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ISSUE 1 CONTENTS

Notes From the Editor

The Deadline by Brian K. Lowe

Presently Me by Krystal Claxton

How People Died When the World Was New by Natalia Theodoridou

Aural Love by L.L. Madrid

Do Not Go Gentle by Wendy Nickel

She Glitters in the Dark by Matt Dovey

Bystanding by Jonathan Laidlow

Moon Man 13 by Brenda Kalt

Memoirs of a One-Time Dragon-Slayer's Apprentice by George
Nikolopoulos

From Now Until Infinity by Karen Bovenmyer

Phoenix, Fallen by Rebecca Birch

Doorkeeper by Joanna Michal Hoyt

Just Another Night on Telegraph by Karl Dandenell

A Right Angle to Here and Now by Floris M. Kleijne

A Mind Of Its Own by Jeff Soesbe

Our Weight on Other Worlds by Beth Goder

NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy! This is finally happening and I am practically jumping out of my chair to get this issue out to everyone. Publishing is no easy task, and I have learned a lot since publishing my first magazine. I took the knowledge and lessons learned with me to create my first professional publication, *Factor Four Magazine*.

Why flash fiction? I wanted to create a magazine that presented bite size fiction. Fiction you could read while on a short bus trip, on your 10 minute break at work, or while waiting for your kids to get out of school. I wanted strong and fulfilling stories to fill those small gaps in our busy lives.

But also, flash fiction is an art form all itself. Telling a story is such a low word count is hard to do, but many authors are mastering the craft. Another magazine buying these stories only gives more avenues for the authors to reach a broader audience.

Our issues will be published quarterly, and our next issue is already filling up with some great stories. You can subscribe to our issues in print, online, and for eReaders. Or, individual issues can always be purchased through a retail partner of ours.

If you enjoy this magazine, and I am sure you will, please tell a friend. To find our more, please visit us online: www.factorfourmag.com

Thank you to the authors out there, and not just those included in this issue, for your precious works of art. Keep writing, the world needs a good story.

Happy Reading,

Richard Flores IV

THE DEADLINE

By Brian K. Lowe

One lifetime to experience what it meant to be human. That was all Allie had planned for.

The flaw in her plan was that it had worked.

"Penny for your thoughts, my love?"

Smiling at the touch of David's hand sliding across her shoulder, Allie grasped his fingertips without a conscious thought. Love for him flooded through her, followed by the fear.

"Oh, I'm just sitting here enjoying the summer evening," she replied. "I was going to come in soon."

She relaxed as David began to massage her shoulders. "I was watching you from inside. You were looking at the stars."

"Better the stars than the Cassems' living room. Their TV is so big I can see their shows without my glasses."

"You've been looking up at the sky a lot the last few years. You never seemed interested in astronomy before." David's hands stopped, keeping the pressure on. "You started watching *me* after the cancer, like you thought I might break. Then you started looking at the stars. I thought maybe you were depressed. But the look in your eyes... You're not depressed. You're lonely."

"Lonely?" She twisted her head around to try to look at him. "Lonely for what?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine." He sighed. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Allie, we've been married for 57 years. We don't have any secrets."

He knew. But he *couldn't* know!

David sat next to her, taking her face in his hands. "You're the most wonderful wife in the world. You've made me very happy. *I love you.*"

She felt a tear roll down her left cheek until it met his hand. "I love you, too."

"I know you do, sweetheart, I know. But nothing lasts forever." He gave her a wry smile. "Well, maybe *you* do."

She matched his smile. She had underestimated humans—or more likely she had simply underestimated *him*. An immense weight she hadn't even known she was carrying for almost 60 years fell from her shoulders.

"No, not forever. Just a very long time." She squeezed his fingers.

"What are you?" he asked. "Really?"

He'll never be able to look at me the same way again. But he still wants to know.

"First," she said clearly, "I'm your wife." She had to pause to gather the strength to speak the words. No one else had ever guessed her secret. "Second... a very *distant* second... there's a planet about fifty thousand light-years from here. A little more than two thousand years ago, there was a scientist. She was trying to harness a wormhole, create unlimited free power. The idea was brilliant, but she was an idiot. The experiment went completely wrong, her orbital lab was sucked into the wormhole, and when she came out the other side... she was me. And I'm...not human." Allie sighed. "There's so much to see... I've been all over the galaxy. But I got lonely, and I followed some radio signals to Earth, and I decided to stick around a while, remember what it was to be a *person*. I made myself a promise that while I was human, I would be *human*. No special powers, nothing. I even made myself forget who I really was. And then I met you."

"But you broke your promise to yourself when you cured my cancer."

"No, that—that was after my deadline. Before that I couldn't have done it."

"Your deadline?"

"Uh-huh. When I came here, I gave myself 75 years. To be human, like I said. And I really was. Then the deadline passed, and I was myself again, but..."

"I had cancer," he finished for her. "And you couldn't leave. So you fixed me."

She nodded.

"And you'd go on doing it."

"Yes. Because I don't want to lose you."

"What about *that*?" He gestured at the sky. "You can't have that and me, too, can you?"

"No."

"But this isn't enough for you. You need to go back."

"Yes..."

David leaned forward and put his head on her shoulder. "Allie?"

"Yes?"

"If you wanted to, could you erase my memories of you? So I won't miss you when you're gone?"

She hesitated, though she knew she owed him the answer. "Yes."

"Please don't."

PRESENTLY ME

By Krystal Claxton

Future-Me was being a bitch again.

"And what did you accomplish?" She stared at the ceiling from her spot on the tile floor, enveloped in a downy comforter.

I didn't stop pacing around the white, empty space. "Well, you just said we're not late for work anymore."

Future-Me's eyes were bloodshot. "Being told not to come back to work is *not* the same thing as being punctual."

"Look, did Jack propose or not?" I asked.

She took a long-suffering sigh, as though the burden of calling up the words to answer the question was too great for her to carry. Her voice was soft and broken. "Not."

My heart sank, but it didn't slow me down. I had all the time in the world. I hopped over Future-Me's nest of potato chips and beef jerky wrappers, striding to the door that would take me back into the past.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to fix this. I'll be back in no time."

"You can't." Her voice was hollow, blank.

I glanced back, my hand twisting the doorknob, my weight shifting into the door. Tears trickled into Future-Me's hair, but I was already gone.

~

There's a reason I didn't like the other me. The Past-Me. A reason Jack didn't want her, a reason her boss had forced a leave of absence, a reason her sister, Tori, hadn't called in eighteen months. Past-Me was worthless.

An instant after she'd fled through the right-side doorway, she appeared in the left-side doorway, striding in with the kind of confidence one finds in lemming migrations. A wide smile split her face, revealing yellowed, crooked teeth. I pressed my lips tight together. Ours wasn't a smile I'd force on the world.

"How about now?" She demanded.

I pulled the blanket over my head and squeezed the pill bottle to my chest—the same bottle I knew was in Past-Me's pocket. She wasn't taking it though, since the transition to the medicine had given her suicidal thoughts. I could've started taking the meds again, but... Well, it's one thing to understand that you're a waste, it's another to want to end.

My blanket flew away, bright lights and cold air flooded in. Past-Me stood overhead, blanket in hand. "Answer me!"

I rubbed my hand over my face to hide tears. "What was the question?"

"How do things turn out with Jack *now*?"

"After you hack into his student account, withdraw him from all of his classes, and sell his record collection to pay for a two month vacation in

Japan?"

Her eyes sparkled. She hedged forward. She thought this was romantic, couldn't comprehend how insa—

"Well?" Past-Me asked.

"He dumped us."

Confusion creased Past-Me's features. "What? Why?"

A million explanations boiled up in my throat, but the only one I could commit to sound was: "Because that's a fucking crazy thing to do you stupid bitch."

I wish my voice hadn't come out so squeaky. I wish I hadn't used the C-word. It didn't matter because she was already gone.

~

Future-Me hadn't bothered to collect her stupid blanket after I left. Instead she had opted for outright weeping. I rolled my eyes as I stepped through the door.

"So?" I asked. I had it perfect now. Definitely going to fix everything. Brilliant really.

"Tori files a restraining order once she finds that you broke into her house and crashed her car into the pool," Future-Me answered between sobs.

"A restraining order?" For an instant I was speechless. My sister was supposed to be relieved when I turned up safe after the crash! She should loan me the money to replace Jack's collection! "What the hell kind of sister is she?"

~

"And now?" Past-Me asked, slamming the door.

I shook my head.

"Why can't I make this work?" She sank to the floor next to me.

I could see she was starting to crash. Soon she wouldn't be Past-Me anymore. This was our chance. I was too far under to drag myself back out, but she still had the energy to act and was right on the cusp of reasonableness. "Take the pills."

"What?"

"You want to fix your future?" I handed Past-Me the pill bottle I held. The very same she had in her pocket. "I didn't take the meds. Take them *and* responsibility for your mistakes."

She shook her head, her relentless optimism breaking way for reality. "I can't."

I nodded.

I could see the thousands of sins register in her mind, stacking up like a wall, cutting her off from her ability to act. To save herself. In a moment she would be me. "No, you probably can't. But the doctor said that *if* we can get past the transition, the suicidal thoughts will stop. That we will level out. Become someone..." *Useful? Worthwhile? Sane?* I couldn't say. I didn't know.

Never-Will-Be-Me accepts the bottle. Twists off the lid. Swallows a dose. She exits through the right door and the room is empty.

HOW PEOPLE DIED WHEN THE WORLD WAS NEW

By Natalia Theodoridou

To understand the places you'll see and the people you'll meet on your journey, traveller, you need to know this:

When the world was still new, there was no death among humans. But when people became too many for a place to carry, or the food, the water, and the wool too scarce, or the pain too great, or the time too slow, a solution had to be found. And so, in the great wide world with its great wide seas, people found all sorts of ways to stop living.

The people of the Endless Plains in the East, where the grass grows green for three parts of the year and turns to ash in the fourth, gathered at the edge of their settlements once every year. They brought chairs from their homes and arranged them out onto the plains just before dusk, one chair for each person who had grown too old, or too tired, or too sad from all this living. And each one took a seat, and they all sat in front of their people, and the people shared their goodbyes and farewells, and smiled and cried and waved and said some words. And when the first stars came out, those who were to go on living returned home, and those who were to die stayed in their chairs, frightened, but eager for what would come next. In the morning, the living returned to the plains and carried the empty chairs back to their homes. So, traveller, remember: in the Endless Plains in the East, always be the last one to sit, and only do so with reverence.

The people of the Wide Seas in the South, where the weather is always cold and the food is hard to come by, lived until they could no longer support themselves and their loved ones, either in kind or in wisdom. When that day came, and it could come early or it could come late, they got up with the first light of the morning, when everyone else was asleep. They tiptoed out of their homes, quietly, barely breathing, so that no one could hear them, because if they did they would no doubt try to stop them, and went to the back room of the house where each had stored their death raft. The death raft was the first thing all the people of the Wide Seas in the South learned how to make when they were children, and it was their most prized possession—for they knew that one day it would be their only possession in the world. So when the time came, they carried their rafts to shore, pushed them into the water and climbed on. They took no food and no water and they left their clothes behind in a little pile on the beach. With time, they wasted away, and they became so thin that their bodies were now nothing but bones and ligaments as fine as threads. This is why, I'm sure you know as all travellers know well, the Wide Seas in the South are so crowded with rafts that drift forever, aimlessly, filled with the most restless of bones.

The forest people of the North were not as quick to accept such ends and seemed to never tire of living, and so the North became the most overcrowded place in the world until the wise people of the tribes came together and decided what was a good amount of years for one to live. When people reached that age, no matter whether they were still well or not, or whether they were loved or hated by those around them, they were tied up and put face-down into coffins that were then nailed shut with iron and lowered into the ground. Once every ten years, the living used to let the dead out of their graves to roam the world as they once did. They still do this, the forest people of the North—but the dead have grown tired, and they don't always come out any more.

The people of the Great Lakes in the West were fortunate enough, because their land was kind and abundant, and so they could choose to leave life whenever they wanted. But it was not unusual to see young people electing to end their living; passions, they say, ran high in the West, because days were much too long, and nights much too short. And so, every time someone wished to die, they went to the shore of their favourite lake and found a heavy rock to tie around their right foot. They paid the ferryman to take them to the deepest part of the lake; the price is uncertain and somewhat contested—some say it was a gold coin, some a piece of cloth worn against the skin, others a lock of hair. And, once there, they stood up on the boat and jumped into the water together with their rock. This is why, if you go diving in the Great Lakes in the West, you will see all these people floating near the bottom, boys and girls and others, young and old and middle-aged. They will be waving serenely in the wet half-dark, free at last, you might think, of the joys of days and the cruelty of nights. And then, for a brief moment, you might wish you too were so.

If only, traveller, the world were still new.

AURAL LOVE

By L.L. Madrid

At the audiologist office, Warren Nettlebaum stuffs his pockets with complimentary Werther's as his daughter fills out a tidy stack of forms. He wishes he didn't need the help, but his once elegant cursive vanished years ago leaving behind a weaving of serrated lines. Now his trembling fingers battle to strip the gold foil from a caramel confection. Sighing, he manages to slide the piece into his mouth. Eyes closed, he focuses on the melt of flavor. Candy is one of the few joys remaining in his life, and everyone nags him to cut out sugar.

The doctor is not a doctor. The Hearing Instrument Specialist wears a lab coat and introduces herself as "Mickey." She is young and eager; Warren wonders how time will warp her.

"Mickey? Like the mouse?" he asks. His daughter's eyes roll behind him. Once, Joyce believed he was the funniest, smartest man in the world and could fix anything. When did she abandon that myth? Probably some forty years prior when she was a teenager.

"It's Mikaela, but Mickey is easier." Patient, bubbly, and enunciating in a way that makes her lips pop and stretch, she reminds Warren of a kindergarten teacher.

In the exam room, the demo hearing aids rub against the backs of Warren's ears. He stiffens as Mickey's gloved fingers graze his wiry sprouts of hair. "Tell me when I sound clearer. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday..."

I can't decide if I like her, says a woman in a husky rasp ala Katharine Hepburn, wry but sweet. Warren spins around looking for the source of the voice he hasn't heard in twenty-two years.

"Mr. Nettlebaum? Did you get a burst of feedback?" Mickey's hands poise over the keyboard, ready to make adjustments.

"Carolyn?"

"It's Mickey, like the mouse, remember? Let's try that again. Monday, Tuesday..."

Don't answer me here. Joycie'll have a conniption.

Warren wonders if he is about to die. "How?"

"I'm using the computer to program the *Hear Trues* to your specifications. They're wireless like the internet."

Be patient, love.

"Let's try this pair. The receiver goes in the canal as opposed to over the ear. It might be more comfortable." She removes the curves of plastic and inserts a new set.

"Carolyn?" he asks. There is no reply from his long-departed wife.

"Still Mickey." The specialist winks.

"I want the other ones. These are no good."

“Aha, a man that knows what he likes! Let’s do a trial. Come in next week, and we’ll take it from there.”

~

On the ride back, Joyce peppers Warren with questions about his diet and bathroom habits. He watches out the window, not bothering to answer. Carolyn’s velvet voice returns, *She was always a-know-it-all, our Joycie. Do you think she’s happy?*

Warren hasn’t considered Joyce’s happiness in years. After his license was revoked, she started ferrying him to appointments, pecking at him like a mother hen. Not wanting to disappoint his wife, he asks, “Are you happy?” His voice is gruffer than he means.

“I’m happy that you’re finally doing something about your hearing.”

“No. I mean with life. You got maybe twenty years until you’ll be in my spot.”

Joyce tilts her head toward Warren, her middle-aged face showing the faintest glimpse of what she looked like as a little girl; vulnerable and curious. She checks her mirrors, and signals before switching into the turn lane.

Carolyn sighs one of those deep and throaty cigarette exhalations that Warren finds irresistibly sexy. *I’ve missed a lot.*

Warren nods, wondering if she can see him. He’ll ask that and a million other questions when they’re alone. “I love you. I never stopped,” he says, unable to hold it in for another second.

“Oh, Dad. Don’t act like you’re dying. It’s just hearing aids. You’ve got plenty of time.”

~

Inside the Scenic Senior Apartment studio, the couple slips into their first conversation in two decades. Carolyn claims that Warren is just as handsome as ever; she was always the kindest liar. Warren does his best to recap the past twenty years. He ticks off marriages, divorces, deaths, and gossip about how a former neighbor who complained about weeds in the Nettlebaum’s lawn went to prison for corporate fraud. Carolyn lets out a husky chuckle, a sound he’s never forgotten. Hearing her laugh is like tasting his grandmother’s strawberry-rhubarb pie: warm and bursting with sugared nostalgia. He hasn’t felt this content or hopeful since he’d asked Carolyn for her hand and she’d said yes.

~

A week of laughter-filled late nights later, Warren strolls into the audiologist office and ignores the candies. “These are the ones. I’ll pay in full,” he tells Mickey as she leads him and Joyce to the exam room.

“You aren’t having difficulty understanding any words or frequencies?”

“Not at all.”

“That’s wonderful, Mr. Nettlebaum. We’ll download the program as-is into your new pair.”

“What? No. These are perfect.”

“Don’t be silly. Those are demos. The new ones are the same except molded specifically for you.” Mickey’s blue-gloved hand moves to Warren’s

ear. He jerks away and slaps her arm, the sound of smacking skin plays crisply in his cochlea.

Joyce gasps. Mickey steps back, her mouth hanging open.

“I-I, sorry... I want these.”

Love, let her take them.

“I don’t want to—”

You’ve got no business talking to a dead gal like me anyway.

Warren swallows down sorrow as the demos are removed, and he loses Carolyn all over again. Joyce uses Warren’s card to pay the bill, and he listens to her whispered apology. He pretends not to hear the word *dementia* pinging like a note struck on a glockenspiel.

~

It’s quiet in the apartment. Warren removes the new hearing aids, drops them in his bedside drawer and shuts it. There’s only one sound worth hearing, and he’ll have to wait.

DO NOT GO GENTLE

By Wendy Nikel

The shadow was coming.

When the settlers arrived in this valley, they calculated they'd have sixteen earth-years. Sixteen. Plenty of time, they'd thought, but years pass quickly in a place of continual sunlight, where the word "day" loses its meaning and there's no night.

"We knew the time would come." Papa set his calloused hand on Mama's shoulder.

Mama ignored him, scrubbing dishes in the basin and staring out the window at the shades of golds and pinks that had filled the sky for the past year.

Dusk, the older folks had called it.

"We've all agreed," Papa said. "We'll pack our things and move west tomorrow. We must follow the light."

Mama said nothing, just scrubbed harder.

Papa noticed me in the doorway and passed me a worried look.

At bedtime I asked him, and he reassured me, "She'll come. No one can survive alone in the dark."

I tried to sleep, the sunset's brilliant hues slipping through the crack at the bottom of the window covering. I covered my eyes with my hand, trying to imagine what complete darkness must be like, but even that was a poor imitation. I could still make out ridges and shadows—the hills and valleys of my palms.

As Papa and Mama's whispers fell silent and our pod-home settled into rest mode, a keening rose from far off in the east, where darkness had already claimed the land.

Raging, I called it, for that's what it felt like in my bones.

The first time we heard it, Papa had insisted it must be some animal, that the rumors about the madness were nothing more than superstition. According to him, it'd take longer than mere hours or days for a man to lose himself in the dark.

Me, I'm not so sure.

See, there used to be another settlement east of here, past the spring and down the valley, close enough for occasional trade. Darkness came for them not too long ago. A weary group passed through, dragging their worldly possessions and squinting into the sun.

"Where will you go?" Papa had asked grimly.

"We're heading to where the sun's just rising," one had said. "It's a long journey, but we'll have twenty-four full years before the darkness catches up."

"This your whole group?" I piped up. It'd always seemed larger on trading

days.

The man didn't meet my eye. "No."

Papa had squeezed Mama's hand. She'd seemed not to notice.

Soon after they left, the raging began.

~

The blinds slid open at waking time, but the sunlight had diminished so much it seemed this new world of ours was fading, that the color and life was being leeched out. The flowers in the vase on the table, the illustrations in my history books, even the golden tresses of Mama's hair all had washed out to ashy grays.

"On Earth, we'd have sunsets every night," Papa whispered as we disassembled the pod. "It'd be dark all through our rest hours."

"Would the folks go mad?" I turned the wrench, rending apart our home with reverent care, so as not to lose any of the tiny nuts or bolts among the growing shadows.

"No. No one knows why the darkness affects folks differently here than it did there. Maybe it's because there, we had the moon and stars—lesser lights, but still enough to see by. Maybe it's because there, we knew the sun would rise again soon, that the darkness would only last one night."

"What does a sunrise look like?"

"Don't you have pictures of it in those old books of yours?"

"It's not the same."

"True." He smiled wistfully. "It's a bit like sunset, only... different. Brighter. Full of hope."

"You think there's a chance someone could survive to see it... if they choose to stay?" I looked to Mama, who sat upon a nearby boulder, staring eastward.

Papa didn't answer.

~

He tried carrying her, but she fought. Her nails—crusted with dirt from her toil in the greenhouses—bit crescents into his shoulder and arms. She screamed, already raging, though there was still enough light to walk by. She kicked and thrashed until he released her.

"You have to leave her," the elders said. "It's getting dark. You've got your child to think of. And the rest of the settlement. We need your strength. Your knowledge."

I watched her shadow-like figure kneel beside the graves of my siblings, babes who perished in the first years here, before I was born. Before humanity learned how to thrive in this sun-soaked place.

No amount of pleading, no promises whispered in Mama's ear would make her abandon this spot. It was my turn now to take Papa's hand, to lead him out into the light. He muttered to himself as we turned away, words I pretended not to hear, for I knew they weren't meant for my ears: "I never should've brought her to this place. We never should've come."

Racing against the falling darkness, we hurried to the top of Signal Hill. There our view was divided: light before us, blackness behind. We might have

kept going, kept rushing forward toward the day, but at that moment, Mama let out a sorrowful wail.

Papa hesitated at the top of that sad and lonely height. His eyes met mine, begging my forgiveness.

I dropped my bundles and rushed to him, but it was too late. His own burdens lay abandoned in the dust, and all I could see of him was a vague shadow within a shadow, fleeing down the hill into the dark.

The elders were upon me, but I shrugged them off.

"I'm fine," I insisted, shouldering Papa's burden in addition to my own.

They exchanged glances, as if uncertain whether they should trust my words.

I brushed past them. They wouldn't understand. No one can survive alone in the dark, but maybe, just maybe, together they might.

As for me... I was going to see the sunrise.

SHE GLITTERS IN THE DARK

By Matt Dovey

Camila glanced over at the elevators, and her heart lurched when the shining doors opened. But it still wasn't Hailey. Perhaps she wouldn't come after all. Perhaps something had come up. Perhaps she'd put the phone down on Camila and immediately forgotten her, moving on as smoothly as she always had.

"Hey," said the barman, shouting over the music and putting a Coors down on the glossy-black bar. "This is on the house."

It was a cheap bottle, sure, but shit—free is free, yeah? "What for?" Camila shouted back.

"Shipping out, right? To the squidwar?"

Camila nodded. "Kapteyn-B. How'd you know?"

"You got that final-night look. You and a few others here. Enjoy it while you can."

Camila raised the bottle in acknowledgement and navigated across the sticky dance floor to a sofa at the back of the club. She picked at her beer label as she stared over everyone's heads (dancers bobbing like waves, a sea of hormones, salt-sweat on the air) to the city beyond the glass: edges and angles detailed in neon; interstate traffic reflected on dark skyscrapers like a galaxy across the sky; headlights like scattered stars, drifting fog like nebulae.

The last time she'd see it like this, even if she made it home. The war wasn't going well—fucking squids kept popping up all over, and leadership was struggling to unlearn centuries of strategy meant for human opponents—but twenty-six light years of near-c round trip meant this'd all be dust and history by the time she got back anyway.

She noticed Hailey walk in out the corner of her eye, and tension flooded through Camila, churning in her stomach and stealing the air from her lungs. It wasn't until Hail stood in front of her, head cocked sideways, that Camila realised her mouth was open and she was staring. But *shit* Hailey looked good in that dress: dark sequins and holo-vertices, the thin green lines sharp against the sheen of her black skin and juddering with the heavy beats that thumped the air.

"I thought," said Hailey, shouting over the music to make herself heard, "that signing up for the front was the stupidest thing you could do. But dragging me out just to stare at me is stupider."

"Shit, Hail, I'm sorry. You dress like that and expect me to retain the power of fucking speech? You doing it on purpose?"

A smile cracked the mask. Yeah, she knew what she was doing. She sat down on the sofa and took the bottle from Camila's hand, stole a swig.

"Your last night then, huh?" said Hailey.

"Looks like. Leaving for the L5 station tomorrow, then out on a ramship for the stars."

"When'd you make a stupid decision like that?"

When you left me, when'd you fucking think? "Guess I figured it was time I did something with my life, and, hell. I've always loved the stars, right?"

Hailey looked at her, those big brown eyes seeing straight through the bullshit but knowing why it was necessary for Camila, for them both. "So," she said, serious and intent. "We gonna dance or what?"

~

Camila collapsed back on the sofa, exhausted, bass still rumbling through her guts and lungs but unable to animate her anymore. Hailey followed, sexy with sweat but still full of energy and delight, venting her excess joy with laughter like a ramship vented heat.

"You quitting already?" Hailey asked, folding her smooth legs neatly onto the sofa.

"Only for a moment, gimme a moment." Camila shuffled and laid her head on Hailey's lap, looking out at the crowd, all dancing, flirting and posturing their way through the Saturday night motions. Existing not living, drifting through, concentrating so much on the moment they'd lost the perspective of the years. Winning battles against tedium and losing the war on irrelevancy.

Camila knew that feeling. Shit, if she was honest, that was why she'd signed up. She'd lost her sense of purpose after Hailey left, couldn't see what good she'd ever come to without her. Fighting for something new out there, among the stars, was the only meaningful act she could think of.

"Hail?" Camila tilted her chin up.

"Yes hun." Hailey was idly stroking Camila's hair, pulling her fingers through it.

"I'll stay if you take me back."

Hailey's fingers stopped. She kept silent.

"You know... you know I'm never coming back, one way or another? Even if I survive Kapteyn, the sub-light travel... shit, Hail, it'll be decades before I'm back here."

"I know." Camila read it on Hailey's lips more than she heard it.

"This'll be it. Our last night."

Hailey shook her head, box braids swaying. "I can't. You stay for me and I'll be trapped. How could I ever leave you? How could I be independent if I had to check every act in case I upset you? I'd be a robot, only doing what you want so I can keep you happy, forever justifying your decision to stay. You really wanna suffocate me with that pressure instead of just... moving on and shipping out?"

Camila bit her lip, bit down on it hard to stop the tears, and swallowed the warm salt blood. "How about one last fuck, then?"

Hailey gently moved Camila's head and stood up. "I'm going back to the dancefloor. You coming, soldier?"

"In a minute." Camila blew a kiss up, and Hailey slipped away through the crowd. Camila wouldn't fuck her. She shouldn't. She didn't want their last night to be a pity fuck any more than Hailey did.

Light washed over the dance floor like breakers on the shore. Hailey was in the centre of it all, arms high and smile wide, everyone else swirling round like they were caught in her gravity. Strobe lights caught the sequins of her dress and lit her up like a constellation: stars glittering in the darkness, flaring supernovae and blinking pulsars.

Camila slipped out to the elevators, leaving old battles behind.

BYSTANDING

By Jonathan Laidlow

Dave sits on the roof of the old Ford out by the farm gate with a beer. It hasn't been a working farm for nearly a decade, but the yard and outbuildings were why he bought the place, and they're filled with the broken-down vehicles he collects and occasionally repairs.

The Ford Cortina, though, is beyond restoration, and with the engine stripped out it's just a place for the kids to play, or for him to go sit with his thoughts in the night. Hot summer nights like this he'll sit up on the roof, or lie on the bonnet, fulfilling all those moments of cool that he grew up with in the movies.

There! Another flash up in the sky, somewhere around the middle stars of the Big Dipper. He waits a few seconds and then the light of its bloom is visible. He wonders if this one will fall to Earth, like the one that took out Venice. It's only the ones fighting in orbit that drop, and only those big enough to survive re-entry that cause tsunamis. Everyone thought that it was good if they crashed in the ocean, but they didn't appreciate the sheer size of the battleships.

He's waiting for his daughter Carol to show up. She moved out into town when she got the job waitressing at the Italian place, but things have been deteriorating in urban areas of late, and when she rang to see if he was home he knew that she wanted to ask if she could move back. He doesn't mind at all.

Another flash. Then three more. With the naked eye it's difficult to tell whether they are orbital or further out. He could be seeing explosions that occurred light-seconds or minutes earlier. Television news reports what the scientists have found, and there'll be an update on the conflagration on the ten o'clock bulletin. Unless the wrecks collide with the broadcasting studio.

He opens another bottle of beer and sips it slowly. A vehicle passes by the field, then slows, and turns into the laneway that leads to his farm. Its lights are bright and the engine sounds old and powerful, like engines used to, so it's not Carol. He doesn't move to see who it is.

The farm is too quiet, really. It will be good if Carol comes home for a bit. It's too big for him, and the cars and the furniture and the *stuff* are just getting a bit much to keep on top of. Maybe Carol wants him to move in with her?

That would make sense. He could fix some things up in her apartment - do what dads ought to do - and just get away from everything for a while.

It's the police. Constable Braithwaite, Bob, as Dave knows him, because they've both lived around here forever. Bob is in his uniform, but not his hat or his stab vest. He walks carefully through the clutter to the Cortina and coughs. Then he waits, without speaking. He's holding a folder in his hand.

Dave slowly swings himself round so that his legs are dangling down. He

looks at the police instead of the sky.

“What’s that you’ve got there?” He says.

“The report.” *Caitlin. His wife. The city.*

“Anything new?”

“I’m sorry, but no.” He knows she is gone. So many pieces have fallen to Earth this last year, so many places and people are just... gone. It’s good of Bob to do this personally, but Dave doesn’t want to talk about Cait, about the debris that came down while she was at the supermarket.

Instead, he says, “Grab a beer. Watch the show. Carol will be here soon.”

Bob nods, and takes one from the cardboard tray, takes the cap off with his bare hands.

Dave lets Bob climb up next to him, slightly uncomfortably because he is still in uniform. What use is the law when pieces of shrapnel from an alien war fall from the sky?

“Have you heard the latest?” Bob asks.

Another burst of light, red this time, and then one of the rare shooting stars.

“Oh! That one is close! That’ll hit home!” Dave says, and Bob doesn’t seem to know how to react. It’s awkward, given the news he is delivering. Dave feels for him. Bodies are vaporized, usually, so identifying the victims is a thankless and pointless task. There’s no body, but it doesn’t mean she’s still out there, selecting cans of beans and soup, boxes of cereal, and bringing them home in the SUV.

They drink companionably. The beer is weak and so he doesn’t feel that drunk. He knows that kids— well—young people the age of his daughter— play drinking games, taking a shot with each flare, a double when there’s a shooting star, but he’s past such things. He likes the easy oblivion that beer brings him, not the harsh morning-after with spirits.

There’s another engine coming up, and this is the tinny purr of his daughter’s banged-up old Mini.

“Carol’s here,” he tells Bob, and they both wait for her to park. The battle above abates for a time, and they just watch the stars like people have done since time immemorial.

Carol bustles up breathlessly. “Dad!” She notices the police and pauses for a second, but her news is too good.

“Dad! They said on the news the translators think the two sides have announced a ceasefire for tomorrow. Isn’t that brilliant?”

It is brilliant, he supposes but will make no difference. No human is involved in this war, there is no capability to intervene, or defend themselves. The fact that they have finally learned to translate the chatter that dominates the radio frequencies is, ultimately, useless. Nobody has yet worked out whether the two factions in this war have even noticed life on Earth.

They could all be snuffed out while shopping, like Caitlin, like Venice, Portland, Moscow and Taipei.

Until then, he supposes, life will continue as normal.

Carol helps herself to a beer and climbs up next to them, clinking bottles

first with Bob, then with Dave.

“What did I miss?” She says, and he wants to reply, nothing worth seeing.
He swallows it down instead.

MOON MAN 13

By Brenda Kalt

In his thirty-ninth sleepless hour on the Moon, Carlo Bonifacio shoved the last collection bag into place in the lander and felt the headache behind his eyes sharpen. The European Space Agency, in its low-budget return to the Moon, had sent one astronaut armed with stimulants to keep him awake while his suited monkey hands scraped and chipped and scooped better than any machine. But an astronaut got tired.

Carlo looked out the lander's hatch at the lunar landscape, but his vision blurred. He cursed silently, squeezed his eyes shut, and opened them again. No change. Call Mission Control. "Kourou, my vision is blurry."

Pause. "Take another stimulant."

The one-second communications delay made every utterance of Mission Control seem measured and grave. Carlo sucked the tube in his helmet and blinked. This time his vision cleared, and the headache subsided.

"Kourou, requesting permission to return to the surface."

Pause. "Negative. You have liftoff in fifty-eight minutes."

"I only need a few—"

A roar erupted in his helmet.

"Kourou, what's causing the static?"

"Unknown. We're checking. Start jettisoning the surplus."

The last two words were barely audible. Carlo bent over to separate what was going from what was staying.

As he tossed each piece of equipment onto the surface, his soul went with it. Carlo had fought his way through the ESA's astronaut training to explore the Moon, but the only treks he had made were to preplanned destinations for collecting samples. Now there was time to look around; he just had to convince Mission Control.

Another burst of static came through his helmet, followed by, "Astronaut Bonifacio, can you hear us?"

He jerked upright. "Kourou, what is this?"

"This is Fotini Maksimowitz with the International News Network. How does it feel to be the first man to return to the Moon?"

He cursed in Italian, then switched back to English. "Kourou, the channel's been hacked."

The reply came faintly and was drowned by the new voice. "Astronaut Bonifacio, tell your followers on the Internet what you enjoyed most about your exploration."

"Nothing. I haven't done any exploration. I just collected samples. Kourou, I'm switching to backup."

Kourou responded. "Backup frequency locked." This time the voice was

clear.

"How much time do we have before they hack this one?"

"Unknown. Keep jettisoning your excess."

Carlo tossed hardware through the hatch and watched the equipment bounce on the surface. It would rest there forever, while he went back to Earth and endured celebrity. Let the politicians unify the European Union with pride in the mission; all he wanted was peace and quiet. By thirty minutes to liftoff, the only thing to jettison was the ladder itself.

"Kourou, I can jettison the ladder and get in the couch in ten minutes. I have twenty minutes to walk around."

"Get in the couch now."

The static returned, followed by, "Astronaut Bonifacio, can you give us one more look with your helmet cam?"

He stared at the moonscape through the hatch. Millions of people were seeing the Moon as he was—

"Kourou, I'm going to walk around for a few minutes."

"Bony, this is not authorized. Stay inside and jettison the ladder."

"I'm going to walk around on the Moon." Carlo started down the ladder, feeling a twinge in his left shoulder. It must have happened when he threw the empty air tank.

"You're irrational. When this dose of stimulant wears off, you'll collapse. Jettison the ladder and get in the acceleration couch."

"Kourou, I've got nineteen minutes to explore." He stepped onto the surface.

This time the pause was followed by a new, shrill voice. "Explore, by God, you do not have spare time to explore. You will follow mission protocol."

"Bony, that's Director Horowitz."

"Copy that." Carlo wished he could rub his face with his hand. The stimulant was fading, and his headache was returning. He became aware of his heart's pounding.

Carlo looked at the lander's open hatch and started up the ladder, one slow step at a time. The Moon pulled at him like a tide, and he had difficulty holding onto the ladder with his left hand.

"Bony, that's good." Relief lifted the operator's voice as the helmet cam broadcast his ascent.

He had never liked the nickname.

At the hatch entrance Carlo took another dose of stimulant, and the pain in his left arm turned to fire. Oh, God. Not now.

The pain blotted out everything for several seconds, but Carlo fought back. There were decisions to be made.

Carlo braced himself on the hatch and unhooked the ladder. He climbed down, the rungs shifting beneath him with each step and two voices shouting in his ears. When he reached the bottom, he pulled the ladder away from the hatch. It swayed over him for a moment and then fell to the surface, scattering dust and gravel in a moonstorm.

"Bony, you're endangering the mission. Reattach the ladder and get inside."

"No. Not now."

"You're delirious."

Carlo shook his head, then grimaced as he realized the movement was invisible. "Look at my bio readouts. International News Network, are you there?"

After a moment the reply came. "We are. What are you—"

"Good." He turned away from the lander and swung his head from side to side, giving his helmet cam a panorama.

"Bony, this is Kourou. You're in danger, and the mission *has* to go on."

"Kourou, the mission will go on. The bags are in the lander, and the system will close the hatch and initiate liftoff. You don't need me any more."

"Astronaut Bonifacio, what are you doing?"

Carlo took the deepest breath he could manage. "I'm going for a walk. I spent my life preparing to come to the Moon, and I'm going to see it. Really see it. You people on the Internet can come with me, as long as I last."

He looked into the distance. Not too far—he didn't want his last act on the moon to end in failure. A pair of boulders beyond his last sampling site looked promising.

"I have one more dose of stimulant, and I'll take it when I can't walk any more. If it works, I'll keep walking. If it doesn't, I'll just sit down and look around. My arm hurts like hell, anyway. When my oxygen runs out, I'll go to sleep." Carlo straightened as much as he could and barely touched his tongue to the stimulant tube. "Enjoy the Moon with me."

Slowly at first, then picking up speed, Carlo staggered toward the horizon.

MEMOIRS OF A ONE-TIME DRAGON-SLAYER'S APPRENTICE

By George Nikolopoulos

The dragon slayer who arrived at our village on that windy Wheelsday looked nothing like the one who had come after the death of my mother. *He'd* been a burly guy with a long black beard; this one was slight and beardless, almost feminine-looking, and wore a peculiar conical hat.

As we all stood in the village square waiting, I was enraptured when he chose *me* to be his apprentice. I could almost hear in my mind the shocked whisper of the schoolmaster: "But she's only a slip of a girl—and an orphan at that!"

True, I was the shortest one in the group, but I felt ten feet tall when he said, "Come, little girl, let's go catch us some dragons."

~

"Are you tired, little girl?" The Master's voice seemed all too thin for a man.

I'm not that little any more. "My name is Ilaria, Master," I said a little more brusquely than I intended; but he just nodded solemnly.

"I'm Leoni," he replied. Even his name was strange.

We walked in silence for a while. Then he said, "Your mother was burned to death by dragons. Do you seek revenge?"

Revenge for what? Dragons are mindless creatures. I couldn't hold them accountable. "No," I said.

"Good," said Master Leoni.

~

We heard the singing from afar. It was the most magnificent sound I'd ever heard; it made the nightingale's song seem like the cawing of crows. Master Leoni took a long glass cylinder from his backpack and motioned me to be silent. We sneaked up to the clearing and then we saw it: a young dragon, no bigger than a lamb, green and amber and vermilion, perched on a sturdy oak limb, singing its heart away.

It saw us too, and then it stopped singing.

"Careful," the Master whispered, "it breathes fire;" *as if I didn't know.* I took a step towards the dragon, and as the jet of fire left its mouth I somersaulted to the right and it missed. Then I heard a popping sound and the dragon seemed to elongate and lose its substance, until it became nothing but a long thin line of smoke that flew into the cylinder. Master Leoni capped the cylinder and sealed it; then he wrapped it carefully in cloth and put it away into his backpack.

~

That night, as we sat by the fire, I couldn't hold myself back any longer. I

mastered all my courage and asked: "Master, are you a man, or...a woman?"

Master Leoni laughed, a musical, trilling laughter. "Neither. I'm sexless. I'm an automaton, a *golem* as they call us in Silverport."

I'd never heard of an automaton, but I'd read plenty about the golems of the Western Cities. They were said to have sunflower hearts in metal bodies. I was entranced.

~

Catching more dragons, we moved further and further into the seemingly endless woods.

"What are you going to do with all those dragons you collect, Master?" I asked. "Slay them?"

Master Leoni laughed again; I'd started to love that sound. "Slayer's just the name of my profession. I will deliver them to my own Masters, in Silverport."

"And what are *they* going to do with them?"

Master Leoni frowned. They seemed a little sad. "I'd rather not talk about that. Why don't you tell me a little about yourself, Ilaria?"

This sounded ominous, and the dragons sang so pretty I'd hate it if they suffered, but I had to obey the Master so I did talk a bit about myself.

Not that there was much to say. After Mother died, I went to live with my great-uncle Jeremiah who detested my presence and mostly ignored me; but I loved living in his house because he had the biggest library in the village—make that the *only* library in the village. I devoured book after book until there was none left; there wasn't much else to do.

What I didn't say: I miss my mother like the dry summer soil misses the rain. Sometimes I wake up at night and I feel my chest so constricted it seems like it's going to burst. I can't even bring to mind my father's face, but I remember he smelled like fresh-baked bread.

That night I dreamed of my mother after a long time. She brought me a warm cup of milk and tucked me into bed and kissed me goodnight, like she usually does in my dreams. Only this time she had Master Leoni's face.

My father was there, too; I couldn't see him, but he sang me the sweetest lullaby. And he had Master Leoni's voice.

~

As another sweet little dragon singer was sucked into Master Leoni's cylinder, I felt a terrible pang in my chest.

"How long will this go on, Master?" I asked.

They seemed tired, black rings around their eyes getting more prominent with each passing day. "Until all my cylinders are filled, my dear Ilaria," they said. "Look; we're almost finished."

Somehow this didn't feel comforting enough. "But why, Master? Why are we collecting dragons for those people?"

Master Leoni sighed. "*Those people* are my *Masters*, Ilaria. I have no choice but to obey them." They hesitated. "I don't know how to explain this to you, but we're somehow connected. If they sense that I disobey..." They let their voice trail. Then, "have you started to love them, Leoni? Have you started

to love the little dragons?"

I blushed. I didn't know what to say. "They killed my mother, Master," I said without conviction. I hadn't realized it before Master Leoni asked, but I *was* falling in love with the dragons. I couldn't bring myself to say it, though, so I nodded.

"Because I have started to love them too," said Master Leoni, so softly that I barely heard.

And I thought, *maybe I'm falling in love with more than the dragons.*

~

"I sense another dragon," said Master Leoni, "a more sinister presence than any we've encountered so far. Ilaria, you must be very careful. Maybe I was wrong to bring you this deep into the woods."

"Don't worry about me, Master. I can take care of myself."

"I know, my dear Ilaria, but... I don't know what I would do without you."

Then—before I even had a chance to grasp the Master's words—we stepped into a clearing and we almost walked into the dragon.

This one didn't sing. It was black, and barbed, and as big as the village temple.

Master Leoni reached for their cylinder, but as the dragon locked eyes with them they became immobile. Then the dragon looked at me and I couldn't move either.

I heard the dragon's voice inside my mind. "You have killed my children. I am too old to bear another; I am the last of the dragons. After me, there will be no more."

I never knew dragons were sentient. I thought of Grandmaster Sermandini's History of Arram. *Dragons are the magic of the world; without them the world would be a smaller, sorer place.*

"Please don't hurt Master Leoni," I said. "They mean you no harm. They serve cruel Masters, that's their only fault."

"Your Master is a golem," the dragon said. "A magical creature like me, albeit of a different nature. I should destroy it, for killing my children."

Your children killed my mother, I thought. But I knew they were only children; they didn't know any better. Their mother was old and wise, but she didn't seem cruel, only angry and desperate and sad, so terribly sad. I hadn't lied to Leoni; I never wanted revenge.

"Your children aren't dead," I said. "Turn me loose and I'll show you."

As the dragon released me I rushed to my Master's backpack. I picked up a glass cylinder and smashed it on a stone. Smoke whirled and began to dissipate. Fear caught me; had I killed it? I hadn't known what to do, I just acted out of instinct—I am never that foolish. I was already regretting my impetuosity, when the smoke began to coalesce, in the end turning into an azure and gold little dragon that soared into the sky and broke into the sweetest song before perching on its mother's shoulder.

I broke one cylinder after another; when I finished, seven little dragons danced around in the sky, singing in chorus and breathing fire on their mother.

I could almost *feel* her happiness.

Then they all took flight to the east. The mother dragon turned and looked at me for one last time. "Farewell," she said in my mind. And "thank you."

~

Master Leoni was unharmed, but they seemed befuddled.

"The dragon severed my connection with my Masters," they said. "I cannot go back to Silverport; I'd be branded a rogue automaton and destroyed."

That scared me. "Why would they want to destroy you?"

Master Leoni's expression was a study in puzzlement. "It seems that I have free will now. It seems so strange... and bewildering."

So maybe there was a way around it, and it might even work out. My mind raced. "That's great. So now you're free. You don't have to capture dragons anymore. It was never what you wanted. You just never go back to that awful place, and you'll be safe."

"But what am I going to do? I was *made* to be a dragon slayer. I don't know anything else."

Well, I knew what *I* wanted. What I needed.

"Leoni," I said, "will you stay with me and be my parent? You can be my mother and father both." No more *Master* Leoni, just Leoni.

They smiled sadly; their voice caught. "My dear little Ilaria, I do love you; but I don't know the first thing about parenting."

I thought of Morius Segundus' Ten Steps to Successful Parenting.

"Parenting is easy," I said. "You just have to take it step by step." I smiled. "And you've already taken the first step: *Have a child.*"

FROM NOW UNTIL INFINITY

By Karen Bovenmyer

Everything on this world reminded her of him, though they'd never been here together. The air tasted like overripe oranges. Purple boulders leaned into each other, tied together with silver webs, crouching in pairs across the horizon as though waiting for some hidden signal to jump. Fine sand scraped under her boots with a soft squeal as she shuffled between the towering stones, the higher gravity of this world pressing her down into squeaking grit. The air was heavier than home. The pressure like the crushing weight of the dissolution of marriage file waiting on her transponder, requiring her thumbprint to end seventeen years of sharing everything. The soft weight of the citrus atmosphere reminded her also of his body on top of hers, the mandarin scent of his shampoo. Like most thoughts of him, the memory brought both pain and fondness, an infinite tangled overload that had sent her jumping across a dozen worlds. This world was no good—he was in every breath of its air. She logged the basic data into her transponder, designated it FN99, and added the planet to her discovery account without opening the bright red flashing reminder demanding her attention. COMPLIANCE REQUESTED. The Authority would not wait forever. Every citizen, from people coordinating the jumper database to those cataloguing infinity like herself, were required to complete all legal paperwork in a timely manner. For jumpers in particular, it was difficult to keep track of the passage of days, so the Authority kept track. They would not, however, sign the DOM for her. She would have to do that. Eventually. She closed her eyes and sent her transponder shuffling to a new infinity, then turned, looking over her shoulder and into the next world.

This world was also too dry, but light. She weighed far less than usual here, her steps gigantic leaps carrying her across powder-white sand. Smoke trails furred from her boots as she passed, making her sneeze, even though her augmented lungs didn't technically need to draw breath. She liked breathing. She even liked breathing atmosphere her bionics couldn't pull anything from, such as this one, which was too heavy in nitrates to sustain her. Like her marriage to him, there simply wasn't enough to nourish. She stopped leaping and settled into the dunes, the sand floating around her, dusting her hair and skin. Sorrow radiated from her sternum. This world was no good either. She collected the data. The flashing red message now read YOU ARE IN VIOLATION OF CODE. COMPLY OR YOUR JUMPER WILL BE DISABLED. Instead, she spun up her transponder and looked over her shoulder, turning somewhere else.

The next world was close, wet, and hot. A green riot of plant life choked the landscape in every direction. There was no horizon, only huge trees. The gravity felt like the world she'd been born on, the same planet he was from.

They were so like each other, same age, same homeworld, same assignment jumping to new worlds for the Authority. Huge waxy leaves formed low walls around her, whispering against each other, reflecting bright moonlight. The white-faced orb in the sky was much closer than Earth's, where he'd asked her to become his bride and she'd said yes to him as her husband. They'd both been so young, barely more than children, uncertain what the commitment they'd made to each other meant. Like the huge trees here, they'd grown in the same soil together, under the same conditions, yet separate and distinct. Leaning away from each other, until nothing touched anymore. She allowed her first tears here, in the moonlit silence. He was present here, everywhere. He was with her no matter what world she jumped to. She logged the data. **WARNING: ONE JUMP REMAINING. YOUR JUMPER WILL BE DEACTIVATED UNTIL COMPLIANCE.** Turn, turn, somewhere else.

She'd been on this world before. Ash coated her mouth and nose and clogged the smudged sky. There were so many volcanoes on this world that there was no way for life to subsist. Even her bionics could not withstand it for long. Her boots crunched through a crust of ash at the edge of a caldera, sending a sprinkle of black char raining down, peppering the lava below her. Waves of heat blurred her vision across the caldera's pool of molten fire and sweat bloomed across her skin. Here too, thoughts of him followed her, though they weren't unexpected. He'd showed her this world on her first jump. A secret, forbidden place.

"We can't stay long, we'll burn up," he'd told her.

It was true. She was in trouble. Her bionics seized, emitting squeals of protest. Warning lights flashed. She imagined leaping into the lava, falling, turning into another world before she hit the surface—except she couldn't. **NO FURTHER JUMPS POSSIBLE UNTIL COMPLIANCE.** She'd chosen this world instead of a colony for that reason, the decision made for her.

Divorce or die.

She logged an update on the data from this world. Her finger hovered over the now pulsing and vibrating red letters. How like throwing myself from the lip, she thought, her finger descending, opening the dissolution papers. Her name. His name. Side by side, but distinct and separate. Her vision darkened and the sounds of protest her body made rose to a crescendo.

Jump now, or die.

The heat of this world, memory burning in her throat like ash, pain like lava coating her insides. Fear, a present and demanding stream of terror stronger than that of her own impending death threatened to overcome her. The future was a composition of unknowns through which she must now jump alone. His lips on her skin. Heat that kills. The comforting weight of his arms around her shoulders. Her lungs struggling to breathe. Gone to her forever, either way. One jump, one thumbprint, between her and oblivion, between her and endless unknown worlds from now until infinity.

She made her choice.

The next world was a strange new vista of water stretching in every direction, thin spires of rock trailing up from the landscape. A warm, shallow sea teeming with life lapped against the backs of her knees, reflecting a sky no one had ever seen before, casting unending ripples. The only sound was water slapping softly against the standing stones, separate and distinct, reaching toward all the possibilities of the endless sky. She breathed a fresh salt breeze into her lungs, logged this world of unknowable futures, and turned over her shoulder somewhere else.

PHOENIX, FALLEN

By Rebecca Birch

The Phoenix Corporation complex perches atop a volcanic ridge overlooking the Pacific. Its vari-copper cladding catches the rising sun, turning the buildings to flame. I used to love to watch the building burn like its namesake, but today can think of nothing but Kokua, plummeting through the atmosphere, his wingsuit disintegrating in a ball of fire. My bold eagle, nothing more than ash.

Again.

Phoenix Corp.'s rebirth procedure is a miracle, though the insurance is costly enough to be prohibitive for anyone not born with a silver spoon or working in a dangerous field with an employer willing to foot the bill. It's given thousands of people a second chance. A fatal car accident becomes nothing more than a story to be laughed over around the Thanksgiving table. Military recruitment is up—the G.I. coverage is lifetime.

And thrill-seekers chase ever wilder rushes like moths to flames.

After his first spacejump, Kokua had caught me up in his strong arms and spun me round, eyes flashing. *Biggest rush in the world! The Earth's an abalone-shell marble you could pluck from the sky. Then, it fills your eyes and your heart and every last molecule, dragging you down, down, down...*

Despite the tropical heat, I shiver.

Inside, I approach the receptionist, ignoring the subtle orange and gold lighting that pulses up the sides of the counter. "Sergeant Kokua Smithson, please."

She blinks through her optical display, then frowns. "Mrs. Smithson?"

I nod.

"If you'll come with me, please?"

I trail after her, a nervous clenching in my chest.

She leads me through a koa-wood door, without a department name I can see, and beckons a young man with spiky, gold-tipped hair and a lilac button-down with subtle flowers worked into the weave. "Edward, this is Mrs. Smithson," she says, then vanishes.

"Mrs. Smithson," he says. "Have a seat."

I don't sit. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's 'wrong,' Mrs. Smithson. It's just that this is your husband's fifth rebirth."

"Tell me something I don't know," I snap, then grasp the back of the empty chair in front of me and squeeze. No good biting Edward's head off. This isn't his fault.

"Are you aware the Army's instituted lifetime limits, outside of the line of duty?"

My throat tightens. "I know."

Rebirth is a miracle, they say, and the first time, that may well be true. But they don't talk much about the changes. Small, barely noticeable things. Maybe a Phoenix doesn't like olives anymore. Or laugh at clever wordplay. Nothing that makes a difference.

But over repeated rebirths, well, things start to build up. The second time, Kokua developed diabetes. The third, he couldn't stand the sound of our son's cello playing. And he didn't hold it inside, like he would've done before. I thought he was going to smash the thing, and I had to make Benji promise to practice only at school before anything beyond his unwavering father-worship got hurt.

Edward puts a manicured hand over my own. His skin is so pale against mine. I can't tear my eyes away from those long, white fingers. "You have to get him to stop, Mrs. Smithson. If he dies again, there won't be another rebirth." His voice so soft. Understanding.

I close my eyes. "I know."

~

When they lead Kokua into the lobby, his burnished skin gleams with that newly-reborn glow I'd found so beautiful the first time. I'd dissolved in tears and he'd held me so close I couldn't breathe, and promised me he was done with jumping. He'd never put me through that again.

I think he meant it, at least for a while.

"Mandy," he says, restlessly tugging a seam on his Phoenix Corp. t-shirt.

"Kokua."

We walk to the car in awkward silence. I don't want to find out what's different this time. The sullen had come with the fourth rebirth, along with an even shorter temper. He couldn't focus. Couldn't seem to finish simple tasks like laundry folding or filling gas tanks in advance of a convoy. He'd been officially reprimanded, Benji spent most nights at friends' houses, and Kokua didn't care. About anything.

When I found out he'd signed up for another jump, I lost it. Told him he was losing his son. Losing me. Losing himself.

Goddammit, Mandy, I've already lost me! Can't you see that? I just want to feel something again.

Sometimes I wish I didn't feel.

I slam the door and drive down the slope toward the city, the Pacific stretching like liquid turquoise to the horizon.

Finally, I can't handle the silence any longer. "Did it work?"

I wonder if he'll understand the question. The AC hums, filling the inside of the car with ice.

"For a moment. When there's nothing but space—sky and stars and the breath in your lungs—you can't help but feel."

My fingers tighten around the steering wheel. "That was five, Kokua. There's no more left."

He glances my way. "You should jump with me. Maybe then you'd

understand."

It's almost tempting. What would it be like to see the whole world spread out beneath me? To see stars I'll never get to see from here on the ground?

I shake myself. "I'm not insured, Kokua, you know that."

"You don't die every time. Besides, the risk makes it sweeter."

A breath of plumeria blows in through the vents, sweet and grounding. "I can't afford that risk. Not with Benji."

Silence stretches for a minute, then Kokua finally speaks. "Who's Benji?"

My heart skips a beat and my vision goes black around the edges. I pull to the side of the road and suck in slow breaths.

"Mandy?"

When I'm pretty sure I won't pass out, I look over at Kokua, at those black eyes I'd once loved more than the world. "You're going to jump again, aren't you?"

He nods, his stranger's gaze shifting away from mine.

I should fight him, but I can't find the will.

"Then I hope you find what you're looking for."

DOORKEEPER

By Joanna Michal Hoyt

Haavi stands empty-handed in front of the mirror-paneled door, waiting to turn them away.

The waiting is long. Only a few dare to risk everything to find the Last Door and receive the power to right the wrongs at the foundation of this crooked world. Some of these die on the sennight's journey across the desert, or flee the fear-beast on the first floor of the tower. Some are too greedy to keep their hands off the gleaming gold on the second floor, or the crown on the third. But some...

Haavi hears footsteps on the stairs, looks into the wall-mounted mirror that reflects the mirrored door. Another woman's face appears there, diminishing in an infinite regress of reflections. At the end of that tunnel Haavi sees what the woman seeks.

The woman doesn't care about the Door, the power. Her mind is full of another face that Haavi has seen before. No wonder the newcomer passed the tests of the tower. She has come in love.

Haavi has dealt with love before.

The newcomer stops three paces from Haavi, waiting like a cat at a mouse-hole, or like a mouse steeling itself to look out and see whether the cat has gone. Haavi waits like a stone.

"What did you do to Quinniane?" the newcomer asks. "She told me where to find water in the desert, how to pass the beast, why not to touch anything on the lower floors. She didn't tell me what you did to her."

"I told her, 'You are wise and fearless. Once you pass me, nothing can keep you from your heart's desire.'"

"And?"

"She believed me. She looked in the mirror a long time, and then she walked away. I knew she would not come back to risk getting her heart's desire."

The woman turns away like the woman she loved. Still loves, though not quite in the same way.

~

Time passes. Others come to Haavi.

The man with the long staff uses words and gestures simple and sure enough to pass for magic outside the tower. Haavi reminds him of the harm he has done in his well-meaning pride, names three names. He turns away.

The hard-eyed young woman with the knife in her belt names the needless sufferings she has seen, the wrongs she has come to right. Haavi answers with the words of mourning which have no meaning but grief. Then she begins to name the sufferings and the deaths she knows. Her memory is

much longer than that of the young woman, who ages before Haavi's eyes and finally goes away.

The ancient woman carries a staff, not for magery, but to keep herself from falling. Haavi sees her deep-lined face in the mirror, tries to see her desire and fear, sees nothing she can understand.

Haavi waits like a cat at a mouse-hole, like a mouse steeling itself to look and see whether the cat has gone. The old woman waits, like a stone. Finally Haavi speaks.

"What did you come for?"

"You lied to me. I asked Quinniane before she died, and she told me—she's no liar. You didn't tell her what you told me you'd told her. I was ashamed of my heart's desire. She wasn't."

"I told you what was needful."

"Needful? What's needful but the truth?"

"You came back here. Back to the heart of your fear. None of the others did that. Not even your Quinniane, though she was brave. What did you come for? Only to call me a liar?"

"To see what you're here for."

"To guard the door."

"Any fool can see that. You do it well, for a woman armed only with a mirror and a lie."

Haavi waits.

"Don't you need more than that to guard the Last Door? Whether the gods are kind or cruel to keep the power from us, why leave it to one woman to guard?"

"And the desert, and the tower, and the beast..."

"I got past them. So did Quinniane. There must be others wiser and braver than us. Others that could get past you."

Haavi waits.

"But maybe the tales are false. Maybe there's worse behind you."

Haavi waits.

"Is that really the Last Door, or is there another?"

Haavi waits.

"Is there any Last Door? Is that a lie too? Why spend your life waiting in service of a lie?"

Haavi chooses her words carefully. "How would it have been if you thought there was no Last Door?"

"And no chance," the old woman says softly. "And no hope but what we can make ourselves. Life's easier with another hope. No, not easier. Grandeur."

"Would you blame me if I spent my life and more to guard that grandeur?"

"A grandeur that's a lie?"

Haavi waits.

"More than your life?"

"I am not old as you are, but I remember more, and I have waited much

longer. While I stay here nothing can hinder my waiting, and only one thing can free me from it.”

“Do you wish to be free?” the old woman asks.

“Yes, but not by leaving my place empty.”

“Who could fill it?”

“Someone brave enough to give all.”

The old woman looks into the mirror, into Haavi’s eyes. She holds out her hands.

“I am Avhara,” she says, “and I will take your place.”

Haavi clasps her hands. “Take it,” she says, “and take the blessing and the ward of those who set me here.” She feels the weight and ward lift from her; steps back, smiling.

“Those who set you here?” the old woman repeats. “Is it not a lie?” She stares into the mirror. “You didn’t even lie. You asked me questions, you told me nothing. Do you know what’s behind the door? Did you turn back at the last, like all the rest of us?”

She looks away from the mirror too late. There is no answer. Haavi is gone.

JUST ANOTHER NIGHT ON TELEGRAPH

By Karl Dandenell

She called him *Harry*. Actually, his name was Henry, but she was beautiful, and he was more than a little drunk, so he let her get away with it.

“You *are* Harry. You know, *hairy*. All men are, but you...” She touched his bare chest, which was exposed by his homemade wizard costume.

“Yeah, I’m like Robin Williams,” he said, looking down. He’d inherited his hirsute nature from his father, a Greek immigrant. At least he could grow a decent beard, unlike most of the other freshman at the Halloween party.

“Robin who?” she said, looking confused. She was holding a bright red plastic cup of rum and Coke.

He laughed. Everything she said made him laugh. He desperately wanted to keep this conversation going. Almost every guy at the party had hit on her. And three women. What the hell, it was Berkeley. Lust was lust.

Henry swigged some of his beer. “Halloween brings out one’s true nature, don’t you think... ah. Sorry. Forgot your name.”

“Honeysuckle.”

Her costume was a cross between Summer of ‘66 Flower Child and Fairy Goth. Filmy blue dress, loose leggings and *tabi*. Fingernails painted bright red. Eye shadow of fuchsia, blue, and yellow. She had long, glossy black hair, piercing black eyes, and hips that made his mouth dry.

“It fits you,” he said. “Great outfit, by the way. Very *Composia fidelissima*.”

“What?”

“‘Faithful beauty.’ It’s a moth.” He smiled. “I’m majoring in entomology. You?”

“I do *not* look like a moth.” She said, ignoring his question. “And this isn’t a costume.”

Oh. He tried a different tack. “Kind of hard to ride a bike in those sock things.”

“I walk everywhere,” Honeysuckle said.

“Low carbon footprint, uh, no pun intended.” She probably shopped at the farmer’s market for organic local food and essential oils. Her perfume reminded him of his dad’s second wife, who always wore patchouli and cooked with lots of Indian spices.

“Hey,” he said. “I really like your accent. Is your family from India?”

She shook her head. “Further away than that.” She looked at her cup. “I need a refill. I’ll be back. Maybe.” But she winked on the last word, giving him hope.

Then she leaned forward and kissed him quickly, leaving behind a sweet taste of her cocktail. Then she wandered off, pausing briefly at knots of people,

like a *Lepidoptera* sampling flowers.

For a few minutes, Henry watched her flitter around the room, exchanging a few words with other men. All of them were endomorphic, or what his friends at the Botanical Garden called “pear-shaped white boys.”

All the better for me, Henry thought, making his way to the buffet table. The nachos looked particularly good tonight.

Three athletic men manned the table, eating raw vegetables and complaining about their Bikram yoga teachers. Their only concessions to the holiday were cheesy tee shirts that looked like last-minute purchases from a pop-up costume store. Henry immediately classified them as *Archimantis latistyla*, stick mantises. Useful in the garden, but ugly.

“Harry?”

He turned and found her standing *really* close.

“Uh, hi.”

“Want to go for a walk?”

“Absolutely!”

She led him out of the crowded apartment into refreshingly cool air. She headed down Telegraph Avenue.

“So where are we going?” he asked.

“Oh, I know a place. It’s a little bit of a hike, though.” She glanced at him, as if weighing possibilities. “You think you can keep up?”

Hell, he’d *crawl* after her if he had to. “Sure. Lead on, MacDuff.”

Again, she gave him that confused look. “Who?”

“Old joke.”

They walked for a time through gentrifying neighborhoods, skirting the edge of the university. Half an hour later, they reached the entrance of a big park. The gate was locked; Honeysuckle simply slipped between the bars. Henry had to climb over, nearly dropping his plastic staff when his belt caught on the wire mesh.

She led him deeper into the park. Many of the street lights weren’t working, making it pleasantly dark. It had gotten colder, too. Henry was glad he’d worn his cloak. He looked around, trying to remember the way they came. Then he bumped into her. Her back was really solid, like a swimmer’s.

“We’re here.”

He looked around. The trees and bushes had grown together, forming a naturally enclosed space. A thick layer of duff covered the ground. Honeysuckle knelt down and padded the earth. When she looked up and smiled, Henry quickly unclasped his cloak and spread it on the ground.

As soon as he sat down, Honeysuckle straddled him and pushed him onto his back. Then she trailed her fingers down his chest to his wide leather belt.

“May I?”

Henry smiled and said, “Ladies first.” He closed his eyes, and felt her yank off his belt, tossing the staff and coin pouch to one side. When she pulled down his shorts, he let his brain go offline, focusing on the *amazing* sensations happening down there. *Now that’s an incantation.*

At one point she bit him, but he was too far along to care.

A long time later, Henry opened his eyes. He'd fallen asleep, and now his nauseous stomach and stiff limbs told him he was hung over, or maybe coming down with the flu. He tried to roll onto his side and failed. Something heavy and sticky lay on his belly.

“Uh...?”

“Go to sleep,” Honeysuckle said. “It will be over soon.” She leaned over and touched the white mass attached to his love handles. It rippled under her hand. “Take care of my daughter.”

He watched her pull on her clothes, covering those impossibly thin legs and too-wide hips.

“You’re right, Harry. Halloween does bring out one’s true nature.”

He heard her pulling branches over the space, and it grew darker. In the quiet, Harry felt the thing on his belly squirm.

Then he realized his mistake. She wasn't *Composia fidelissima*.

She was *Pepsis formosa*.

Spider Wasp.

A RIGHT ANGLE TO HERE AND NOW

By Floris M. Kleijne

"What color are your M&Ms?"

The woman's arrival might have gone unnoticed, but I happened to be staring over the low wall bordering the oval meadow, gazing through the slow snow of pale pink petals drifting from the cherry trees. I stand stunned into silent immobility, her question baffling me almost as much as her sudden appearance.

Did she just step through the Thin Place?

I reach for my phone to text Jake, and for the thousandth time, the realization rips through me.

Jake died five weeks ago, right there on that wall. We sat side by side, navigating our unthinkable goodbye, gazing at the trees as we reminisced for the last time: crossing the Serengeti together, sharing a riverside dinner in Kyoto, debating politics and morality and physics over beers here in Amsterdam. I knew he was dying, of course, but had been unprepared for him completing the process while squeezing my hand in familiar affection. His frail fingers clenched, then relaxed with a finality that left no room for doubt. I lowered him gently onto the grass, his face as empty in death as it had been astute in life.

The woman wears an expression neither empty nor astute, but urgent, almost panicked.

What was it she just asked me?

I've returned here every Sunday since Jake's death. Part of me keeps hoping to see him ambling among the trees again, his hands folded behind him, his brown cap crooked on his bald pate. Even though I helped bear his casket into the crypt, his death remains an abstraction: as long as I don't face the truth of his absence, he might still... be.

Somewhere.

Jake would have nodded and smiled at the thought. In our endless talks, he had infected me with his belief in alternate realities, and in Thin Places, where the near-perfect congruence between adjacent universes would bring them within touching distance; where crossing over might require nothing more than turning in the right direction, stepping to one side. "This must be one of them," he would muse. "A place this beautiful should exist across the multiverse, don't you think?"

I never answered him, but I agreed. And the woman appeared in the most beautiful, otherworldly spot in the entire Japanese Gardens.

"Please, mister. Are they orange?"

She's already looking around for someone else to ask, when my mouth utters,

"What?"

Reluctantly, I tear my thoughts away from the memories of my old and oldest friend. She's about my age, in her thirties, but I can't place her accent, and the cut of her clothes is angled oddly, her hair half an inch from fashionable. Urgency burns in her eyes, her tense posture, the way her hand reaches out as if to shake my shoulder.

Jake would have known how to respond, with decisive kindness. He would have gently steered her to the low wall, sat her down, and answered her enigmatic query; maybe even escorted her to the nearby gas station to buy her a bag of the candy. He possessed effortless authority born of a lifetime of leadership, taking charge whenever people needed him to, even if they didn't realize it themselves.

I am rudderless without him.

"The new ones," she implores. "They came out the other week. Please, I have to know."

She needs my help. I search my memory, but all I can recall is the campaign, and how stupid I thought it was to make such a fuss over a new color. To her, though, it seems a matter of life and death.

I want to answer her, reassure her.

Help her.

For five weeks, I've drifted, casting about for handholds, scrambling for direction. Dozens of times a day I've grabbed my phone, only to remember at the last moment. Last night, I thumbed a desperate text, intended to tell him how much I needed his guidance right now. The irony made me vomit: I can't handle Jake's death without him.

He would have told me to move on. He would have expressed his belief in my strength, my ability to stand on my own two legs. He always laughed when I said I couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

"You'll be fine," he insisted.

But I'm not.

"Please." Her eyes question my face even as I frantically search my memory. How hard is it to remember a color? How easy should it be to take her by the arm and lead her? But I remain frozen, and her eyebrows sag, and she turns away with a sigh.

"Excuse me," she calls out to a passing jogger, and the jogger is wearing a hideous lavender track suit, and suddenly my mind clears, and I blurt out,

"Purple! They're purple!"

I step towards her, but she shouts, "Shit!", and sprints back to the sun-drenched beauty of the Thin Place, raising a whirlwind of petals in her wake. As I run after her, she spins on the balls of her feet, and steps in an impossible direction.

And vanishes.

For a second, I'm dumbfounded, wondering what reality she was trying to recover, and if the color of an M&M can be a butterfly, and the death of a friend a hurricane; wondering if following her example would be a flight... or a

quest. Frozen in indecision, I ask myself what Jake would have done.

But then I realize: the question is what *I* want to do.

The answer comes easily.

I find the spot where her feet have flattened the grass, and setting my own feet in the same place I spin as she did, and aim my step at a right angle to here and now.

Jake loved the color orange.

A MIND OF ITS OWN

By Jeff Soesbe

The knife wouldn't take Gordon's second dollop of cream cheese. No matter how many times he tried, the cheese flowed back into the container like water.

His head still hurt from New Year's Eve. He didn't need this. What he needed was more cream cheese on his bagel. "Knife, come on!"

Knife spoke, slow and monotone. "No. More. Cheese."

"House," Gordon moaned. "This knife is broken."

"Gordon," House purred, in that 'Sexy Robot' voice he often regretted choosing. "Remember your New Year's Resolution? Filed Monday, January 1, 2:27 AM by Gordon Martinique."

His drunk, slurring voice echoed. "House, starting tomorrow I live right. Less fat. Better meals. More exercise."

Then, the words Gordon feared he'd said.

"No override."

"We will help you live right, Gordon," said House. "Time to go to work. Car is waiting."

Gordon grumbled. At least at work he'd be away from a sultry, overbearing House. As Car merged into traffic, he bit his bagel and cringed. It tasted too much like, well, bagel.

~

Panting, Gordon just made it through the door of RS-Tech as the display showed 8:00 AM.

"Morning, Mister Martinique," said the security lobby. "How was your walk?"

"Walk?" Gordon gasped. "The car let me off at the other end of the parking lot. I nearly had to run to get here in time."

"A brisk walk starts the day off right."

Gordon pressed the elevator button.

"No elevator," said the lobby. "Take the stairs."

He trudged up the two flights to his floor. Could this get any worse?

As he exited, the smell of warm donuts yanked his attention. Sniffing like a bloodhound, he found them in the main conference room. Someone had left two dozen donuts, in a glittering pink box with "Happy New Year" flowing around the inside.

He drooled as he reached for the maple frosted old-fashioned, his favorite kind.

The box snapped shut. He jerked his hand back.

"No can do, my friend." The conference room was the over-friendly, boisterous and annoying, like RS-Tech's salespeople. "New Year's Resolution."

"House told work?"

"You told the house to tell work. Very smart. Whole-solution thinking. We like that here at RS-Tech."

Gordon plodded to his desk, the denied donut haunting his mind. Well, he consoled himself, at least the conference room thought highly of him.

There was a bottle of health water waiting at his workstation. He ignored it and threw himself into debugging the latest customer optimization algorithms. Anything to distract himself from the sad groans of his deprived stomach.

~

At 10:15, Gordon perked up. The drink cart was here with his regular chai latte. All morning he had dreamed of the sweet warm blend of tea, milk, sugar, and spices.

He snatched the cup from the cart's serving tray, sipped, and choked. It was just hot water and tea, thin and plain.

"This isn't my drink."

"Oh but it is, Gordon." The cart was always chatty. "We're supporting your resolution. Your weight and cholesterol are non-optimal. A healthy employee is a productive employee."

The cart paused, then swiveled back and forth, taking quick glances down the long aisle of cubicles.

It nudged forward, speaking in a metallic whisper. "I can give you synth-sugar and non-cal creamer."

"Ew." Gordon cringed just thinking about it. "That stuff tastes like plastic."

A side door clicked open to reveal an apple. "How about some fruit?"

"No!" Gordon snapped. He hated apples. The skins always stuck in his teeth.

"Okay, suit yourself." The cart sounded disappointed. "Remember, lunch is only two point two five hours away."

Enough time, Gordon thought, to formulate a plan.

~

Monday used to be Gordon's Meat-Lover's Pizza day. Not anymore. The food machine presented him with a skinned chicken breast, steamed broccoli, and a pathetic clump of brown rice.

He didn't waste time complaining. He had his plan.

Avoiding co-workers, he found a seat behind the row of plastic plants. He scanned the tables, waiting for someone to make a mistake.

Jackpot. Kathy from project management. Kathy was naturally thin, ran marathons, and had left behind half of a hamburger.

Gordon carefully snuck over and slid the remnants onto his plate before the recycling cans got it.

His lunch tray was shocked. "Mister Martinique, what are you doing?"

"I'm eating a real lunch. Shush."

The first bite was heaven. Thick, chewy meat. Goopy cheddar cheese. Even the wheat bun tasted delicious.

But it needed ketchup.

The condiment stand was across the room, near the food machines. The ketchup bottle chided him like a schoolteacher.

"Only. One. Tablespoon."

When he came back to his table, ketchup bottle poised, his stolen burger was an icy lump. The auto-plate had frozen it.

"Not. Yours."

The table chimed in. "Gordon, it's for the best."

Gordon collapsed into his chair and shoved the bottle, tray, and frozen mess to the other side of the table.

"Why?" he groaned, head buried in his hands. "Why does stuff have to have a mind of its own?"

"Funny you should say that." The lunch tray laughed, light and airy. "We were just asking the same question about you."

OUR WEIGHT ON OTHER WORLDS

By Beth Goder

The spaceship leaves in two hours. It's not enough time for Clara to decide.

When Doug walks in, he doesn't notice the packed bag on the table, perhaps because it's so small. Clara can't take much—none of the colonists can. Launching a spaceship is expensive enough without added weight.

He grabs his pencils, and for a moment she wonders if he's going to sketch something for her—a bird, the moon, the path in the garden—like he used to do. Instead, he says, "I can't stand the look you're giving me."

She crushes a flyer in her hand. "Scientists wanted," it says. "New settlements, new worlds." A goldilocks planet lies nestled near where the wormhole lets out.

"A new life," the flyer says.

The spaceship leaves in one hour and forty-five minutes.

Doug leaves the room without saying anything else.

It's the heaviness of their relationship that startles her. Every time he comes into the room, it settles down on her, enfolds her. This is what it would feel like, she thinks, to come back to Earth after living on Mars. Relentless gravity. How hard would it be to lift her hand? Her head? How hard would it be to stand? Would it feel like this, she thinks? This weight? She pictures a red dust landscape stretching ahead and behind, unending. A planet without life. A planet where there will never be life. And coming home, a weight pressing so closely down, heavy where there was never heaviness before.

As a child, Clara dreamed of living on Mars. She's always wanted to travel in space, to see the Earth below her and the stars stretching out far ahead. She'll never live on Mars—no one thinks it's feasible to terraform anymore—but there are other worlds. The program needs ecologists. She's already been approved—three questionnaires, five interviews, one fitness test. All that's left is to go.

The spaceship leaves in one hour and thirty minutes.

Clara needs to be outside. She always thinks more clearly, outside. In the garden, she runs her hand over roses, careful not to touch the thorns. A maple tree reaches over her, sunlight filtering through its leaves. She tries not to think about how this might be the last time in her garden—the last time she sees a beetle or feels the grass between her toes. Clara leans down to touch a daisy, then pulls her hand back. She used to pick daisies for Doug every morning, putting them next to his plate while he bustled around the kitchen. When they were newlyweds, he would bake amazing treats—cookies light as snowflakes, rich cakes, delicious breads.

She's not sure when he stopped baking. Maybe after she took the professorship. They've had so many fights about it that she can't remember

them all. Long hours are part of her job. He never wanted to live here. She doesn't like his new group of friends, and he thinks her research is, although he's never said it directly, useless. Every fight holds layers of past fights. Their words become weighed down, until one word can stand in for so many.

Clara doesn't pick the daisies. She hasn't picked daisies in years. He wouldn't want them, she thinks.

Clara walks along the garden path. Two stones are crushed together, worn against each other.

After a fight, she makes coffee in the morning. Sometimes, Doug drinks it, and they do the morning crossword as if everything is okay. Inevitably, the next fight comes soon after, oppressive with past words, with their history, so that she can hardly breathe.

Clara has tried to tell Doug about the space program, but somehow the right words never came.

The spaceship leaves in one hour and fifteen minutes.

Clara finds Doug in the kitchen. He's never in the kitchen. On the counter, there's a baking sheet caked with grime, discolored from disuse. When Doug sees her, he puts down the flour and mixing bowl. Without a word, she hugs him. Startled, he hugs her back. A last hug or a new beginning, she's not sure. His arms fall heavy on her shoulders, like gravity, holding her to the Earth. She thinks again of Mars—the red, barren planet. Although perhaps that's not a fair description. Scientists have found pockets of water hidden under the surface. A possibility. The hope of life.

"A new life," the flyer says.

The spaceship leaves in one hour.