linoleum.

The minutiae of the mess has mostly ascetic value. Unpronounceable spices. Salt and pepper shakers sculpted to resemble an Unspoiled erection and vulva. Cutlery so revolutionary that there's no practical way to hold it with human hands. It'd be a waste of time to try and fence this crap to other Decayed. Before I decided to settle, I rarely bothered with Unspoiled kitchens beyond the food pantry and wine racks and chefs. And if it even needs be said, I was usually more discreet than this Unspoiled child has been.

So Sally's sitting all civilized at the table. She's flipping through the pages of a checkbook. Improvisation is key. I act like I'm Mrs. Martin, and hellspawn brats rummage through my shit every day. For all I know that's how these people live anyway. What else would one do with so much free time?

"You're so busted," she says.

"Oh yeah?" I say. I swallow hard. I pretend to rub my lower back.

"Found your checkbook," she says.

"Thanks," I say. I drop my hands casually to my sides. "Been looking for that."

"What say we make it an even thousand?" She flicks the checkbook across the table, motions for me to sit. "For my trouble."

I shrug in defeat, sit down opposite the Unspoiled, and fill out the silly little check. No problem. I've seen it done on television. (Yes, we watch television, too, dear prejudiced reader. Another benefit of not being afraid of brain rot.) A scribble here, some circles there. I note that my first name is Barbara.

"The recipient?" I ask.

"Me," Sally says.

Damn. "Recipient" must not be the correct Unspoiled word. I try to rephrase and shrug it off as a simple slip of the tongue. Mmm. Tongue. I must focus.

"Of course," I say. "But the check should be made out to whom?"

“Umm, Booster Club?” she says, like I’m the asshole.

“Right.” I sign and tear off the check. I don’t feel like an asshole. I don’t feel like a Barbara either, for that matter. I’m a stranger in my own skin. Which is quite apt, actually.

Sally smiles as she takes the check. She folds and fastens it to her clipboard. “Thank you, Mrs. Martin. With your help, the girls’ soccer team will get the new uniforms they need this year.”

“Sure,” I say. “Anything for the kids.”

“Got any gum?”

I look at the junk-littered floor. “You’d know better than I would,” I say.

“Don’t get cute,” she says.

I walk Sally back to the foyer, noting with sorrow how the pull of her pigtails reveal a quite biteable nape of neck. But there will be other visitors. No need to be greedy. I have fresh brains upstairs, after all.

But when I open what’s left of the screen door, there’s this second Unspoiled girl standing there. She looks even less forgiving than Sally did before she popped me one. She has fewer fake tattoos as well, which I appreciate because in my experience they tend to taste like chalk.

“Sally, you crackbaby!” the new kid screams, thankfully not at me. “Martin isn’t even on your list!” She charges through the open door and grabs Sally by the throat.

“Too late, reprobate!” Sally yells back. She jams the corner of her clipboard into this other Unspoiled’s left eye. “That vacation’s mine!”

“Ow, don’t be such a proletariat!”

I look out the door. Can’t believe a neighbor hasn’t called the cops yet. It’s not that I don’t appreciate how they’ve come to my door to kill themselves for my entertainment and dinner. I would just prefer they do it quietly.

“Maybe you girls could take this outside?” I suggest.

The new girl looks up and releases her hold on Sally’s neck. “Hey, where’s Mrs. Martin?”

Sally lets up, too, but remains stiff, eyes narrow.

Where's Mrs. Martin? Oh dear. Again, I reach around to scratch my lower back. There were two women upstairs. Don't tell me I'm wearing the maid's skin instead of Mrs. Martin's. She was so much prettier than the other one.

"I'm Barbara's sister," I say. But though the corpses did look similar, so does Sally and this new girl. Don't judge me, dear reader. I challenge anyone to tell the difference between Unspoiled.

"In-law," I continue. "Stepsister, actually. In-law." I wince. The Unspoiled do divorce in the suburbs, don't they? They do it all the time on television, anyway.

Sally looks from me to the clipboard and then back again. "You're who? Was that even *your* checkbook?" She steps forward. "You wrote me a fraudulent check for a thousand bucks? That's like a federal thing."

The new girl punches Sally in the upper back, but she glares at me as though I was her intended. "You gave her a thousand dollars? *I'm* your neighbor, you degenerate!"

I blink at Sally. "I... thought you said you lived across the street."

Sally rolls her eyes. "Whatever, asshole."

"Okay, that's enough." I pull the revolver out of the back of my pants. Mrs. Martin pulled it on me earlier. A weapon of elegance, apparently, though it does create an extra step in the hunting process. It's so unlike a bite, where the kill and the consumption are one fluid act. But it's what these people use. "Why don't you two discuss this outside, okay?"

The revolver is cold in my hand. Not quite sure I'm pointing the correct end of it at the girls.

"Hey, you shut the hell up!" The new girl pulls Sally's pigtail back with her right hand and snatches the gun from me with her left. I back up, hands waving, as the new girl points the gun at Sally sideways. "Give me the fucking check."

"Maybe you should get a job, you want it so bad," Sally says.

"You wish I needed it as much as you do!"

I back out slowly into the kitchen, trying not to trip over kitchen utensils I never got the chance to identify. The Unspoiled seem to have forgotten me. I appreciate that.

As I slip out the back door, I hear a gunshot. Easy living, my decomposing ass. I don't care if they *do* leave the doors unlocked in the suburbs.

My colleagues among the Decayed do not listen with interest to the results of my experiment, though they do demonstrate a great fondness for my Unspoiled coat of skin.

They help me out of it with such enthusiasm that they cannot hear my appreciation under the sounds of their teeth tearing into the second, surprising layer of flesh underneath.

It's good to be among those who understand you.



Counting Down to the End of the Universe

by Sara Genge

Tren is glad his hands are still good enough to build a clockwork bird. He looks at the table; he has everything he needs. The feathers are sharp, golden and perfect. The beak is finished and shines on the cloth.

A head blocks the light from the mouth of the cave and casts a shadow on the delicate springs he's working on. He looks up, knowing even before he shifts his gaze that it's his daughter. At two hundred, Lia is relatively young as immortals go, and the only one of them who has remained mobile.

The sun shines through the wisps of Lia's hair, surrounding her head in a not-so-saintly corona. Her lips are pursed, and Tren cannot remember a time when they weren't. Her eyes droop at the corners and the small tumor on her cheek grows larger with each month that passes.

Still, Lia is relatively unscarred. She is able of body and mind. She shouldn't hate him so much.

"I've come to clean Mother," she says.

Tren nods. Clara hasn't been able to walk since the stroke and she hasn't spoken since the pack of wolves took her three months ago. Lia probably blames Tren for that, too.

Tren returns to his clockwork but he cannot concentrate with the sound of Lia working in the background. His wife moans when Lia pushes her off the dirty mattress. The smell of urine and

*Her eyes droop at
the corners and the
small tumor on her
cheek grows larger
with each month
that passes.*

decay punches Tren in the gut. He doesn't know why, but the smell of a woman rotting is different than that of a man. Women are more acidic, somehow, and the wafts that rise from Clara's living corpse are pungent and sharp and remind him of the color green. Tren has learned to ignore the mellow alkali scent of his own rotting leg.

Immortality was never impossible. All it took was stubbornness and vast quantities of biotech. He designed the parameters himself. Regeneration had to be infinite, but slow to avoid creating even more tumors. Consciousness had to be spread throughout the body, so that decapitation wouldn't be fatal—but what use are old memories? Tren turns back to his work.

He has worked at this table so long that microscopic bits of him are spread all over its surface. His cells don't die, but they occasionally fall off. Thanks to his distributed consciousness, he can still feel them, strewn around the world with him at the center. He spends so much time at this table that he fears it will soon become a part of him, that it will feel no different than his arm or his leg.

Without looking, he can already tell where each clockwork piece lies. He wonders how much he relies on his blurry eyesight; maybe he's finally gone blind and is living by touch but doesn't know it.

Tren picks up a wire, twists it until it breaks, and smiles. Brittle, that's how he likes it—transient. Tren stifles the urge to look at his wife or feel his own legs for the metastatic nodules that he knows he'll find there.

He'd never meant to apply the immortality technology to himself and he doesn't plan on repeating the mistake.

He looks past the glare of sunlight and onto a blur of green. He sighs. It must be beautiful out there, but he wouldn't know it. He's too decayed to walk to the entrance of the cave.

Without death, there's only time and a series of accidents and illnesses that should be deadly, but aren't. There's only infinite convalescence, slow recuperation that never outpaces time.

"I'm done," Lia says. Clara sighs.

"One less day until the end of the universe," Tren mutters.

Lia nods. For all her youth, she too, wishes for the end.

She doesn't say it, but Tren knows she blames him for fathering her. How could she not? She's a mistake, an error in judgment made long after Tren should have known better.

"How is your mother?"

"Bitten!" and Lia laughs.

Tren smiles. Yes, the wolves.

The clockwork bird will be a gift to his wife. He strokes the springs into place, biting the tip of each metal feather until it is sharp, long, and straight. Tren knows that if he holds this bird long enough, the skin on his hands will grow over the metal skeleton. When the bird's completely covered, he could bite at the flesh linking them and set the bird free, to be Tren's eyes in the green blur beyond the cave.

He's always wanted to fly and the idea of being pain-free, if only in a small portion of his being, is tempting. But he knows better. Any part of his flesh will suffer accidents sooner or later. Anything made from his flesh will bring him pain in the end.

He puts the bird away. The bird will be clockwork, and only clockwork.

At night, Lia lights an oil lamp before slipping away. The bird chirps in Tren's hand and Tren wants to become the bird so much that it hurts more than any of his current wounds. But he resists. This is a gift for his wife.

He ambles to her sleeping place, analyzing the rattle in his lungs and the pain in his leg with the intellectual curiosity of an expert. He wonders whether the gangrene has spread to the bone, whether the tumors are grazing on his dark musty brain.

Tren places himself in front of his wife. The half of her face that the wolves took is still missing, and it won't regenerate very fast. Her right eye is good, though, and she slowly bats the lid every few seconds, reminding Tren that she's alive. He knows that she can still feel her left eye out there somewhere, lost. He can imagine the pain of each cell being torn away from its brethren, dissolved into its constituent elements, screaming, voiceless, in the dark.

Tren is glad his wife no longer speaks.

The bird's wings are clipped so it can't escape. It chirps and whirs. He can hear the gears revolving and hopes his wife will too. She

follows the animal with her eye, and the bird hops away from his hand to inspect the various juices coming from Clara's mutilated face. Mucus seeps from her open sinuses, brain liquid where the skull was cracked and, of course, blood. Always so much blood.

She gives him a questioning look and he beckons the bird back into his hand.

He raises his eyebrows.

She nods.

He snaps the bird's neck and feels the gears unravel. It's well and truly dead.

His wife's half-mouth twitches into a smile and she nods her head. Tren sits by her side until she falls asleep.

"One less day till the end of the universe," he whispers and crawls to his sleeping place. Pain creeps into his dreams, like it always does, but he doesn't hear his wife moan tonight and that's all that matters.

Tomorrow, he will make her a ferret. It won't be hard to make it sniffle and move, but he wants it to be warm, too. He wants it to play catch-the-tail in the crook of Clara's arm, nestle against her gashed chest, press its paws to what's left of her face.

The ferret will be clockwork. Only clockwork. It will live for a while and then it will die. It will give Clara hope of a death after life.



Contributors

Blue Joe — **Stephanie Burgis** is a Croatian-American author who lives in Yorkshire, England, with her husband, Patrick Samphire, and their crazy-sweet border collie, Maya. Her short fiction has been published in several magazines and anthologies, including *Strange Horizons* and *Aeon*, and her YA historical fantasy trilogy will be published by Atheneum Books in 2010, 2011, and 2012. Please visit www.stephanieburgis.com.



The Bride Price — **Mr. Crawford** lives in an appropriately ancient and drafty house in Sacramento, California, with his wife and six nearly normal cats. He spends his days bringing websites to life in the dusty laboratories of UC Davis. More information about him, including other published stories, can be found at www.mossroot.com.



River Water — **Becca De La Rosa** lives in Dublin, Ireland, in a house without central heating. Her work has previously appeared in *The Best of Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Strange Horizons*, and the *Fantasy Magazine Anthology*, among other places.



Counting Down to the End of the Universe — In addition to working all-night shifts as a doctor in Madrid, **Sara Genge** writes speculative fiction for the sleepless mind. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Transcriptase.org*, *Cosmos Magazine*, *Apex Digest*, and others, including translations into Greek, Czech, Hebrew, and Spanish.





What to Do with the Dead — **Claude Lalumière's** fiction appears in *Year's Best Fantasy 6*, *Year's Best SF 12*, several volumes of *The Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica*, *Interzone*, *SciFiction*, *On Spec*, *Electric Velocipede*, and others. His stories have been translated into French, Italian, and Polish. Claude's eighth book is *Tesseract Twelve* (Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing, 2008). *Objects of Worship*, the first collection of his own fiction, will be released in summer 2009 from ChiZine Publications. He's not dead yet.



Jaguar Woman — **Silvia Moreno-Garcia** hails from Mexico and lives in Vancouver with her husband, her son and two very naughty cats. She writes fantasy and magic realism. Her stories have been published in *Fantasy Magazine* and *Reflection's Edge*. This is her second story to appear in *Shimmer*.



One for Sorrow — **Shweta Narayan** is a cultural crazy-quilt; she's lived in six countries on three continents, and read and loved folk tales and fables in all of them. The Artificer's story here is based on a South Indian epic (and the original is quite a bit stranger).

Shweta has work in places like *Shimmer(!)*, *Coyote Wild*, and the *Journal of Mythic Arts*, and forthcoming in *Goblin Fruit* and the *Beastly Bride* anthology. She was the Octavia Butler Memorial Scholarship recipient at the Clarion workshop in 2007.



The Carnivale of Abandoned Tales — **Caitlyn Paxson** is a writer, folklorist, and musician. She has a degree in writing and cultural history from Marlboro College, and has pursued studies in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and France. She currently resides in Ottawa, where she is the artistic director of a storytelling series at the National Arts Center of Canada and is working on her first novel.

Interview with Cory Doctorow — **Jen West** is a freelance writer in constant search for the next interesting character or story. Her interviews appear in *Shimmer*, the Nebula Awards web site and Fairwood Press's interview collection, *Human Visions*. She has degrees in Journalism and French from the University of Oregon. She lives with her writer husband, Ken Scholes in St. Helens, OR.



Spoils of Springfield — **Alex Wilson** is a writer, actor, and *Shimmer* subscriber in Carrboro, North Carolina. Fiction, comics, and poetry appear in *Asimov's*, *Weird Tales*, *The Rambler*, *The Florida Review*, and *LCRW*. He runs *Telltale Weekly* and the writer wiki *Guidevines*. www.alexwilson.com



The Fox and the King's Beard — **Jessica Paige Wick** lives near where *Firefly* filmed. This is coincidence. She co-edits the poetry 'zine *Goblin Fruit* with Amal El-Mohtar and collects masks. She is not a Tolkien fan, preferring Dunsany. Her work appears in *Cabinet Des Fees*, *Mythic Delirium* and *Jabberwocky*.



A Painter, a Sheep, and a Boa Constrictor — **Nir Yaniv** is an Israeli writer, editor, and musician. His stories appear in several languages, his story collection, *One Hell of a Writer*, came out in 2006, and his collaboration with Lavie Tidhar, *The Tel Aviv Dossier*, will be published by the Chizine Publications (Canada) in 2009. Nir's home site, including stories, articles, and free music: www.nyfiction.org



Firefly Igloo — **Caroline M. Yoachim** is a writer and photographer who lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband, Peter. She is a graduate of the 2006 Clarion West Writers Workshop, and her fiction has appeared in *Fantasy Magazine*. For more about Caroline, visit carolineyoachim.com



Artists & Illustrations



Cover: *The Ectoplasm of Miss Svengali As Produced by Madam Phantasm Illusionista*—**Carrie Ann Baade's** work is featured in *Metamorphosis*, a survey of top, contemporary Surrealists. In 2005, she received a N.E.A. Fellowship. Baade received her B.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and her Masters from the University of Delaware. In 2009, solo shows are at Billy Shire Fine Art in Los Angeles, Rosenfeld Gallery in Philadelphia. Carrie is currently an Assistant Professor at Florida State University.

p. 5: *Blue Joe*—**Tom Marcello**

p. 17: *Black Raven Blue*—**Sean Stone**

p. 33: *One for Sorrow*—**Chris Howard** is a novelist, short story writer, and painter. He works in watercolors, ink, and digital sometimes mixing them. His first novel *Seaborn* came out in July 2008.



p. 53: *Laugh of the Tricksters*—An award-winning artist, illustrator, and teacher in New York City, **Adam Doyle** grew up in Boston and lived in Los Angeles and Rome. With degrees from The Rhode Island School of Design and The School of Visual Arts, his work appears in galleries, books, magazines, kid's books, comics, liquor labels, newspapers, theater ads, and online. Visit www.adamsdoyle.com.



p. 71: *Orange Girl*—**John Bellotti Jr.** received a B.F.A. from the Fashion Institute of Technology. He has illustrated independent comics and appears in the Japanese SF magazine, *g-fan*. He also illustrated and animated the online series, *Stuperheroes* (www.stuperhero.com). John lives in New York and works as a freelance set painter.



Shimmery Staff

Beth Wodzinski's (Editor-in-chief) fiction appears in *Flash Fiction Online*, *Apex Digest*, and *Fictitious Force*. She tests software and has a fondness for reality TV.

E. Catherine Tobler (Editor) climbed mountains in a bright yellow coat, with shoes that made her feel like a clown. She endured. Writing is not that much different.

Catherine Knutsson (Associate Editor), a graduate of the Royal Conservatory of Music, has work in *DKA*, *Quantum Muse*, and *Forgotten Worlds*.

Mary Robinette Kowal (Art Director) is a puppeteer and award-winning designer. She received the 2008 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer.

Cheryl Walton (Copy Editor) is a marketing and technical writer; she writes, owns a pair of leather jeans and two poodles, and she will work for margaritas.

Anne Zanoni (Copy Editor) prefers to be behind the scenes, or using an SCA rapier. Her cat complains when she "types too much." She helps run the Sanctuary Press Writing Workshop. Visit www.azanoni.blogspot.com

Sunil Sebastian (Editorial Assistant) is a technology consultant who can't explain his job but is good at it. He writes hoping to be called "eccentric" instead of "crazy."

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by Carrie Ann Baade

With fiction by

Stephanie Burgis
Shweta Narayan
Nir Yaniv

Richard S. Crawford
Silvia Moreno-Garcia
Caroline M. Yoachim
Jessica Paige Wick

Becca De La Rosa
Claude Lalumière
Alex Wilson
Sara Genge