

Issue III | Spring 2020



**Astral
Waters**
REVIEW

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Masthead

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Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the first anniversary issue of *Astral Waters Review*! Our first issue published on May 1st, 2019, and I couldn't be happier with the incredible stories, poetry, plays, photography, and artwork I've had the privilege of sharing with you, and I'm endlessly proud of the brilliant authors, artists, and creators I've worked with thus far.

I look forward to many more years of this magazine supporting the literary and artistic endeavors of underrepresented speculative fiction creators, and in the spirit of our mission statement, I believe we can accomplish that by making a key change here at *Astral Waters Review*.

Namely, I want to ensure that readers of all financial standings have access to this publication. To do that, all issues of *Astral Waters Review*, past and future, are [now available for free download on our website](#).


Our mission states that we exist to support and amplify the voices of marginalized genre writers, and part of that mission includes making our magazine as easily accessible as possible to extend the reach and representation of these creators.

If you can, please help us spread the word about the magazine on social media and in person; we need your help to grow our audience and increase visibility for LGBTQ+ and POC science fiction and fantasy writers. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for your continued support of *Astral Waters Review* and all that we aim to do with this publication.

With gratitude,
Amylia Ryan, Editor-in-Chief

*Astral
Waters*

The Basilisk

A portrait of Melanie Moyer, a woman with dark hair, smiling, wearing a light blue denim jacket. She is sitting in front of a bookshelf.

MELANIE MOYER is a Philly-based author and copywriter. Her first novel was published through Waterton Publishing in 2018. Her forthcoming novel will be published in summer 2021 through Lanternfish Press. Her short work has been published in *Ghost Parachute*, *Meat for Tea*, *Prometheus Dreaming*, and *Popsugar*.

I picked up on it instantly. How couldn't I when Dr. Hostler literally slapped on our syllabuses an entire two weeks dedicated to the Great Filter Theory and the Fermi Paradox. That sucked. I had a feeling in a week it would be debunked as some natural, weird formation, a trick of the light. Like that face on Mars. And then me and the three other people who were able to put two and two together in that class would say *what a fucking waste* it was that Dr. Hostler got a little too impulsive. But she'd been waiting for it since the '80s when everyone was tripping over themselves for another monthly fallout drill. Maybe making it this long was a triumph for her. How someone with that mentality gets to teach at the Ivy League level is beyond me. But she's dead now and they're still saying they found "evidence of ancient, extraterrestrial civilizations" on Titan where those pools of liquid methane were always pulling the alien-loving astrophysicists in like moths to a buzzing tube of neon.

When they said they found something that looked a pyramid on Titan, Dr. Hostler did not finish the salad that was found sitting on her kitchen table. Instead she took a handful of potpourri pills and a bottle of Jack and her assistant found her the next day. I think a lot about the time between. How long after the new story about ancient extraterrestrial evidence play did she take to decide what it meant. How long after that did it take her to decide what she was going to do about it.

I sat at the bar in Corner Tavern where the TVs were wiped of football or hockey or anything that reminded us that anything else but this was going on. CNN, MSNBC, some usual crack on Fox News

talking about it being a sign from their god. I was already sick of the chyrons and the white anchors in their pressed clothes smiling and showing clips of *E.T.* and *Men In Black*. I took a sip of beer as Tommy Lee Jones gravely said *imagine what you'll know tomorrow*.

Dr. Hostler's funeral is on Saturday. It's going to be filled with colleagues and former students and people talking about her work. Let's talk about how a woman killed herself because she thought aliens' existing was going to be it for us. Thanks for the hot tip CNN.

"The Fermi Paradox, as discussed, is the apparent lack of intelligent life despite the vastness of our universe," Dr. Hostler said to the dimmed room as a blue and white Power Point switched slides on the projector. "The Great Filter stems from the belief that the lack of intelligent life in the universe is the result of a flaw in the argument that intelligent life beyond our planet is *probable*."

I scribbled that down because she was a known quick-clicker and never went back to older slides for people who never learned how to do shorthand in college.

"This threshold, if behind us, works as a measurable barrier for intelligent life that we have already overcome. If in front of us, it is almost certainly a promise of imminent destruction of life on the planet."

I wonder if she took the time to write that on a suicide notepad somewhere or just didn't waste time and let the impact of it all speak for itself.

"So, what? We found intelligent life and we get smacked by an asteroid?" That assistant who found her was also at the bar. Because who the fuck wants to be alone in a West Philly apartment after you found the dead body of your boss.

"No."

"I'm sorry, I just don't understand any of it."

I didn't want to explain. I didn't want to spell out why a woman killed herself. My throat was getting sore with the beginning of a cold and the news anchors would not stop showing clips of every imaginable sci-fi movie in Western canon. So instead I told her to check those copious amounts of notes she'd been in charge of organizing and I'd see her at the funeral on Saturday. When she called after me asking for a phone number in case she needed to talk, I pretended not to hear her.

I walked home with the taste of yeast and those IPA hops sticking to my teeth and I thought about finally buying that British novam-in toothpaste but if we were all careening toward disaster, what's the point? I pushed through some people who still felt the need to protest Philly's sanctuary city status in Rittenhouse Square, despite pictures of a literal alien race on every screen in the world. Maybe they were afraid we'd harbor those aliens too.

#

"You're not a very good student, Miss Kern."

That was fair. I said as much, with a shrug.

"It doesn't bother you that you're sitting in an Ivy League school right now with abysmal grades?"

"My mom really wanted me to come here."

"Why did you decide on a course toward astrophysics?"

I liked space. I had a telescope when I was 8. Maybe a part of me wanted to feel a little bit in control when I looked up at the night sky. It was a less depressing way to spend my time than sitting upstairs in my room with headphones like a cliché when the arguments in the kitchen turned into shouting matches and slammed doors.

And I was good at math. So the options were math teacher or something cooler—which is literally anything.

This was my last conversation with Dr. Hostler. Countdown to alien pyramid reveal: three days. It was office hours, which I went to because she said she gave extra credit if you showed up for them, and we mostly had conversations like this.

“This is a lot of money you’re wasting.”

It was hard to explain that money came from a settlement. That my dad hit the gas one night instead of the brake after a heavy dose of some \$9 whiskey and went through the front of the house, and all my mom had to do was be competent enough to pick up the phone for any lawyer who answered and everything in my dad’s bank account went to her. It’s easier just to say *we came into some money* and smile and nod when people talked about their student debt.

“I was hoping to recommend you to a colleague at the University of Colorado doing research on exoplanets.”

“Moving is a hassle.”

“A few weeks ago you said you wanted to get out of Philadelphia.”

I did say that. Maybe I meant for a weekend in Ocean City or a drive up to New England. Maybe I just meant somewhere the stars were more obvious and it was less noisy and smelled less like garbage water. Maybe I just didn’t like how humid it was feeling during the Indian summer or the way there was always a story about a shooting or burglary. Maybe what I really needed was just one good bender in my apartment to snap everything back come Monday. Or maybe I needed antidepressants and to stop dreaming that my dad was yelling at me in that old home on Kendall Lane when he stopped being able to tell the difference between me and my mom.

After a few more disappointed, gentle tongue lashings from Dr. Hostler, I went back to my apartment in University City and stared at the open textbook. She was the type of professor to assign her own work during class, though a couple other foreign sounding names—Rupi Patel, Pelle Lindstrom, Oleg Malkin—were thrown in there after her own. She wasn’t big on pictures. Lots of words in small typeface line after line, and after a while my yellow highlighting seemed like a useless spin of the wheels in my head.

I drank decaf coffee. When it cooled I looked at the clock and then poured wine. I drank that until I noticed in the bathroom mirror that my lips got stained and I wondered at what point my father became self-aware before he slipped over that invisible cliff into the land of DUIs and AA meetings.

I watched the sun go down through the crack in the blinds that I never opened because I liked it to be a cave at all times inside. I put on old episodes of background noise from Netflix and ate snacks for dinner rather than the salmon or eggplant I bought with such high hopes for a meal worthy of slapping in front of my 54 Instagram followers. On the laptop screen were people yelling at each other through keyboards on Facebook, was the birthday of someone from my freshman dorm in

undergrad, were people sharing a video of a dog dancing to a Celine Dion song. Outside it was getting louder with the sounds of students going out for the night and Ubers honking to get their attention.

I didn't think about what Dr. Hostler said again. But then she died.

#

Over too-hot coffee before the sun comes up, I like to think about what Dr. Hostler was specifically afraid of. It's become my new morning pastime. My first thought goes to the obvious places: global warming, overpopulation. Those slow-moving beasts become the glaciers they shave out of existence one year at a time. I look at the little red plastic stirrer in my cup and think *I'm part of the problem*. But it's not my fucking fault. Capitalism just likes to eat whatever's in sight and I can't undo it with a \$10 metal straw from Amazon.

Then I like to think a little more fun: rabies outbreak, Ebola, zombie apocalypse, nukes waving to each other in the sky as they chug along. It's all on the table. I crunch down on a few grounds that got through the filter. It feels like sand in my teeth. That's us. Sand in the teeth of the universe's waiting mouth.

"When I was younger I had a life or death incident," she told me once, in office hours.

"That's heavy."

"We saw something we weren't supposed to see."

"Like mob stuff?"

"A kid in the neighborhood told us it was a basilisk—of all ridiculous things—that lived in a cave—this was before Harry Potter—it was a great big creature that looked you in the eye and killed you that way or breathed some poison gas on you and got you that way. The parents let him do it because it kept us away from the fence and the national guard men standing around it sometimes. Mostly they just relied on the fence and the stories though."

"Wait. Holy shit—sorry. What was it?"

"A beast from an accident in the power plant they never told us about. A glob of corium from a meltdown that would be buzzing out radioactivity for the next thousand years or so. The grass around that place was brown and dead for so long. In short, it was a basilisk."

Dr. Hostler stared into space then as her tea steamed up between us on her desk. It was apple and cinnamon, and she always put a little bit of almond milk in it. "I think radiation is the universe's kill switch. The self destruct."

"Cool."

She looked in a trance. "The history of mankind is the history of attainment of eternal power."

"Right."

She swung the conversation back to class, back to the thesis statement I hadn't submitted yet for my final paper. Back to how the weather was finally changing.

Now, classes were canceled for the rest of the week. I'm not sure if it was aliens around Jupiter or the dead professor. But I went back

to the Corner as soon as the clock struck noon and ordered a different beer because I figured I had a limited amount of time to try new things.

“Wild, right?” The bartender was energetic, hyped up on the Red Bull he got himself from the tiny fridge on the back counter where they advertised a vodka too. Not to give anyone any ideas.

“Yep.”

“My grandmom died last year, sucks she never got to see this.”

“See it and she probably would have died when they announced it.”

“Good point.”

One of the stations decided to cover a Neo-Nazi rally down in Georgia. But that was only because their platform was that this whole thing was a deep fake by liberals to sneak some legislation in while everyone was goo-goo eyed over a sci-fi dream come true. The guy talking had impeccably cut hair, a pressed and clean suit; he looked like he smelled nice and expensive. His audience was a sea of tattooed, rail-thin, shaved-head, toothless ghouls shouting affirmations at virtually every word that left his mouth.

“Everything is just insane.”

I turned. The assistant was back. She must have thought I was a regular here.

“It’s a time bomb,” I said, wondering if I really believed that or if I was saying it like someone says the sky is blue and the ocean is big.

“Dr. Hostler had convictions, but she also had other things going on,” the assistant said. She had a name. I’d seen it on the syllabus under the contact information. It was Andrea. “People are going to talk at that funeral on Saturday about how she did what she did in the name of science and her staunch beliefs but it wasn’t that at all. At least, I think it would have happened anyway.”

“Armchair psychology?” I ordered her a beer without asking what she wanted.

“She was sick.”

Ah. That got a pause from my tapping fingers. Andrea took a sip of the lager I ordered her and looked up at the news screen where they showed Trump smiling like a rag doll with loose skin that had been pulled back to show teeth. He was waving, someone had a sign about the Space Force. The chyron read *Trump Vows To Protect US From Alien Invasion*. It wouldn’t even have been out of the ordinary to read a week ago.

“She had leukemia,” she said. “From an accident as a kid. ‘Keep out’ signs are like catnip to kids.”

“I didn’t know adults could get leukemia.”

“I think she had it for a while and they were managing. Adults usually don’t last long with it, and she was in the final stages, so this was just the cosmos putting it all together, I guess.”

“What happens when someone finally debunks that thing?”

“You believe the alt-right bullshit that it’s a ‘liberal diversion tactic’?”

“No, I just mean we have no fucking clue what it is and even natural geological structures on earth have done some whacked out stuff. Look at the Giant’s Causeway or the Bimini Road.”

“I,” she said before taking a massive gulp of her beer, “just find it hard to believe that a pyramid on a moon hundreds of thousands of miles away is the reason it all ends here.”

“It’s not the reason, it’s like, it means that we’re not unique and other sorts of beings have gotten to our level of intelligence and then maxed out because there’s some crazy hard level to conquer and no one’s done it yet and chances are we won’t. If we kept on not seeing signs of intelligent life then it means we did something unique and that really hard level is somewhere behind us.”

“So, what is it? Global warming? Loss of resources? Mutually assured destruction?”

“Don’t know.”

More sips of beer, more ramblings from the bartender, and more shots of protests and stern-looking men telling us what it all means. The church was starting to get irate. The Middle East was downright refusing to believe any of it. If the world was going to end, I decided I wanted to do it right here, at this bar stool with some asshole craft beer in my hand. But I wanted to be watching Spongebob or Rugrats or something that reminded me of my parent’s first house on Kendall Lane.

#

I went to the funeral and it was uneventful. I sat next to Andrea and she cried a little bit and I pretended not to see it. I ate at the lun-

cheon after and felt ridiculous eating shrimp skewered with toothpicks while a woman was newly dead in the ground and we were telling jokes and smiling. Andrea gave me her number, told me to call her sometime, told me we should go out and not talk about death.

I thought about it, for a minute. I thought about us at a bar or a craft cider house or somewhere we made reservations. I saw us watching movies on a couch and one day telling people about how we met because her boss—my professor—killed herself. We’d have Thanksgiving and Christmas and kiss at midnight on New Year’s Eve and wear matching Halloween costumes. We’d smile in vacation photos and get married somewhere ridiculous and bring kids into this world and yell at them. We’d have a suburban house and a suburban car and a suburban life. We’d watch our kids go through the whole thing too, when they were old enough.

I pocketed the number and never took it out again.

Hopefully the world would end before she came looking for me at the Corner Tavern again.

The Astronaut

The cliffs of a comet are a place you can go.
Dust with no footprints,
And bits of solar radiation,
Darting like invisible snow.
And what does a comet sound like
In the vacuum of space?
Sound is only a feeling
When the waves dissipate outward,
Swallowed by a deaf black sea.
To hear this song you must trust your feet.
In the dust you must kneel
as all things must eventually kneel.
Place a gloved hand on the wall of an ancient cavern,
and up your arm you will feel the universe chime.



L.K. EARLY lives in the Twin Cities area with her dream girl and their dog, Frida Maria. She spends her free time baking, quilting, and staring out windows. She is a graduate of the Golden Crown Literary Society Writing Academy, class of 2017. Her short stories have been published in *Haunting Muses* (Bedazzled Ink, 2016), *A Heart Well-Traveled - Vol. 2* (Sapphire Books, 2017), *Our Happy Hours*, *LGBT Voices from the Gay Bars* (Flashpoint Productions, 2017), *Conference Call* (Bella Books, 2017), *Written Dreams* (Brisk Press, 2018), and more.

Patch Bastard



HAYDEN MOORE was born and raised in Georgia and has lived in New York City for the past twelve years. In the past seven months, he has been published nine times for his short stories: twice in *Corner Bar Magazine*, *Metonym Literary Journal*, *Drunk Monkey Literary Journal*, *Fictional Cafe*, *Modern Literature*, *Calliope*, *Wood Coin Magazine* and *Wink Magazine*. He lives with his wife and cat on the waters of Jamaica Bay in Queens.

Already have I once been a boy and a girl, and a bush and a bird, and a silent fish in the sea: Empedocles

Along the dirt roads of that place where a dried-up creek marked the state line, Arethusa steadied herself with tired hands on the rough bars of the carriage window. There were no shadows on the plank floor to mark the time of day. Sweat dripped from her bare body with its own rhythm and was half evaporated before it fell from her face like lost tears surprised to find another way out, only to die on their way down. Honey locusts lined the cracked road as they drifted by, their assertive thorns yet another portent of the night to come. The unseen horses snorted from ahead, a dissonance to accompany the perpetual rattling of the vessel they pulled. Arethusa named the horses in her head: Patch and Bastard. Horse regrets filled her mind. She closed her eyes. Her own regrets regretted in horse thoughts. Just like the horses, she yearned for a place not where creeks underlined the state of Tennessee and bid farewell to Georgia. Arethusa wanted to gallop across the sea she had never seen, to find that place where sky-piercing mountains did not mark the boundary of some state or country, but where the frozen peaks punctuated the limit, the end. For a moment, she could smell the snow and feel the cold wind as she danced with the horses in a place where none of them had names and there was nowhere else to go. This was enough. Nothing was beyond. It was the placeless place, the end.

As her sweat-clothed body sought a little patch of shade forming in the corner of her wooden confinement, her mind penetrated the barred window and flew upwards. There was no up or down, past or present. The future was meaningless. She was herself a little girl again, her father's kind hand enveloping her own as they trotted towards the woods. Arethusa could feel the fire consuming her home. Faint laughter intertwined with shouts fed the flames. Her mother's bones rested somewhere near her. The woods smelled of shadows and looked like sulfur. The ground tried to eat her stumbling feet while the moon pulled back her eternal nightshade. Stars blotted themselves out. More feet joined her father's and hers. They sounded foreign, the tongues of the pursuing shoes full of hard consonants with a few vowels for prisoners. Shouts obliterated a father and child's wordless understanding. Steel proved her father was mortal. Thoughts revealed themselves as savage nothings as manic hands pulled her away. A single scream summoned the darkness from within.

"God damn piece o' shit horse! I'll have ya fur dinner 'fore long! Get on! Get on, ya heap o' bones! Get!"

Arethusa woke with the sting of the whip on her back. She reached over her shoulders to touch her back. Nothing but flesh, bones and sweat. Her eyes darted along the bare carriage. The oblique shadows cast by the bars on the window told her how long she had slept. Nothing. Alone. In a few hours, the sun would be down. In a couple of hours, the carriage door would be unlocked. In an hour, her costume would appear like a tumor through the bars. In half an hour, she would have a bite of something, a drink of something worse. Throughout, eyes would probe her. Eyes would judge her body and her mind, her words and her face. As she shivered in her own dread, her long arms crossed over her knees as she cursed herself. One of the only things she remembered about her mother, the woman who passed on the curse to her, was a single warning: Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse.

The bitterness of the hard bread pervaded Arethusa's mouth as she pulled the sparkling green dress over her aching breasts and let it fall. There was just enough light left for her to cringe at the sequins. A year ago, the costume had reached her knees. Now, the dress seemed a cruel joke, as it only hinted at temptation for the gawkers to come. Arethusa wondered how she was able to keep growing with so little food, so little will. She pulled her bountiful black hair over her left shoulder and tied it into a knot as always. Splinters and dust spilled from her damp hair as it settled upon her chest. When she pulled the hood over her head, the black hair peeked out like a simulacrum of life in the midst of the performance to come. All the rest was artifice. Well, most of it. A soft bed, a few good meals and a conversation was all she needed. That would change everything. She knew she contained multitudes, just like her mother. But the rabble was already waiting for her. There was never enough time or sustenance. Stale beer, stale food, stale people in a stale world were waiting. No matter how many creeks were crossed or curses cast upon herself and on the horses, it would always be the same. Arethusa knew the horses knew it, too.

The toothless old man locked the shackles on Arethusa's right leg as always. She felt the pain of the rock that had struck the old man in the head long before he was either old or a man. She had already wept for him, though. As she felt the iron circle of possession possess her, Arethusa closed her eyes and stood. She stepped off the carriage blindly and felt the mud beneath her feet. The chain of the shackle squirmed along behind her. The mud felt like an animate death on the calloused soles of her feet. She even smiled a bit as the mud tickled the sides of her feet as she sank. A fiddler played somewhere behind her. Drunken sounds were lost in the drunken song. Firelight crackled behind her. She took a deep breath. Pine and cedar hinted at the limestone beneath the mud. Arethusa imagined a cave somewhere nearby where the lime caverns could be her tomb. She was fifteen and too old. She had suffered too much by experiencing so little. A thousand and one pinpricks

penetrated from within her lower stomach. A porcupine was taking refuge within her. Arethusa opened her eyes. The man's breath forced her to.

"Now you listen here," the yellow-eyed man said, who was as old as her father had been, "Not a sound outta ya this time. Ya hear? Not a goddamn peep or I'll—"

Arethusa continued to hold her breath as she nodded to the rotten teeth in front of her. When she looked down, it looked as though her feet had been reclaimed by the sodden earth. If she stood here long enough, the rest would follow.

"Now, this is what we're gonna do," the man continued, taking a step back. "I'm gonna bring two folks up to ya...just two. Don't ya even think about tryin' to scare nobody purposely. Just show 'em. That's it. Ya hear?"

Arethusa nodded again without looking up. The mud had claimed her ankles and was yearning to consume her calves. The porcupine did a somersault inside of her. She cringed. When she looked up, the man was gone. Only the spirit of his breath remained.

Smoke, cicadas, a soft hot breeze, crickets, piss, rust, porcupine, shit, whinny, stomp, footsteps. As the list grew in her head, Arethusa banished every one of them but two. Time was eating its own tail as she joined the porcupine and the horses. Her feet continued to sink in the mud as she flew amidst the clouds at the pinnacle of the sky. Words were just as meaningless here as her species. The horses were free of the whip and the hard road. The porcupine was along for the ride as a benevolent stowaway. She was what she was supposed to be. Here—

"Now follow me over here but don't ya dare get too close to her."

Arethusa clinched her toes in the depths of the mud. She knew. This was what everyone was made from. Just add water and poof. People. Shouts and footsteps. She knelt down and sunk her hands into the receiving earth. Life paste. By the time the footsteps settled in a half-circle around her, Arethusa had covered herself in mud. Only her eyes and teeth betrayed she was not a golem. Clumps of mud hung from the sullied sequins of her costume. She relished in the way the mud dried on her skin. It was a chthonic embrace, a dead hug that hinted at life.

"Don't be scared, now. Whatcha see here is just what she does before she does what she does. It's a kinda ritual. But this ain't no church ritual. Preacher man cut out her tongue 'fore she could talk. Preacher man knew she was evil. He cut out her tongue 'cause it was the will 'o God. Might seem a bit cruel to cut out a baby's tongue at her baptism. But the water turned to blood when that baby went into the water. Pure evil. But don't fear. She can't summon the demons no more. Just a little bit of magic," the man slurred through his cracked lips.

"She some kinda savage!" a boy yelled.

"Some kinda Lilith!" his mother added.

"Looks here like she bathes in shit like a demon," an old man guffawed.

"Now! Here, here," the man intruded, "I am livin' proof she ain't deadly. Those chains you see on her are for her own protection. She ain't no captive. She can't even feed herself proper. I am her deliverer. Now, don't thank me. I'm grateful to have gotten the burden. She's the daughter I never had, I tell you what. Her favorite thing is doin' her thing for people just like you. It's this or the asylum for her."

“She can’t be old enough to marry,” a woman gasped.

“It may look it,” the man continued, “but I swear on the Bible she’s older than this here man standing before ya. Older than America, probably. Who knows. She came from some place in the Cock-us-says. Place where witches lived. ’Fore Christian times o’ course. Now—”

“Show us somethin’!” a boy’s voice cried.

“Yeah, show us!” voices yelled, as the crowd pressed closer.

Porcupine, horses, herself. Arethusa stood up and clumps of mud fell from her. Her arms fell to her sides and traces of flesh betrayed her mortality to the crowd. She felt protected from the gawking eyes, protected as long as the night remained and the mud had not fallen to pieces. When she opened her eyes, the crowd gasped. She tried to remember what color they were. It had been too long to recall. But she could remember her mother’s and father’s, those eyes long ago consumed by the same kind of earth she was covered in. Her hands began to shake. They always did before she performed. Her phantom tongue licked the back of her teeth. Horse eyes watched her nearby. She was as bound to the carriage as they. But not all bonds were visible. The porcupine agreed.

“What I need from y’all is a volunteer. Now, I warn ya...She might look harmless, but she’s downright powerful. The Lord moves in mysterious ways. ’Specially the Dark One. I gotta tell ya first off: No kids. And I warn you fellas...better be wary of lettin’ your wives volunteer. They ain’t never gonna be the same after this. Now...who’s brave enough—”

“I’ll do it,” a woman said, as she stepped forward amidst the cacophony of voices.

“Now looky right here! This lady outdid all you fellas. How old are you, ma’am?” the man asked, as he put his wiry arm around her shoulder.

“Now that’s not a polite thing to ask a lady,” the woman said with a smile.

“Pardon me, miss. Didn’t mean to offend. You can’t be no much older than...well, not her,” the man laughed, pointing at Arethusa. “Now, you just follow me and step right up to this—”

“What’s her name?” the woman asked, digging her bare feet into the mud.

“Her name?” The man paused. “Her name’s Lilith, o’ course. Swear on a Bible.”

“Lilith?” The woman smiled. “Sounds ’bout right.”

“Again, just step right up but only get close enough for Lilith, here, to touch ya. Don’t you dare look into her eyes. Person just like you tried that once. Thought she was brave. Swear on my life she dropped dead right there. Swear on a stack of Bibles.”

“Well...where do I look? She looks pretty enough even covered in mud,” the woman muttered, swallowing.

“Anywhere but in those crazy eyes of hers. Probly best you closed your own. Temptation is a wicked thing. You’ll see plenty enough,” the man said in a baritone voice.

Yes, mama, Arethusa said in that place where she still had a tongue. She let language drift away like seaweed in a receding tide.

While the porcupine adjusted itself within her, she rearranged the habits of her nights past, like broken bits of colored glass, until a mosaic of an altogether different picture refracted the light of her mind. Deep within her being, in that secular room of the palace, the prismatic mosaic of infinite colors and meaning shone through her. Faint steps in the mud echoed through the scene but failed to diminish even a photon from finding its own glory amidst the countless others. Hers was a multiverse folded in and upon itself until all possibilities and actualities were and were becoming. She opened her eyes and saw with six.

“I can tell you’re scared,” the man said, standing behind the woman. “You just close those pretty eyes of yours and I’ll guide your hand. Don’t be gettin’ no ideas back there, husband!” The man laughed, as laughter from the crowd joined his.

Arethusa was settled in her creation and opened her eyes. The trembling hand of the woman held by the same old one from so many nights before was close to her bare shoulder. Arethusa watched as the clenched mouth of the woman looked to be somewhere between a laugh and a cry. Time slowed down as it tended to do in the grips of expectation. Just before the woman’s hand reached her skin, Arethusa looked around the scene through her three pairs of eyes. The woman, woods and Patch, creek and Bastard. Tunnel vision, peripheral, peripheral. Nothing to the sides, nothing ahead, nothing ahead. Good. One, two, three, Time is a winding fickle thing—

Contact.

“Easy, there now...easy, baby girl. Cryin’ won’t help not one of us. Won’t change a thing. Ya just had to come into this here world with a head of fire. Easy, easy, easy baby girl.” I watch as you cry for the last time. Your head. That little head I was ’bout to lay at my breast. That little head is hangin’ behind your little body. That little body not like his.

Not like his at all. Specially the hair. Not sure if he’s gonna bury you. Might burn you. Probly headed out to kill the daddy. I hurt. Sposed to be a joyous kinda day. But it’s night. S’posed to be a joyous pain. It just hurts. It hurts like I think dyin’ will. If I can just get up. Just get up and catch ’em ’fore—

As the woman stood transfixed with her arm on Arethusa’s shoulder, the man watched as he always did. The crowd watched as they never had before. The husband watched like he never would again. Gut-tural words continued to pourforth from the woman’s mouth. As the dark words continued, Arethusa smiled. Flecks of dirt fell from her face. Had anyone been close enough and dared to look her in the face, they would have sworn she was coming to life. With a twitch of her spare shoulder, Arethusa gathered the attention of the woman. The woman opened her eyes and was transported from one world to another. She made eye contact with Arethusa. Brown eyes met the eyes of Arethusa, those eyes that looked like shattered gemstones of countless colors collected in a sphere and told to see.

The horses whinnied. The porcupine stood up and stretched its needles. The moon banished the clouds. The cicadas and crickets played on. The crowd listened. The man hesitated. Arethusa stared. The woman saw and was seen. Drip, drip, drip.

“She arite?” someone called out.

“Look, mama!” a boy cried. “That demon is pourin’ blood!”

“It’s just part of the ritual,” the man said, placating with his arms.

“Must be some kinda blood ritual. I heard about ’em. I tell you what!” another voice mumbled.

In the lantern light, the blood trickling down Arethusa's legs looked black. Even the copious mud covering her was lost in contrast to the vital stream. As it coursed down her leg in its slow chaos, the woman turned and walked away from Arethusa. By the time her husband could manage to say half her name, the knife in his belt was up to the hilt in his chest. He stood there without looking at the violence, a breathless stare into his wife's eyes as if seeing her for the first time, as if prolonging the uncertainty while he admitted his own guilt. The breath was out of the crowd. A man fainted. The husband fell dead. The fledgling widow stared on. A child laughed. The man gritted his remaining teeth and spat in the face of Arethusa. Arethusa continued to bleed. Crack!

CRACK!

Only the horses, the porcupine, and Arethusa could see the light of the world, feel its radiance and smell its warmth. As the crescent moon pulled the curtain of the clouds across her, the man lurched towards Arethusa. One, two, three...Time is a winding fickle thing. Thump. Thump, thump. Prance, prance, prance...prance, prance, prance. An eternal circle styled with hooves was formed in the mud. Only the heels of the man's boots were still visible. As the boots twitched, Patch and Bastard whinnied at the little life left in the man buried just before his time. Patch reveled in the way Arethusa saw the world. Bastard did, too. Arethusa drifted from one horse to the other while she shared her own sight, her own world with them. The porcupine circled itself within her as it fell into a well-deserved sleep. The crowd scattered. Darkness articulated the peripheral world.

"Bout time you finally keeled 'em," the old man giggled, as he unlocked Arethusa's shackle. "I figur' ya got 'bout an hour or so 'fore the thorities get here. Now get. Get on with ya."

Arethusa placed her hand on the old man's left cheek. The old man saw. The old man heard. The old man knew. Tears streamed from his good eye. By the time he fell to the ground, he was already dead. A calm smile ameliorated the ruin of his face.

When Arethusa climbed onto the haunches and further up Patch, she was looking at the boundless world through the eyes of Bastard. She admired the way she looked on Patch, a demigoddess already aloft on her way towards flight. East was all the three of them knew. East and the sea. On such a night as this, the world was theirs because they had created this world. Theirs was the world where hooves galloped over the water and the moon was a destination, not a muse. Even the barking dogs in the distance knew. Even the voices that followed the lantern light would know.

The Eejit Stage of Evolution

or

Why intelligent life may never be found

an Irish ballad
by
DENIS TITCHENELL

Is there a sentient voice out there and one we could detect?
We aimed our scopes into the void in search of intellect

Then one day I beheld a stream from what might well be worth
Pursuing with some scrutiny—a place they called the Earth
Sing hey de la-dy did-dle dee dee a toast to pla-net Earth

At first it took some fiddling for Their ways we did not know
Then inspired tweaking solved it and we watched the Lucy Show

With Gunsmoke and Ed Sullivan, a childish world, no doubt
But not devoid of value as I slowly figured out
Sing hey de la-dy did-dle dee dee I slowly figured it out

With Shakespeare, Dickens, Wilde and Shaw some isles had made their mark
That continent had Twain and Cheers (in primetime after dark)

I've studied how their world went wrong and what the cause might be
By listening to their radio and what they called TV
Sing hey de la-dy did-dle dee dee they loved to watch TV

For ages now no signal's come from out the Milky Way
To assure us Earth's folk braved the storm and still live there today

We followed raptly all they did and sought to find out why
With all their wit and wisdom they had let their planet die
Sing hey de la-dy did-dle dee dee they let their planet die

It seems that no amount of sense can lunacy outweigh
When service to the ego trumps what nobler minds would say

'Twas greed and megalomania self-righteousness and gall!
If they'd only failed to light the fire of intelligence at all
Sing hey de la-dy did-dle dee dee the mind destroyed it all

Is there a sentient voice out there and one we could detect?
Again we scour the sky in vain in search of intellect

In all the milliard specks out there, there seems to be a dearth
of consciousness. We had such hopes when we discovered Earth
Sing hey de la-dy did-dle dee dee a toast to pla-net Earth

The Eejit Stage of Evolution

D. Titchenell



Is there a sen-tient voice out there and one that we could de-tect? We aimed our scopes in-to the void in search of
in-tel-lect. Then one day I be-hold a stream from what might well be worth Pur-su-ing with some scru-in-
ly a place they called the Earth Sing hey de la-dy did-dle dee dee a toast to pla-net Earth

Flowers from Daddy



TYLER MILES is a journalist from Scranton, Pennsylvania, who holds a Bachelor's of Arts in English from Penn State University, and is trying to rekindle that creative fire news writing beat out of him. He's currently pursuing his master's at Wilkes University.

“Do it, baby,” he said with a wink. “This one here.”

I tried winking back. Slyly—at least, I thought so—my eyes wandered the alley: a rotten mattress and ripped garbage bags outside of overgrown yards like thin, dead forests, and beat-up garages smeared with blood-red graffiti.

The house surrounded by the gate loomed dark and stern, its candled windows like eyes warning us away, but I concentrated hard.

Blackness.

Suddenly I was inside the kitchen. A small black ghost. Everything was milky blue and distorted, like when someone bumps the antenna on daddy's TV. I didn't care too much for the sight anymore—blue was a pretty color sometimes, but I was bored of it.

Nobody here.

I pushed the sight beyond the only doorway I saw into a living room with creased, torn wallpaper that made the golden flowers appear like they grew from the wall.

There was a wrinkled old white lady sleeping on a recliner that looked just like daddy's. Her toothless mouth was an immense black hole as she laid there the way mummies did in my school books when

explorers raided their tombs...right before the mummies woke up and ate them!

She was all alone. I opened my eyes to daddy's own. They were soft and gleaming. His mustache curled up in the funny way it did when he smiled.

"Only an old lady, but she sleep," I told him.

It was easy for him to hop over the fence with those long legs. When I drew pictures of him I would cut his head off the paper to show how tall he was. He always laughed when I showed them to him and said "Now nobody gon' know how handsome yo daddy is."

The streetlight above was busted, so it flickered orange. Little snowflake moths swarmed it anyway. I wasn't afraid here, though—can't nobody whoop my daddy. Besides, everyone loved him and waved when they'd see him in his big car. Ma said that's why he never wants to work: he wants to be "Mr. Cool Man all the time."

He hopped back over the fence with the most beautiful rainbow flowers I ever saw. I sniffed them the whole walk home. I loved it when he got me flowers, especially stolen flowers. It showed how much he loved me.

I hope he doesn't change tonight.

He'd do that sometimes.

He sometimes left home and returned different. He'd smell different, refused to look when you spoke, and sometimes he'd even drool. I had to stay in my room when he was like that. One time he sold

flowers he stole for me to a man outside of the beer store, and when Ma found out she put him on the porch and locked the door. He fussed and hollered for hours.

She said his whole family was cursed because they were owned by Portuguese slavers in Louisiana who taught them witchcraft, and that they continued to practice that and that cursed us all. Cursed me.

I wish I could use my vision to help, because I don't care about seeing inside stupid houses anymore.

I just want to see inside my dad and find out what's wrong.

Humanoid Traffic Stop

A Ten-Minute Play

Cast (in order of appearance):

PASSENGER (African American female in a “vehicle” pulled over; two side-by-side chairs)

DRIVER (African American male seated beside PASSENGER in vehicle pulled over)

COP 1 (in police “vehicle” parked behind vehicle pulled over; two side-by-side chairs)

COP 2 (seated beside COP 1)

OFFICER WELLER



ROGER COLLINS is Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Cincinnati where he received that university’s Cohen Award for Excellence in Teaching. In addition to his academic publications, his short fiction has appeared in *Obsidian III*, *The Pegasus Review*, *Words of Wisdom*, *Writers Post Journal*, *The Xavier Review*, *Wood Coin Magazine of Art and Literature*, *the 34th Parallel Magazine*, and *Embark Literary Journal*. His one-minute, ten-minute, one-act, and two-act stage plays have been produced in Cincinnati and Dayton, Ohio, and in Brooklyn, NY.

At Rise

OFFICER WELLER lumbers toward the vehicle pulled over.

PASSENGER

(Waving cellphone;
to DRIVER)

You don’t know where we are, do you?

DRIVER

Don’t start that again!

PASSENGER

(Looking back at approaching officer)

And now this!

COP 1

(Observing OFFICER WELLER)

He’s moving way too slow!

COP 2

It! How many times do I have to tell you? It! It’s moving way too slow!

COP 1

Okay, okay! It’s moving way too slow!

DRIVER

(Looking back, shouting
toward approaching officer)

Any day now!

COP 1

See! He's supposed to—I mean, it's supposed to have a calming
influence. Assure the driver.

PASSENGER

(To DRIVER)

Can you believe how slow he's walking? He's trying to intimidate us!

DRIVER

(Yells to approaching officer)

Got no one else to harass this morning?!

PASSENGER

Calm down, honey.

OFFICER WELLER

(Finally reaching
vehicle pulled over)

That's okay—I understand. You're exercising your first amendment
right. Freedom of speech. I know the law!

DRIVER

Know this!

(Begins to give OFFICER WELLER the finger,
but PASSENGER pulls his arm down)

COP 1

This ain't going well! Call it back!

COP 2

Let's wait!

(Points to a "screen" in the squad car)

It's scanning perfectly. It recorded the license number, our location, the
number of occupants—

OFFICER WELLER

(Finally reaching the car
pulled over; to DRIVER)

I don't think you even slowed down at that stop sign back there.

DRIVER

Of course I did!

OFFICER WELLER

Okay. You slowed down, but you didn't stop.

PASSENGER

He did, too! I'm in the car, I should know!

OFFICER WELLER

(Points to cell phone in
PASSENGER'S hand)

You might have been preoccupied. Distracted, perhaps? (Beat) This
situation, this incident, this occurrence, shall we say—it offers a
teachable moment. I'm reminded of a parable I'd like to share.

COP 1

A parable? Who programmed this thing?

DRIVER

And you're supposed to know the law? You wanna recite a parable?
Ever hear of separation of church and state?

OFFICER WELLER

This is a secular parable. It's allowed! (Beat) There once was a driver.

PASSENGER

(To OFFICER WELLER)

Good God! Just give him a ticket!

DRIVER

Whoa—wait. If we listen to this parable, can I just get a warning?

OFFICER WELLER

Well, I do have discretion. My artificial intelligence doesn't mean fake intelligence.

DRIVER

Wait...what? Artifi—? Fake?

(To PASSENGER)

This thing's a robot!

OFFICER WELLER

That isn't obvious? You couldn't tell? It defeats the whole purpose if violators can't tell!

DRIVER

(Leaning away from OFFICER WELLER)

Purpose? Whole purpose? What purpose?

OFFICER WELLER

To reclaim public trust!

PASSENGER

With robot cops?!

OFFICER WELLER

Absolutely! For one, you'll notice I'm unarmed. That's a huge plus for many citizens. And even though I'm unarmed, I'm pretty much indestructible. I keep human police out of harm's way—I can protect and serve even while under attack!

PASSENGER

You're still a robot!

OFFICER WELLER

(Waves ticket
book at DRIVER)

With the authority to issue tickets. Without bigotry, I might add. I'm robotically unbiased!

DRIVER

Okay, okay...I'm willing to listen to your parable if you just give me a warning.

OFFICER WELLER

Well, no promises. This is a full-service traffic stop.

PASSENGER

Full service?

(To DRIVER;
waving cellphone)

Should I record this?

DRIVER

(Shaking his head)

No, no...let's not...you know. Let's just listen.

OFFICER WELLER

Well there once was a driver...

PASSENGER

Jeez!

OFFICER WELLER

...and this driver approached a stop sign, slowed down, looked both ways, and drove right through it.

COP 1

You know where this is going?

COP 2

No clue.

OFFICER WELLER

The driver didn't see the police officer half a block away, but the officer saw him. The officer turns on the siren and flashes the red-and-blues, pulls them over, and asks the driver for license and registration.

DRIVER

We getting close to the parable part?

OFFICER WELLER

(Leans inside the car)

COP 1

(To COP 2)

What's it doing?

DRIVER

(Leaning away from OFFICER WELLER)

What...are...you...doing?

OFFICER WELLER

Okay—just as an aside, before I go on with my parable.

PASSENGER

Oh, my Lord, why me?

OFFICER WELLER

Most citizens don't realize that traffic stops are a fantastic way for us cops to find what we're really looking for. Something spectacular! You know, illegal weapons. Burglary tools. Drugs.

COP 2

(To COP 1)

It can sniff for dope. Explosives. Nervous sweat, even. Electronically, of course.

COP 1

(To Cop 2)

Jeez...you think it could replace us?

OFFICER WELLER

(Removes head from "car"
and resumes former posture)

Well...where was I?

COP 2

(To COP 1)

They must be clean.

OFFICER WELLER

Oh yeah—the officer gets the driver’s license and registration. Asks if the driver was in a hurry. Emergency maybe? We cops aspire to be understanding. Ideally, of course. But this driver claims no emergency and appears unrepentant. Arrogant even. Sees no difference between slowing down, looking both ways and coming to a full stop. And perhaps there is no major difference safety-wise. But words have meaning, no? And slowing down is not the same as coming to a full stop. So the officer pulls the driver from the car, takes out his baton, and begins to beat the driver over the head.

(DRIVER & PASSENGER

recoil from OFFICER WELLER)

COP 1

Who wrote this thing’s software?!

OFFICER WELLER

And while the officer’s beating the driver he asks—a rhetorical question, mind you—“Would you like me to stop...Or...would you like me to slow down?” Get it? Stop or slow down?

DRIVER

Are you freakin’ crazy?

PASSENGER

Dammit! I coulda recorded that! A robot officer’s parable!

OFFICER WELLER

And it is just that, ma’am—a parable. That couldn’t actually happen. But you do get the point, right?

DRIVER

Yeah, yeah—I get it. Stop sign. Full stop. Understood. (Beat) Can we go now? You know, with that warning you promised?

OFFICER WELLER

No, no—no promise, remember? Full service. So, first, your license and registration.

(DRIVER hands over papers)

(OFFICER WELLER reviews papers)

OFFICER WELLER (continued)

(Nodding approval)

Okay, okay. (Beat) You know your rear tag light is broken.

DRIVER

My what?

OFFICER WELLER

(Lumbers to the back of the car, looks down. Then, to DRIVER)

Your rear license plate light. Broken.

DRIVER

It’s daylight for God’s sake! I don’t have my lights on!

OFFICER WELLER

Nevertheless, your rear tag light is broken. When you do turn on your lights, your rear tag light won't work.

DRIVER

How can you possibly—

OFFICER WELLER

Refractometry. That's how I know. Please...don't ask me to explain the science. Take my word for it: your rear tag light is broken!

COP 1

(To COP 2)

No, really! You think it could replace us?

(The low hum of a gathering crowd murmurs from behind the audience. The hum continues at moderate volume until the end of the play.)

DRIVER

Okay. Okay. Full stop at stop signs. Replace my rear tag light. Now can we go?

OFFICER WELLER

Please consider this a learning opportunity. Because you could have had an emergency. One that required urgency. Emergencies can happen to anyone. How you handle them—that's the key. You'd hate to turn an emergency into a tragedy. By plowing into another car. Or, God forbid, a pedestrian. Can you imagine? Hitting somebody? Killing somebody? The guilt. The remorse. The lifelong regret.

COP 2

(To COP 1)

Yeah, this is getting weird.

(Points to the back of the audience)

And we're beginning to attract attention.

COP 1

(To COP 2)

Time to pull the plug!

COP 2

(To COP 1)

But I'd like to avoid the shaming!

COP 1

(To COP 2)

Shaming? This thing's got feelings?

COP 2

(To COP 1)

Yeah—this model, anyway. That's where it gets its empathy. Or so I've been told. (Beat) I know—I'll blame it on our in-dash computer. Yeah, that's it, a computer malfunction...

(To OFFICER WELLER)

Officer Weller!

(Points to a "screen" in squad car)

We got a glitch here in our computer system. We'll take it from here!

(COP 1 leaves the police vehicle.

COP 2 fingers the vehicle's console to deactivate OFFICER WELLER.)

OFFICER WELLER

(To COP 1 and COP 2)

Let me do my job, damnit!

(PASSENGER stands and begins
to record on her cellphone, panning
between the cops and the audience)

COP 1

(To COP 2)

Turn it off! Turn it off, damnit!

COP 2

I did! I did turn it off!

(The low hum of “the crowd”
behind the audience continues)

OFFICER WELLER

(Walking forward,
facing audience)

I want everybody to back up. That’s right. Back up, please. Nothing to see here. Just back up and stay calm. Easy, now, easy. That’s right. No need to panic. Easy. No one has to get hurt.

END OF PLAY

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Stories continue on next page.

Or the Blackhole right 'round the street corner



GARRETT CARROLL is a musician and writer currently majoring in English literature. When not writing music or endless essays, he can be found taking walks around his college town, drinking Arizona tea, and cuddling with four cute dogs.

Or the blackhole right 'round the street corner,
Deep within the alley of the Andromeda system,
That spins reluctantly, wheeling toward our
Milky Way in the despondent stretch
Of the shoreless ocean, where water falls
Through the ancient sciences of new and old civilizations
Who ate salads, great tacos, ham and vegan sandwiches,
different cuts of red meat across domed factories,
Preached gospels and myths, fantasy and fiction,
Sailed the skies, scarred the lands with grid city streets,
Kings' crumbling castles, corporate offices
and cute antique stores 10 minutes walking distance.
Hundreds of thousands of miles driven across
The white and gray mountain ranges of a distant moon,
Circling a gas giant, stormed with a population of
Silent snakes and whispering whales,
Beneath the surface of a sinking ocean
Evaporating into the moon's magma core, observed
By orbiting, ovular satellites and the first aliens
To step foot on the white, gray, and sandy mountain range.

The Haunting of Piedras Blancas



DC DIAMONDPOLOUS is an award-winning novelette, short story, and flash fiction writer with over 200 stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. DC's stories have appeared in: *34th Parallel*, *So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Raven Chronicles*, *Silver Pen*, *Front Porch Review*, and many others. DC was nominated for *Best of the Net Anthology*. She lives on the California central coast with her wife and animals.

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There is no end to my love for Jemjasee. I pace the ragged cliffs, searching the sea for her ship. My longing will not cease until I am entwined in her marble wash of lavender and green arms.

It's dawn. The sunlight's red varnish stretches across the Santa Lucia Mountains. The mist from the sea floats through the Monterey cypress. Backlit in pink stands the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse.

The waves caress my vestige feet. The foam licks my revenant face. The damp never seeps into my gossamer bones. My long silk robe opens, my breasts exposed to the witless wind. It hisses, jeers, but I am invincible, adrift in my chariot of grief.

The gulls perch in conference on the white rock. Beyond is the blue empty sky, the vast sea without sails, no horizon. Blue. *Come, Jemjasee*. Am I to roam this rugged coastline for eternity, this journey without distance? I feel doomed, my struggle invisible. *You must come, Jemjasee. Save me from my weariness.*

I skim the jagged bluff. The elephant seals raise their massive heads when they see me, then fall back to sleep.

Along the winding path, I float unnoticed by gardeners and groundskeepers. I glide over the pebbled lane, past stone cottages, a gift shop, the bell and tower.

Slipping through the walls of the lighthouse, I float to the stairs. Tourists gasp when I appear. “The website didn’t say anything about a magic show,” someone says. “It’s like Disneyland!” cries a child. Their zeal echoes around the cylindrical walls. I nod, playing along with the charade. It’s not always like this. Some days, people are thick with fear. They flee from my presence. When the sun shines, I’m an act. If the fog veils the coast, I’m a phantom. Most days, they don’t see me at all.

“Ah, that’s my wench.” I recognize the guide’s garbled, liquored voice, his gnarled laugh. A salty ex-sailor, he sometimes comes alone, drinking, running after me, catching air.

On the step, I look into his weather-beaten face. His sunken eyes leer.

Damn foolish scoundrel.

Turning, gliding over the wrought-iron stairs to the deck, I let my robe fall. Naked. “This isn’t for kids!” Offended, parents usher their children outside, then turn for one last glimpse at my beautiful body.

I continue. Invulnerable. My feet sail over spiral wrought-iron stairs, my fingers sweep above the narrow curving rail.

Everyone has gone, except for the guide, who looks up at me and says, “You elusive lass, I relish the day I grab your long red hair and make you mine.”

He’ll never get the chance.

Inside the lantern room, the beacon has no purpose. Still, it shines for those who live along the coast and the tourists driving by. I glide outside to the widow’s walk. From the empty skies to the ocean’s

bed, nothing rises or descends.

Jemjasee, if you love me, come.

Not long past, her ship rose out of the sea, and beams of lights pranced above the waves. Particles rearranged themselves, silver, glittered. The mirage shimmered into form. A shape malleable to Jemjasee’s thoughts, horizontal, then vertical, a kaleidoscope of color reflecting the terrain, the craft visible only when she wanted.

Jemjasee was too good for me, too advanced. Not only did I fall in love with her, but with the idea of what I, too, might become. She couldn’t suffer the stench of violence that infused my planet. If exposed too long, her breath ceased. I had to go with her, or not.

But how could I journey outside of my own world? Fear ransacked my mind. It stuffed my schooling, programming, upbringing into a box that, god forbid, I break out and beyond until I’m unfettered by the lies I’ve been taught—crammed it down my cranium, and, just to be sure, set a lid, a square hat with a tassel on top, to keep it all in.

My decision to leave Earth was as ragged and split as the cliffs of my homeland.

After anguishing in my cottage, gazing on memories, touching knickknacks, holding friendships in picture frames, I pondered all I would lose. The future—too elusive, too great a change; my past—something I clung to.

I can’t leave.

Jemjasee held me, the feeling of sadness so great no words would comfort. My heart was shrouded in sorrow. She walked the

waters as her ship ascended from the sea.

The vessel hovered above the waves, a silver triangle. Sleek, like Jemjasee. It rolled on its side, morphed into a vertical tower with a fissure, and she entered. A thousand lights, curved and colored, sparked, flashed, then disappeared.

The instant she left, I knew my mistake.

And so it began, the tears of regret and self-loathing. I missed the woman who was so full of love that she knew nothing of its opposite.

One day, while my mind slipped down around my ankles, I sat in my cottage, staring at a collage of empty food cartons, magazines, dust bunnies, paint chips, shattered wine glasses, a broken window from where the wind whispered, *Go ahead. Do it.*

On that day, I chose to end my suffering. With clarity restored and a mission in sight, I tossed a rope over the living room beam and tied a hoop large enough for my head, but small enough for my neck. From the kitchen, I dragged a chair and placed it underneath the shaft.

I climbed on the seat, put the noose over my neck, and kicked out the chair.

I dangled. Minutes went by, and still I was alive. Then my neck broke and life ebbed. Somewhere I drifted, first as a dark cloud, then into a gauzy realm where I was still—me. Oh, my outrage to discover that I could kill my body but never my Self!

A shadowy reflection of the woman Jemjasee loved, I roamed the rim of the bluff for another chance to leave, hoping she'd return.

I saw her. In my rapture I wailed, *Jemjasee!*

She walked the shore, shouting, *Astrid! I'm here for the last time. Come, before your planet strikes back for the harm done to it.*

I ran down the cliff. My kisses lingered deep in her neck. My hands seized her stalks of short black hair.

Jemjasee looked through me even as my mouth covered hers, my fingertips drunk from the touch of her.

Nothing, not my cries or kisses, could rouse her.

Sobbing, I screamed, *Can't you see me—don't you know I'm here!*

Then she saw me and backed away. I saw the horror there in her golden eyes. Her shock pierced my translucent heart.

Please forgive me.

Her kind never sheds tears. Jemjasee had told me that on her island in the universe, there were no reasons to cry, but looking into her perfect lavender and green marble-colored face, I saw a tear on the threshold of falling.

I was ashamed.

She left by way of the ocean as her ship rose out of the sea.

Condemned, I pace the ragged cliffs, the gulls in flight, the lighthouse behind me, on an endless quest to be with my beloved, forever adrift, because I hadn't the daring to journey past my sphere.

The Gardens



LANE CLARKE holds a Bachelor's Degree in English literature from Virginia Tech, and received an honorable mention in the 2015 Steger Poetry Prize, administered by Nikki Giovanni. Clarke attended the University of Chicago Law School and currently works as an attorney in Washington, D.C.

The roaches no longer ran away. That should have been the first sign.

They are designed for survival. They're not like humans. They don't jump from planes and they don't fall in love—they're not suicidal. Not like us. And that's how we should have known. The roaches no longer ran from a steel-toed boot, nor scurried away at the flick of a light. They waited for the unavoidable. They were tired.

They were sick.

We were all sick. The virus came quick, like a thief. Or flatulence. Silent but deadly. Before the media could even report it, the entire east coast was a mass grave. If we had been paying attention, it would have been obvious. Because of the roaches.

But humans are not built for survival, so we didn't know we were dying. How does one tell the difference between the slow death of existence and the swift death of illness?

I fit my mask over my face. It's too big now, my cheeks emaciated and sharp. I don't remember my last meal. Perhaps the rotted peaches I found in the garbage bin outside the abandoned bodega. That was yesterday. Or maybe it was last week. Time is a strange thing when you are dying: It moves so fast and yet sits utterly still, so that each second is a labored breath.

“Let’s go.” I can barely hear the words through the fog in my ears. They began to leak blood last night, a black tar more resonant of a corpse. Her face wavers in front of mine, blurry. But I know her shape. “Ira, let’s go.”

Hana grabs me around the forearm and yanks. It is so hard to move now. My legs feel like Jell-o, the red gooey stuff Mama used to give us after homework. When there was still an us. When there was still homework. The schools closed a month after the Drop. Quarantines only worked for airborne disease, they discovered too late. How do we fight something that was birthed in our veins?

I feel the weight of Hana’s hand on me as she maneuvers us through the piles of trash on the forgotten highway. A sign, once green, now a putrid shade of brown, hangs nearly off of its hinges. One mile to Washington, D.C. I wonder if a city is still a city if there is no one left to live there. Is a capital still a capital if there is no longer a country?

Hana releases me and I fall backward, my hand falling into the split-open neck of a body. I stare into its face, unsure if it was once a man or a woman. It’s eyes are closed, not open and gray, rotting. Not a virus kill, but a murder. Maybe one of desperation. Maybe one of malice. The body gives me comfort. We can still die in the old ways. We are still human.

“Ira,” Hana calls. She is frustrated but attempts to hide it. She knows it’s not my fault that my body is failing me. But she wants to move faster. She thinks we can outrun it. She forgets that it lives in us. Her hope is what keeps her alive. My lack of it is what kills me.

I push myself up. The skin of my palm rips open easily. I think it stings but I can’t quite tell. Pain is so relative, and everything hurts.

The blood moves out of the cut like a slug, thick and slow. Even blacker than what slithers from my ears.

I stumble toward Hana and she hands me her water jug. It’s nearly empty. I refuse it. She is healthier than me, she will need it soon. When I’m dead. She smacks my hand away and I marvel at her strength. Beautiful Hana, strong Hana. The virus has met its match. She grabs the braids at the nape of my neck. They are loose now and one rips away from my softened scalp. She ignores it, lifting my mask while tipping my head back and bringing the bottle to my lips. My throat burns as I swallow. How dare I try to feed it. Don’t I know I should let it waste away? It sends the liquid down the wrong pipe for our insolence.

I choke, heaving it back up. Neon yellow acid comes up with it, the only offering an empty stomach can make. Hana mutters a string of expletives under her breath before I feel her fingers rub circles into my neck.

“Relax,” she says. “Breathe. We’re almost there.”

#

“We’re almost there,” Hana says, hoisting herself over the gates to the botanical gardens.

“You didn’t tell me we’d be committing a felony,” I mumble, following her.

“We aren’t. This is a misdemeanor.” She glances at me with a shrug. “I checked.” She grabs my hand, lacing her fingers through mine. How many laws I would break for her never to let go.

She leads us through the gardens. My nose twitches. Allergies. But I don't stop her. The gardens are empty, quiet, but we take up so much space. Much more than I could ever take up on my own. I sneeze. She pauses.

Viral symptoms step one: runny nose, sneezing, sore throat. Flu-like.

I expect her to drop my hand before I can explain, but she squeezes harder as her eyes widen. Reckless love, Mama always said.

"Chill," I say, pointing at the flowers hanging above us. I don't know what kind they are, but they look as if they got confused in their formation, petals forming a complicated web of twisted lines. "Pollen."

Her shoulders lower as she releases a breath. She looks up at the incriminating flowers, staring hard as if she can flatten out their pattern into a shape she can scream at for messing with my sinuses. But they are a Rorschach test with no identifiable image. She looks back at me.

"Good, because I swear, if you were dying..." Her shoulders shudder.

I pull her toward me. She stumbles forward and catches herself around my waist.

"If I were dying," I repeat, a finger on the corner of her lips where laugh lines spread out like roots. "What?"

"Then we would all die," she finishes. "You're the sun."

#

"I can't anymore," I moan, dropping to the ground again. She keeps her arms beneath me so I lower slowly, but still my sharpened tailbone feels harsh against the ground.

"It's one more mile." She nudges her head toward the hanging sign. We have walked so many of those that just one more sounds like a walk to the corner store. So close. Impossibly far.

"What's one more mile?" I ask. "Where the hell are we going?" I lift my hand to wipe burning tears from my eyes. I want to lay down. I want to sleep. I want to listen to Mama tell stories about Daddy from before the war stole him. I want Isaiah to make too much noise on his drum set. It's so quiet, too quiet. I hate it.

She doesn't answer me. "Just one more mile." It's all she can say. Hope is all she has left to give.

"Hana," I start. "There is nothing in D.C." My voice is hoarse and I hardly recognize it as belonging to me. I wonder where I left it. Maybe in Roanoke, or Charlotte. Maybe in Atlanta, where we packed our bags and buried our families.

"There is," she says stubbornly. She drops her backpack beside me on the ground and sits down. The skin exposed by the rips in her jeans is as dark as the denim. You could almost forget she's liquid gold beneath the grime. She digs at the bottom of the bag for her map, the one we stole from a gas station that smelled like the inside of a sewer. I always thought death smelled like old pizza crusts beneath the bed, mold, sanitary napkins left too long. But no, feces. The dead smell like lots and lots of feces, with a hint of old pizza crusts if you're in the presence of a corpse long enough to think about it. Which we had been, for months and hundreds of miles.

The map has numbers written all over it, very Zodiac killer. I laugh to myself and she glares at me. I made the joke aloud once and she didn't appreciate it. There is something about forceful death, the kind that takes a planet by the neck and chokes it out, that makes willful killing much less palatable. Who knew it would take a systematic slaughter of the human race to make serial killers less glamorous. You killed fifty women, well sorry, but you've got nothing on egovirus, a killing machine so sinister it lay dormant for 200,000 years just to kill us when we finally felt invincible.

The name is ridiculous. So on the nose, a disease named for our narcissism. But with something that moved as fast as egovirus, I guess one can't be blamed for a lack of creativity. Like hit and runs, it's unfair to not have something, someone, to blame, to not have a name you can curse. So egovirus it was. We taunted the world in our persistence on destruction, and the world answered back. To remind us of our inconsequentiality. At first, they thought it was biochemical warfare. The Americans blamed the Chinese. The Chinese blamed the Mexicans. The Mexicans blamed the Nigerians. Humans tearing each other apart to blame those *other* people. The virus was genius like that. It knew our weaknesses, our biases, and if we killed one another, amputated what we thought were the diseased limbs of our species, it would have to do less work in the end. But then the Americans, the Chinese, the Mexicans, the Nigerians, and every other country got hit; 1.2 billion gone in one night. Swift, calculated.

Painless.

What I would give to have this death go so quickly, rather than feel the movement of it beneath my skin, like tiny bugs slowly driving me crazy. A constant purring of matter that refused to do anything but tap incessantly, annoyingly, until the very end.

That's how Hana had found me, screaming, begging to die. Mama was on the bed and Isaiah was in my arms. My twin brother, heavy, the hands and feet he was still growing into dragging on the floor. The whistle under my skin was already so loud, so present. If only it had taken me first.

Hana said she had heard of a place, a safe haven, in Washington, D.C. for the Not-Sick, for the immune. I didn't believe her, but I couldn't stay. Not with the ghosts of my family, where the whistling was louder, mournful, keening. Are you still a daughter if your parents are gone? A twin, if your other half has perished?

"Right here," Hana says, pointing at the map. Coordinates 38.8977 degrees North, 77.0365 degrees West. "We're so close, Ira." She puts a hand on my knee. I used to consider it a comfort. Now I despise it. The tight grip she keeps on the future, certain that it exists for us. It keeps my body from accepting its fate. I want to scream at her. Let me go, Hana. Let me go.

I look past her. From here, I can see the Washington Monument. It seems strange, out of place. When the world crumbles, surely something so massive, so seemingly permanent should crumble with it. The earth, so utterly broken, should not be able to hold it up when it has no legs, no spine.

"Okay," I say. She smiles. Most of her teeth are browned now. She grabs my hand and stands, pulling me with her. I slump forward, my backpack weighing me down. It's mostly empty, save for a few cans of green beans and a zebra cake I've been saving for something, I don't know what. It would all fit in Hana's bag but I want to feel useful. I slow her down. The least I can do is carry the green beans. But even that small weight is nearly unbearable now.

She pulls the straps from my shoulders. Finally, finally, I let her take it after months of arguing. She fits it onto her chest like a Babybjörn. She would have made a good mother one day. She loops her arm through mine. We start walking.

The ground tilts beneath us, my vision searching for purchase, a straight line. The toes of my diminishing sneakers catch on the ground, the sole separating from the rest of the material. Hana catches me each time I trip, her linked arm tensing through mine to keep me steady. I cough. Black sludge lands on the ground, coating my tongue and teeth. Tears fall and settle into the cracks of my lips.

So long I have wished for this death and now that it's here, I'm scared.

Hana keeps us moving. She glances down at the map every so often until it becomes clear where we're going. She hesitates, for the first time since I sneezed in the botanical garden, like reality has finally caught up and she is searching for another explanation, a more satisfying one. She has figured it out. Her haven is not a place for us. But she keeps walking because we've come too far to stop.

"We're almost there," she continues like a mantra. I see the strain in her neck as I weigh down her right side. I'm getting too heavy, my bones too leaden.

Viral symptoms step x (they stopped counting when there were too many to number)—blood hardens like cement until your body is nothing more than a brick to build a new world with.

"We're almost there," she says again. And we are. It looks smaller in person, the White House. I've only seen it in pictures, on TV. It looks like a real home. But not for me, not for Hana. Not for our families,

past and present. We're too brown to find solace in this place. The flag that once wove above it is still, tattered into shreds. It tells everyone that would attack us in our weakened state to not bother, for we are already dead. But there is no one who would attack. The whole planet is dead. At least the bodies are. Our hearts died long before the virus came to claim us.

The gates are open. There is no threat to protect anyone from. The greatest one lives inside of us, grasping on to anything it can eat. Hana drags me to the front doors. It seems funny, to walk to the front doors of the White House and knock, like a neighbor, like a friend.

I don't expect them to open, so when they do, I nearly fall backward off of the steps. A shiny pair of patent leather shoes. That's all I can see as my head lolls toward the pavement.

"Is she?" I hear. I feel Hana's body move in the way of a nod as she struggles to hold me up. I concentrate on every bone until I get them to move under my command. My head lifts slowly. He's tall, the man. I make out the wonder on his face through my mask's smudged lenses. He's curious why I'm wearing it. There is no way to protect from the virus. But from his attire, a pristine tuxedo, it doesn't seem like he knows what one must do to avoid the stench of the dying. I see him nod and reach for me. I react, pulling away. Muscles that have known no fight since we left Atlanta suddenly come back to life and a fist forms, arcing until it makes contact. Fingers, decaying beneath skin just barely holding them together, snap. Bones slice their way through my skin. I gasp, but not at the feeling, at the sight. Bones protruding at ugly angles, covered in blood deeper than midnight.

"Ira," Hana scolds in desperation. She didn't know about the malleability of my skin yet. The powder softness of my bones. She knew I was dying, but did not know how much of me was already dead.

“Please.” It leaves her lips in a whimper. A silent wail. Maybe she is pleading for this man to let us in. Maybe she is pleading for time to reverse itself to when I was still a whole person. I hope it’s the former. The latter would only be wished by a fool.

He steps aside and we enter. The inside is as hot as the outside. The lights are off. Electricity is a thing of the past. There are more people inside, standing along the walls. Hana gasps. I look at them in confusion. They don’t look sick. Hungry, startled, yes, but not sick. They are the Not-Sick. They exist. Am I the last of the dying?

The man snaps and two of them step forward. They are even larger, broader, and at another time I might have felt fear at the ominous tension they carry. But I have nothing left to fear. We made it to the haven and were not turned away. The immunity is real. More than I expected, much more than I deserve. I am ready for whatever comes next.

One takes the bags from Hana, the other lifts me from the floor. I’m cradled against his chest. Hana reaches and removes my mask. The man smells, not quite clean, but I recognize the effort of soap that pushes through the mustiness. He smells like Isaiah. He smells like my brother. This kind of hurt gets in.

I stare at the others as we pass them. The Not-sick. It feels unfair. Who was more deserving of a future than Isaiah? Who was chosen to be spared? What power could be so cruel as to take him and leave me behind?

I turn my head and find Hana. We exchange our silent wonder. Her eyes flash in apology. The virus is no longer her inevitability. It is only mine. Survival grants a guilt that is hard to swallow.

I reach for her and she takes my hand. I’m glad it is me. She is stronger. She can live without a tether.

I’m placed on a stack of pillows on the floor, cushions pulled from a large maroon couch. Hana crouches beside me. The man is still there, regal in a place without royalty.

“We will make her comfortable,” he tells Hana. It sounds clinical, a detached offer of kindness. Then he leaves, the two Not-Sick following behind him. Our bags sit on the floor.

“I’m dying,” I tell her. It feels safe to say it now.

“I know,” she responds. I guess it feels safe to accept it now too. She lowers and puts her head on my stomach. She places my hand in her hair. The curls are soft beneath my fingers.

“You made it,” I whisper. I was unsure before, wondering if perhaps the virus was slower for her. She was the only person we’d seen through five states without the virus. But she believed, and now here they are. The immune, given a second chance to come back from Hell and make things right. Hana is good for that, soft where I am hard. Forgiving. She won’t carry guilt around in her heart. She will do better, be better. I think I just walked through a room of saints.

She sits up and reaches for the bag at her feet. My bag. She pulls out the zebra cake, rips through the plastic, and bites into it. She holds it to my lips. I almost gag around it’s sugary sweetness, the smell overwhelming. But I bite and let it melt on my tongue.

“We made it,” she corrects.

“We—” I begin. My chest falls out of rhythm, stills.

#

“If I’m the sun, then what are you?” I ask with a laugh, pulling away from her.

“I’m the moon of course,” Hana sings. “Just waiting to catch the reflection of your shine.”

But she’s wrong, the roles in her mind reversed. I’m only seen because of her light. And if I *am* the sun, then she’s the universe.

“You won’t think that when we’re old and gray,” I say.

“Nope, when we’re old and gray, you’ll shine even brighter. So bright, you’ll explode in a big supernova and the world will cease to be.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“No, it sounds merciful. Why go on when we’ve lost our brightest star?” She grabs my hand and kisses it.

I sneeze.

The Gardens | Clarke



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THE ORDER OF THE RUBY CAMEL

The Order of the Ruby Camel

Tells

Nate's turn to pick up
the black book, open
to the page where
the spine is cracked,
recite the prayer we
all know by heart,
but it's the ritual
of the thing, you see.
The demon must
be kept in its chapel,
lest it break free
and infect the turnip
harvest, or something,
no one in the village
has been alive long
enough to know
what actual harm
would befall us.



ROBERT BEVERIDGE (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Collective Unrest*, *Cough Syrup*, and *Blood & Bourbon*, among others.

It's something to do
on a Saturday night
when steal-the-radish
no longer invites
in the way it does
while the harvest
is underway, when
you've read every
novel in the town
library (all five
of them) enough to have
created life stories
for even the most
minor characters,
when you've gotten
tired of your attempts
to replicate a cheese
soufflé in a Dutch oven
over the town square
campfire. Though you
do wonder if the demon
might be able to help
with that perfect
fluffy texture
when you've had
one too many
cups of plum wine.

The one thing
they told us was
not to negotiate
with it, but Nate's
uncle thought he
was the shit, the guy
who could sell fish
to a smokehouse,
and so last Walpurgis
he volunteered,
wanted a tongue like
Gene Simmons
and business cards
like Shelley Levene's
and you know how
this story ends but it's
a slow night and there's
enough plum wine
on the kitchen table
for once, so deal
the cards and let's
get down to it.

TELLS

The cube is black and may stretch for eternity in each direction. We are told that outside it there are perfect beings who can read the minds of others, always order just the right fish to go with the wine, bluff with perfect accuracy. We have never seen them, yet some of us build shrines in the forest adorned with ink, cerebellum, the jack of diamonds.

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Stories continue on next page.

The Last Two



SHIRA HERELD is a queer writer, actor, wilderness therapist, trail worker, and activist. Her work has been published in *Lilith Magazine*, *Almond Press*, *Outrageous Fortune*, *Assisi*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Wilde Magazine*, *plain china*, and *Control Lit*.

“So.”

“So.”

The two twenty-somes glanced at each other, then hurriedly away, as if scorched. The boy bit the corner of his thumb, yanking at the dead skin there, making the awful squelching noise the girl couldn’t stand.

“Look Scott—”

“Would you stop calling me Scott? It’s Srisuwan.”

“Give up already, you know I can’t pronounce that.” Overhead, the poisonous sun swirled in and out of sight through viridian clouds. Lana wondered if there really might be any Twinkies left. “You don’t think somebody—”

“Can’t be.”

“But somebody else could have—”

“Please don’t.” Srisuwan took a deep breath and softened his tone. “Of course, it’s not necessarily just us, I’m just saying that the probability of us finding—”

“Blah, blah, blah, I get it, you’re good at math.”

“There’s no need to be like that.”

By movements much more careful than his anger craved, he shifted his weight away from Lana on the hand-built punt. The sea oozed viscidly up the sides of the craft, tarry splotches sloshing over the edge near their feet.

“Okay, sorry,” Lana finally broke in. “I’m just—this is kind of a lot of pressure. I did not sign up for this. I mean—for God’s sake, I’m a philosophy major. I didn’t expect to ever have to *do* anything!”

“It’s alright. I feel the same.” He forced himself to look straight into her skittery, insectile eyes. “It’s just—I think my parents would be—disappointed if we didn’t—if I didn’t even try to—”

His voice dissolved into a thought as deep and gray as the water. Neither of them had mentioned parents for weeks. The only way they ever referred to that long period of Before was with the general “people”—a concept that, when said fast and blasé enough, could be as meaningless as “paper clips” or “stuff.”

Srisuwan picked out what might be a peanut from their probably-edible food bag. He also wondered if there might be Twinkies somewhere, maybe hidden far underground where a roving colony of other people had escaped the initial blasts, the earthquake, the tsunami, the infection.

“Better not eat too much,” Lana cut in. “By my calculations, we should hit land again tomorrow, but who knows.”

“Sorry.” Srisuwan retied the bag and dropped it back onto the floor of the boat. “I wasn’t really hungry. Just bored.”

“That’s a stupid reason to waste food.”

“Guess so.” She wasn’t exactly pretty, at least by general estimation, Srisuwan guessed, watching Lana paddle slowly along with a flat piece of metal (a fender?) they’d found yesterday. Too square in the shoulders and jaw, like she’d done a lot of swimming in high school. And she was white, which would never have flown with Mæ` or Pâw. Still, if it were just the two of them...

“Scott, I think I’m going to sing for a bit, so I don’t go out of my mind. My voice kind of sucks, but if you’d do me a favor and just shut up and let it happen, that’d be great.”

Since it was her turn to paddle, and she scared him a little bit, Srisuwan said nothing, even though her rendition of century-old *Don’t Rain on My Parade* sounded like Barbra Streisand’s reanimated corpse having a coughing fit. It was still better than silently watching the vomit-green storm clouds build on the horizon, spitting electrical lightning at each other like angry sorority girls. Lana continued through the rest of the *Funny Girl* soundtrack until she forgot a lyric and lapsed into frustrated silence, paddling half-heartedly as the rumble of thunderheads echoed across the vast, fuming water.

“I can row for a bit if you want,” Srisuwan offered, hoping it would distract her from singing some more. “Take my turn early.”

“I’m fine,” Lana snapped. A bee the size of a pigeon zipped by, shouting something that sounded suspiciously like “*Don’t tell me not to fly, I’ve simply got to—*” Lana swatted at it with the piece of metal; it fell into the molasses-water and immediately dissolved. Then she thrust the oar at Srisuwan. “Okay, if you insist.”

He took it without argument and sculled in what he hoped was the right direction. Lana stared at his skinny arm muscles and failed to find them attractive.

“What should we do when we get to land?” Srisuwan asked as the already dim light faded around them. “Keep wandering, or settle in?”

“Keep wandering. Gather food. Look for water, or Diet Coke, or something else to drink. Just keep moving. Not much else to do.”

“Eventually, we’ll have to settle down.”

“Why?”

Srisuwan dipped the metal oar three times before answering, hoping in the dying light she couldn’t see him blushing.

“Well, to—you know—to—”

“If you start again with the ‘it’s our responsibility to repopulate the Earth now’ crap, I’m going to throw myself overboard.”

“But, don’t you think—”

“I think you’re just looking for an excuse to get some action.” Lana crossed her arms over her flat chest and stared at him with such intensity that he felt his penis shrink several centimeters. “Which is just plain stupid, and goes to show you why a world run by men fell apart in the first place. Sex would be a complete waste of calories. And anyhow, even if lightning struck me and I decided to do it with you, what would our kids do? They couldn’t exactly marry each other, unless you want the entire new strain of human to come out like West Virginia. Did you ever even take a biology class?”

“I studied biotech-engineering,” Srisuwan responded, aware that his whole face was reaching a shade of red not dissimilar to the center of a nuclear explosion. “And I’m not a pervert. I just—it feels like we have to—”

“There’s no ‘we’ in this.”

“Okay, ‘I.’ It feels like I, as a person—a member of the human race—”

“What’s left of it—”

“—that it’s wrong to give up. That I’m somehow disappointing someone.”

“Who?” Lana glanced exaggeratedly around at the miles of open ocean. “Who is here to disappoint?”

“What about—you know—future generations and stuff?”

“If there aren’t any, it’s sure hard to disappoint them.”

They both fell silent for a time, paddling forgotten, while Srisuwan stared up at the full, dark sky and tried to make his argument more coherent, the way it was when it berated him in his grandmother’s voice each night for the past two months since he and Lana had found each other.

Lana picked at a scab on her knuckle, frustrated that she felt almost sorry for him. Finally, in a small voice, she asked, “I mean, do you even want to? With me, I mean, not just in principle. I’m not exactly—my face isn’t really—and I don’t have any boobs—and my ex-boyfriends have all said I’m a raging bitch.”

“Stop it, you’re not—” Srisuwan began automatically, then stopped and decided to rephrase more honestly. “It hasn’t been easy being with you, but you’re not awful to be around. I mean, it’d be nice if you’d at least try to learn my name. But I don’t mind not being in charge. I wouldn’t have a clue what to do if you didn’t make our decisions.”

“So...” She glanced up from her knuckle, trying unsuccessfully to raise one eyebrow, a skill she’d been practicing surreptitiously for the last week. “Do you actually want to...?”

Srisuwan thought about it, fingers tapping lightly on the oar. Putting aside the perceived responsibility, the dreamed-up parental disappointment, the once-timid, now totally worn-out belief in God, the judgment of future generations—

“No.”

“Oh.” The shadow of a hurt frown crossed her face. “Good. I didn’t want to either. I mean, it would have been nice if you’d wanted to with me, even though I would have turned you down, would’ve been a pleasant little ego boost, but...no, good. Glad that’s cleared up.”

“It’s not you, it’s—look, I’m gay.”

Lana’s right eyebrow shot up her forehead, but she was too distracted to celebrate the victory.

“You’re gay? You’ve been arguing this reproduction crap all week and you’re gay?”

“I just don’t want you to think I have an ulterior motive.” Srisuwan shrugged. “And I didn’t mean to offend you. I’m sure you’re—

good-looking—to the average guy, but I can’t say I particularly want to—would you please stop laughing? You’re rocking the boat.”

“Sorry.” She wrapped her arms around her stomach and strove for stillness. “It just feels like somebody up there has a hell of a sense of humor.”

“Well, did you want to—before I said anything, of course—with me—”

“Not at all,” she said, matter-of-factly. “You’re so far from my type, you might as well be a sheep. But I’m sure other men—if there were other men—would think you were—well, would be—pleasantly surprised by your resourcefulness and good spirits.” Smiling as though she’d paid him a compliment, she began humming a tune that sounded like glass caught in a garbage disposal.

An ever-darkening hour later, they both lay down carefully in the punt, legs stretched out along each other’s sides. The thunderclouds had drifted off the edge of the horizon, and the sky above remained an encouraging hunter’s green.

“Scott?”

“Ng?” He kept his eyes closed, but Lana watched solitary canary-yellow flecks of dust swirl like fireflies above her head. Some small, mutated creature bonked its head on the side of the punt, let loose several gleeful bubbles, and swam away.

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings before. I’m sure I will again soon...but I am sorry about it.”

“Thanks.”

“I was thinking, when we get to dry land again, and we’re wandering—I mean, there’s no reason not to stick together. Watch each other’s backs. As long as you keep your hands off me, deal with those needs by yourself, we might as well stay put indefinitely. We’re a pretty good team.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Great. G’night...Seezawon.”

“Close enough.”

After a minute, Srisuwan started to snore obtrusively, but Lana didn’t mind.

She wondered briefly if he were right, if she did owe something to the vast, complicated human past that had brought her to here, to now, to fulfill this supra-important, life-continuing duty. Then she thought of the last, messy boyfriend she’d had before the world exploded around her, decided with a comforting finality that life would be much less complicated the way the Shakers envisioned it, and managed to drift off into a placid, reassuring sleep.

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Stories continue on next page.

Adjudicated



STEPHANI MAARI BOOKER (she/her/hers) of Minneapolis, Minnesota writes works for the page and for performance in which she wrestles with her multiple marginalized identities: Black, lesbian, lower-class, nerdy, and sexy. The author of *Secret Insurrection: Stories from a Novel of a Future Time*, she has speculative fiction published in [Aphelion Webzine](#), [The Future of Us: An Anthology](#), and [Jalada 02: Afrofuture\(s\)](#). She also has nonfiction, erotic fiction and poetry in many other publications.

It was Black Friday at Mega-Save Super Warehouse, and I was under arrest. The store security handed me over to the State Police after me and a wench I called Ms. SUV—for her road-hogging monster—had an “altercation” in the parking lot. Two state troopers took me to a police station, and one of them brought me to a small room with some ugly plastic and metal chairs and side tables. It also had an adjudication booth, which looked like a tall, wide, frosted glass upright coffin. The trooper took off the handcuffs she put on me at the store and told me to step into the booth.

When the trooper closed the door, this scary monster voice from nowhere told me, “Place both palms of your hands flat on the panel facing you for fingerprint scan.” So I did that. After a few seconds, the voice said, “Remove your hands and drop them to your sides.” I did that too, and then the voice said, “Hold still for full-body scan and imaging.” I had to stand there for what felt like forever in the silence of that glass coffin before the voice said, “Scan and imaging done.”

Right after that, the wall in front of me showed a live video of a judge who told me I was charged with assault and battery, and if I wanted to plead in the booth they’d send live video of a public defender I could talk to beforehand. Even though I was scared out of my mind, I still managed to ask the judge what would happen if I didn’t plead right then and there. She said because I had a violent felony charge, I’d be put on law-watch and a disabler no matter what I plead or whether I plead that day or ask for another arraignment hearing.

I told the judge, “I want to plead not guilty. I don’t need to talk to a lawyer first for that, do I?” She said no, so I pleaded and the judge set my trial for January 11. Then she pronounced my order of adjudication, putting me on law-watch and a restraining order with a disabler to protect “the victim”—Ms. SUV.

After the hearing was done, the trooper let me out of the booth and ordered me to sit on one of the chairs next to a side table. She told me another trooper was coming to give me the law-watch and disabler nano-bot shots. When that trooper came, he brought a metal tray that he put on the table next to me.

The injectors were on the tray looking like a pair of glass tubes about the length of drinking straws, but they were thinner. One end of each tube was covered with a flat, square-inch wrapper—neon green on one tube and hot pink on the other.

Lying next to the tubes was a pair of thin black gloves, which the male trooper picked up and put on his hands. “Place your arms on the armrests of this chair with your palms facing up,” he ordered me. As I did that, he picked up the tube with the green wrapper with his left hand and pinched and pulled off the wrapper with his right. He then dropped the wrapper on the tray, pulled down my right sleeve, placed the end of the tube against my arm below my wrist, and held it there. I didn’t feel a thing except for the dull pressure of a blunt glass stick against my skin.

When the trooper removed the tube and put it on the tray, he said, “Judicial tracking administered.” Then he picked up the other tube, took off its wrapper and did everything he had done to my right arm to my left one. “Disabler administered,” he said.

From that moment on, I was a walking, talking audio/video recorder with GPS tracking thanks to the nano-bots the cop shot into me along with the disabler nano-bots, which would alert my personal comm if I came within 200 feet of Ms. SUV and tell me which way to go to avoid her. If I disobeyed the warnings, my body would be paralyzed and the cops would come get me. Shot up with the disabler and the law-watch, I was allowed to leave the police station.

#

If I hadn’t been doing Black Friday, I would have never got adjudicated. There’s no way I would have ever participated in that old-fashioned brick-and-mortar-store shopping nonsense my grandparents might have done in the first place, but that was before I had kids. Xmas-Yule-Kwanzaa was on its way, and my seven-year-old son Aengus wanted the hottest robo-doll on the market. So here I was going to Mega-Save Super Warehouse at 4 a.m. to get in line to wait for the store to open at 5 a.m. and get the robo-doll I reserved online. If I didn’t get into the store, get the robo-doll, and get through the checkout scanner by 8 a.m., the reservation would expire.

When I got to the store, the parking lot was already filling up. I could have gotten out of Jet, my black sedan, and ordered it to go find a space while I got in the line in front of the store, but Jet might not have found a space in the lot and would have had to alert my personal comm about it. Then I would have had to call Jet back, get in my car, and go search for somewhere else to park outside the soccer field-sized store lot. So I stayed in my car and directed it while I searched for a space.

As I was cruising along down the lanes between the parking spaces, I heard a car horn blowing hard right behind me. “Jet, put the rear camera on screen,” I ordered. The video screen on the dashboard

came on and showed a silvery luxury SUV tailgating me and blowing its horn repeatedly. Inside the SUV was one passenger, a 30-ish blonde Amer-Euro woman with a scowl on her face.

“What the hell?” All I was doing was riding slowly in the parking lot, not the street, and this high-class bully was practically riding my behind and honking at me. Why? Nobody was ahead of me. I first thought Ms. SUV could go around me, but then I figured that big piece of crap probably doesn’t have room to drive between the parked cars to the left of the lane and my sensibly sized sedan that doesn’t hog the road.

“Jet, are there any cars behind the SUV in back of us?” I asked my car.

“No,” the feminine voice of the computer that was Jet’s brain answered.

“Jet, slow down and stop,” I ordered. Once my car stopped, I said “There, how you like that, Ms. Fat-ass SUV?” even though Ms. SUV couldn’t hear me. Now that wench would have to back up her expensive piece of crap and then turn around or find a way to go around my car. She won’t risk her pricy big-girl toy to try to run me over, I joked to myself.

Ms. SUV went from repeated honking to one long blast. “Oh, now you’re laying on your horn? You can lay on it all you want to. Turn around or go around or go up my ass for all I care,” I said. “Jet, cut the music up three clicks.” The volume of the rock mix I was playing on the stereo rose, and I crossed my arms and sat back in my reclined seat.

Suddenly, a pounding sound scared me so bad I jumped out of my seat. I sat up and turned to my left window, and there was Ms. SUV standing outside my door and glaring at me.

“Move your car!” she screeched at me. Her fist was still on my window where she had pounded it.

I could have stayed in my car. The doors automatically lock once the car is in motion, so I was safe. But Ms. SUV left the plush safety of her giant luxury ride to run up to my car and bang her fist on my Jet!

An old cliché for what you experience when you get fired up before you snap is seeing red. Looking at that wench as she stared through my window with her fist on the pane, my eyes were burning blood.

#

When my assigned attorney told me I could get six months of medication, therapy and law-watch for a plea, I told him I would accept being doped and shrunked but I can’t do law-watch and keep my job. “I’ve never been arrested in my life; I had zero criminal record until stupid Black Friday. I can’t get nothing better than that?”

He told me he can try to offer doping and shrinking with a continuation of the restraining order, including the disabler, for a year’s time with my offering to allocate to the facts of the case and express remorse in public court. I’ll be cryin’ and lyin’ to the judge then, because even though I know what I did was wrong, I don’t feel any real remorse. In fact, I feel downright justified for what I did. Ms. SUV started it; I finished it.

Anyway, that was three weeks ago. I'm on unpaid leave from my home-based online customer service job. The company's worried about my giving up trade secrets and customer information to the law-watch. My friends and most of my family don't want any communication with me recorded by the law-watch. My ex-wife Maeve, who has our kids, isn't taking my calls either, but that's no surprise. My getting adjudicated and being put on law-watch is the perfect justification for her keeping me from seeing Aengus and our daughter Yemoja, who's eight. So I've got no job, no kids at home, and right now no communication with nobody.

The only person who calls me now besides my lawyer—or visits me or lets me visit—is my Mama. Today, though, Mama's not taking my calls even though it's Sunday and she doesn't go anywhere on Sunday mornings. The only time she's ever incommunicado is sundown Friday to sundown Saturday—she's a Seventh-Day Adventist who does nothing but what's holy on their Sabbath.

I need to see my kids, I need to talk to Mama, and I need to get out of this apartment. I'm going to Mama's place to see what's going on with her. If she's not there, I'm going to my ex's house. I don't care if she gets mad. I should at least get video calls from Yemoja and Aengus, even if all we say to each other is “hi,” “I love you,” and “bye!” Yes, I agreed with her and her husband that the kids staying with me while I'm being adjudicated is basically putting them on the same punishment I have to endure, but dang! I haven't seen my kids or talked to them in all this time, and there's no way I'm going to miss spending some Xmas-Yule-Kwanzaa time with my daughter and son. They're the only reason I was at Mega-Save Super Warehouse on Black Friday in the first place!

I get dressed, grab a bottle of pineapple juice and a snack bar from my kitchen, and leave my apartment. After taking the elevator to

the first floor, I use my personal comm to call Jet and tell it to start up and come and park at the garage exit where I would meet it. Jet arrives at the exit and opens its left front door. I get in, close the door, put on my seat belt, and tell Jet to take me to Mama's apartment complex. As Jet pulls out onto the street, I recline my seat back and tell the car to play my instrumental jazz mix as I have my little breakfast. I could turn on some video and watch it on the dashboard, but I'm not in the mood. I really just need to chill out for the 30-minute ride to Mama's place out in the 'burbs, while Jet navigates the light late-Sunday morning traffic on the freeway, using the Thing-Net to communicate with the road and other cars to drive itself.

When I arrive at Mama's apartment complex, I direct Jet to take me to the main entrance and stop there. I get out and walk through the front doors into a hallway to face another pair of locked doors. A blank video screen is on one of the doors at eye level. I speak to it, “Yolanda Yancey, 234.”

The video screen speaks back to me, “Who's calling?”

“Zora.”

The video screen displays the word “Calling” with Mama's name and apartment number. I wait a few seconds, then Mama's face shows on the screen. “Zora, oh honey, what's going on?”

“I'm here to ask what's going on with you. I've been blowing up your comm all morning.”

“Oh, dang.” She shakes her head and her brow wrinkles. She looks like she's worried about something. “Let me meet you downstairs.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can come up.”

“Oh no, I need to meet you downstairs.” The screen goes blank.

What is going on with her? Why won’t she let me come up? If I didn’t know my Mama better, I’d think she had a man-friend up there with her.

I wait for five minutes until the locked doors open and Mama walks through. She immediately throws her arm around my shoulder and says, “Here, let’s go outside,” as she leads me back through the main entrance.

“Mama, what’s up?” I’m really confused now. “Why did you come all the way down here? I could have just came up. I don’t need to stay long if you don’t want that.”

“It’s not that,” she says as she guides me out to stand near my car. She then faces me and looks straight into my eyes while holding my shoulders in her hands. “Aengus and Yemoja are here.”

“What?” I’m all excited and happy.

“Maeve brought them over yesterday right at sunset for them to stay the night, but...”

“That’s great! Let me go up there and see them.”

“Honey, listen,” Mama uses her grip on my shoulders to shake me a little. “Maeve told me I can’t let you see them.”

“She...what?”

“I’m sorry, honey.” Mama lets go of me. “She told me that if I let you see them then that means she can’t trust me to keep them from being exposed to law-watch with you, so I won’t get to see them no more.”

Oh, hell no. How dare that high-and-mighty heifer threaten my Mama with not seeing her grandkids?

I take Mama into my arms, hug her, and kiss her quickly before letting her go. “I’m so sorry, Mama. Tell the kids I was here and I love them.”

I step over to my car, open it, and get in with a slam of the door. “Jet,” I say, “go to Maeve’s house.”

When I get to that heifer’s house, I park Jet on the street, jump out, run up to the front door, and bang on it with my fist. I ain’t even thinking about using their door greeter screen. “Maeve, get your ass out here right now—right now, damnit!” *Bang, bang, bang!* “Damnit, get your ass out here right now!”

She comes out and stands in front of her door, begging me to calm down, keep quiet. I ain’t calming down nothing: “...Uh-uh, you don’t go threatening to take my Mama’s grandkids away from her... Bullshit! Don’t tell me you didn’t say that to her... She told me you did and I know you did... You got me fucked up with that shit... You don’t upset and disrespect my Mama like that! You must be out of your goddamned mind...!”

Oh, no! A City Police cruiser pulls into Maeve’s driveway. Two cops get out of the cruiser, and one of them says to me, “Zora Yancey, come with me, please.”

“What? What did I do? I didn’t do nothing!”

“Come over here with me, please,” the cop orders me again, so I walk over to her as she stands next to the cruiser while the other cop goes to talk to Maeve.

The cop with me says, “You’re under adjudication, so I’m going to ask you what’s happening here. You can either tell me the truth, or you can sit in the back of my cruiser as I watch the video from judicial monitoring.”

“The video will show you I wasn’t doing nothing!” I say.

“This woman’s husband called the police. Why do you think he did that?” the cop says.

“Because he knows I’m on law-watch and knows that y’all will come running when somebody calls about somebody on law-watch!” I tell the cop what Maeve and I were arguing about, saying that they needed to go arrest her husband for calling in a false police report because he knows my law-watch will prove him a damn liar for calling the cops on me.

The cop who’s talking to Maeve tells his partner that he and Maeve are going inside to talk to her lying-ass bitch husband, so I have to stand out here with this cop and wait.

After I don’t know how long, the other cop comes out of Maeve’s house and calls his partner over. The cop with me tells me to stay by the cruiser as she goes to see what he wants. They talk for a while out of my earshot and then walk back to the cruiser. The male cop starts telling me that they see there’s a family dispute between me, my ex-

wife, and her husband. I tell him it’s between her and *me*. “Those are me and my ex-wife’s kids. Her husband’s got nothin’ to do with nothin’!”

The cop keeps talking, going on about how though there’s no evidence I committed a crime, my ex and her husband don’t want me here, so I should just get in my car and leave.

“And Maeve’s lying husband doesn’t get arrested for making a false police report?”

“No, and you and possibly your ex-wife don’t get arrested for disturbing the peace,” the male cop says.

“But they’re keeping me from having any contact with my kids! I got the right to my kids! You can’t arrest them for violating my rights?”

“That’s a civil matter, ma’am,” the female cop says. “As long as they don’t leave the state with your children without your consent, there’s no crime.”

The male cop tells me again to leave the area; they don’t want me parking Jet across the street from my ex’s house staking them out or stalking them.

“If we arrest you, I guarantee you that as an adjudicated subject, a judge will place you on house arrest. You don’t want that to happen, do you?” the female cop says.

Do I want the disabler nano-bots reprogrammed so I get paralyzed if I set one foot out of my apartment? Hell no! Of course, I don’t say all that. I just shake my head.

“Of course not,” the female cop says. “So let’s not go down that road. You get in your car and leave, all right?”

“Fine!” I run over to my car and get in. “Jet, take me home!”

As Jet pulls off, I climb into the back seat and lie down so other riders on the road won’t see me. Jet will look like just another rider-less car as I cry, scream, curse, and beat the back of the front seat with my fists without anyone seeing me—except the law-watch. The law-watch will see my backseat car fit, my yelling at my ex-wife, along with the Mega-Save Super Warehouse security video footage of me jumping out of my car and jumping on Ms. SUV. They’ll see it all; they’ll know it all. And I’m losing it all.

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Stories continue on next page.

Excerpt from *Fantastic Blindness*

Chapters 1 & 2



VICTOR EVANS lives on Vashon Island and works as a college professor, teaching journalism and mass communication. He is a former entertainment journalist and has worked at numerous media organizations, including *Entertainment Weekly*, MTV, CNN and BET. He is currently finishing his new middle-grade mystery, *Evan Sinclair and the Case of the Missing Baseball Bat*, which follows the sleuthing adventures of 13-year-old Evan who will do anything to hang with the cool kids. You can follow his and Evan's latest exploits at www.victordevans.com. When Victor is not teaching or writing, you can find him on his farm with his partner wrangling chickens.



MELISSA MCCANN lives on Vashon Island, a bucolic world separated from the rest of the multi-verse by a sea that can only be crossed if you know the word to pay the ferryman. Her published work includes the *The Blackwood Curse* trilogy, *King of Midwinter* and the *Strangers* series.

Chapter 1: Salome

The clientele of the Old Spaceman Pub eked out a living on the orbital mining station Ganges Shore and had just enough money left for a drink or six at the end of the day.

Tonight, the eyes of three-quarters of the male clientele and at least half the women were riveted to Salome Jones—130 kilos of green-skinned female pulchritude perched on the lap of a very dazzled-looking young man. She'd opened the front tab of her coverall down to her waist. Underneath, a red corset kept everything up where it should be. The young man providing her seat was as big and hairy as a woollybear and probably almost as intelligent. His twin brother sat beside them, his jealous glare burning a hole through his brother's head.

"And then..." The woman gestured with the tube of fermentage-du-jour in her hand. "I tell the lecherous muck-rooter that next time he tries to grab a handful of one of his workers, I'll take his hand off and shove it up his..." she finished with a very rude word. "And then I broke two of his fingers, just to show I meant it."

A colorless little woman wearing her coverall tabbed shut all the way to the neck said, "But he dismissed you with prejudice. You should have stayed out of it."

Salome shrugged, sending waves of ocean-jade down the valley of her breasts into the depths of the corset. "If even half the workers stood up to him, he'd back down."

"We've all filed reports."

Salome snorted. "What's the point of that? Nobody up there cares

what happens down here as long as the supplies get moved and the forms get filed.”

The little woman tightened her colorless lips. “At least we still have our jobs.”

Salome shook a waterfall of loose curls the color of Tyrolean blood opals. “Well, there might be better jobs, but there ain’t none worse.”

“Hear, hear,” shouted at least six of the bar patrons.

Salome raised her glass. “To everyone who was made for better things than this.”

That provoked a cheer and another round of drinks. Salome leaned aside to kiss the glowering brother of the young man she thought of as Boy One. She slid her hand into his lap as his lashes fluttered shut over big soft eyes.

She’d planned to send one of the boys—it didn’t matter which—home with Jilly, the drab little woman, but it didn’t look like she was going to be up to the job.

She was contemplating how much longer she would stay before she took the boys home with her when a low hum attracted her attention.

Along with nearly everyone else in the bar, she turned toward the origin of the hum. A drone hovered over the heads of the patrons. The black sphere as big as one of Boy Two’s fists drifted back and forth, quartering the long, low room and scanning the bio-fields of everyone it passed.

Those it scanned and dismissed seemed to deflate with relief, while the patrons it hadn’t reached yet slithered toward the exit. Salome looked around, trying to spot the unlucky object of the search. She didn’t recoil even when the greasy black sphere paused half a meter from her head and scanned her. The worst thing it could contain was a job dismissal and re-assignment to something different but probably not worse.

“Salome Jones,” it said. The artificially-generated voice could have made a domestic partnership proposal sound menacing. “You are receiving a notification of familial inheritance.”

“A what?” Salome recognized the meaning of each word individually, but she couldn’t make out what they had to do with her.

The drone raised its volume and repeated, “You are receiving a notification of familial inheritance.”

The old party at the next table scratched the bald dome of his head. “That means you’ve got a relative, Sal.”

“*Had* a relative,” his neighbor said.

The drone said, “You are required to view the notification and acknowledge receipt.”

A fan of golden glitter sprang from the drone’s projector array and filled with data. Salome’s hand crept to her head as she tried to take in numbers, documents written in opaque legalese and schematics that made no sense to her.

When the waterfall of information finally poured down the holographic screen and disappeared, the drone said, “Salome Jones, do you

acknowledge receipt of this notification of familial inheritance? Please indicate by clearly saying ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”

“Wait a second. Hold on.” She scanned the blank faces around her. “What was all that? What’d it say I’m supposed to have inherited?”

Jilly cleared her throat. “I think it said a spaceship?”

The old party had been gradually sitting up straighter and straighter, his mouth falling open wider and wider. His jaws snapped shut, and he shook himself. “Yep. That’s what it said. Spaceship. Your great-uncle Atemu Mix...” He raised his brows at Salome.

“No idea,” she said. “I grew up in state dormitories on Capella.”

“Well, Great-Uncle Atemu apparently owned a ship and somehow got himself dead. Before he died, he put in his central file that the ship would go to you.”

Jilly stared at Salome. “But that’s thousands and thousands of standards. You’re rich.”

“Salome Jones,” the drone repeated. “Please indicate receipt of this notification by clearly saying ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”

Salome struggled to put the past five minutes into some kind of order in her brain.

“But what would I do with a ship?”

“Sell it,” the old party said with certainty. “Buy a residence pod.”

A sputter from across the room distracted them.

“I wouldn’t do that, darlin’.” From a nearby table rose a hundred-ninety centimeters of slim, elegant masculinity with near-white skin and platinum hair. She knew she hadn’t seen him here before because she would have remembered the dimples that appeared when he smiled.

“Salome Jones, please indicate receipt of this notification by clearly saying ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’” She looked from the stranger to the drone.

“Say yes and sell it,” the old party prompted.

“Say yes and keep it,” said the dimpled stranger. “Trust me, you can make a lot more by keeping than selling.” He sauntered across the room, his disconcertingly sapphire-blue eyes on hers.

“That’s crazy,” the old party said, scowling at the stranger in their little circle of regulars.

Salome looked from the old man to the charming younger one. He’d have fit in all right in the up-above, even with his odd lack of pigmentation, but here in the Old Spaceman, he stood out like a hat on a mud-slug.

His clothes, a white brocade coat over a form-fitting shirt, suggested he knew a thing or two about making money—certainly more than any of the regulars who came here night after night to drink whatever had been brewing in the tub in the back room.

“Salome Jones, please indicate receipt of this notification by clearly saying ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

“Yes,” Salome said, almost hypnotized by those weirdly blue eyes.

“Thank you,” the drone said. “All documentation has been forwarded to your central file.” With that, the drone reversed and hummed toward the exit, somehow conveying an impression of smugness.

A long bubble of silence burst as someone in the room said, “So what are you going to do with it?”

“She’s going to sell it.” The old party said, eyeing the tall white stranger.

“She’s going to keep it.” The pretty boy said, once again flashing his dimples. “Aren’t you, darlin’?”

Salome rose from her seat on the lap of the young man she thought of as Boy One. She strolled up to the handsome enigma and propped one hand on her hip. “And who are you to be giving me advice?” She planted one finger in the center of his chest. “*Sweetie*.”

“The name’s Skyler Rysen.” He set his mug of smoking grog on the bar where it oozed a cloud over the rim and across the stained plastine surface. He removed her finger from the center of his chest, enclosing her hand in a palm softer than her own. He raised it to his lips and kissed the tips of her fingers, never taking his eyes from hers or letting the dimples slip. “Salome.” He drew out each syllable like a kiss and brushed a stray lock of her hair off her shoulder, his fingers warm on her skin.

She knew the type. The pretty ones who strutted onto the docks and never did a shift’s hard work because they could always charm someone else into doing it for them.

She took his hand and lifted it from her shoulder. “So why shouldn’t I sell it?”

“A ship like that is what they call a golden goose. Sell it, and it pays you once. Keep it, and it pays for the rest of your life.”

She studied him with narrowed eyes. “How does a ship make money?”

“Salome, you’re as lucky as you are beautiful, because I happen to have a shipment of fuel rods that need to get to Yurgo, and you have a ship that could get it there, and the profit would be big. Really, really big.” He arched one eyebrow to convey a broad double-entendre.

Salome tilted her head. “Mr. Rysen, I couldn’t possibly go into *business* with someone I don’t even know.”

He leaned closer. “How about we get to know each other really well and really quickly.”

“Not too quickly. I wouldn’t want to go partners with someone who couldn’t keep up with me.”

The dimples got deeper. “I’d never want to disappoint a...business...partner.”

“Tell you what.” Salome let her gaze slide down and back up. “You hold your breath, and I’ll think about your offer.” She set her finger in the center of his chest again and gave him a gentle but firm push. Then she left him breathing a little harder and went back to her table to sandwich herself between Boy One and Boy Two, who had been glaring fire at Mr. Skyler Rysen.

She raised her hand in the air. “So, what do you all think?”

Everyone in the room began to debate how Salome should spend her windfall. A residence pod was far and away everyone's highest priority. After that, a large number wanted a netjack for brain-plugging directly into the Central Data entertainment stream. Another segment wanted to move to a luxury resort planet, which even Salome knew was unrealistic. And a vocal contingent wanted her to take Skyler up on his offer. To be fair, they were mostly women who weren't so much interested in his business sense.

"What's it worth?" she asked the old party. He had become the font of all knowledge by virtue of having been able to understand a portion of the data.

He pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes, giving the impression of performing complicated calculations in his head. "I'd say you could get anywhere from a hundred-thousand standards to five times that."

"I could make you more than 10 times that much," Skyler said from the bar.

Ignoring Skyler, Salome asked, "What's it cost...?" She paused, wondering why she was even asking, then she asked anyway. "What's it cost to own a spaceship like that?"

The old party shook his bald head. "You don't want to keep it. You have to have a captain, and there's guild fees for the...ah...the thing—the whatayacallit."

Skyler pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "The linchpin."

"That's it," the old party continued. "You have to have it to pinch the ship. That's if the ship even has a pilot. Without it, you're stuck with

in-system travel. Then you've got to have some way to make money on it. That means shipping, freight-hauling, passengers... And you've got to have a crew. That means a first mate, navigator, engineer, medtech, mainteneer, a supercargo..." He shook his head again. "You don't want the hassle."

Skyler snorted. "I could fill all those positions for you like that." He snapped his fingers.

Salome looked over to Skyler. "And just how much money are you talking about?"

"Enough to buy you a tower of residence pods and an entire luxury resort to dock them in."

"That's a load of tugolith dung," the old party said.

"I didn't say I was thinking of doing it." Salome laughed at the idea. Imagine her trying to...she didn't even know what she was thinking about. It was just curiosity. Not about the deal. Definitely not. Not at all. It was probably just the sleek con artist with the muscular chest. Because she obviously wasn't even considering keeping a spaceship. What a ridiculous idea.

Chapter 2: Skylar Rysen

Skyler sipped the smoking grog to hide a smile that wasn't intended for seduction. The pretty lady was half on the hook. Let her wriggle a little, nibble the bait.

He set his empty mug on the bar and dropped a jingling scatter of hard credits beside it. On his way toward the door, he stopped over the lady's table. "Think about it," he said. He slid the back of his hand down her arm, ignoring her haughty scowl, and winked at her two giant companions, who had been staring hot death at him since he'd distracted their light-o-love. "Win-win. I'll be in touch, beautiful." He flashed his best smile one last time before walking out the door.

Just before the door swung shut behind him, he heard the woman raise her voice. "Well, either way, if I'm about to get rich, I guess I owe everybody a drink."

Hooked.

Twenty minutes later, Skylar stepped off the skytrot on Ganges topside. He removed the holo-projector from its position on the outer orbit of his right eye. He'd downloaded the schematics and flight history of the Fantastic Blindness. It wasn't much of a ship. It was going to need work before it could even leave the station, and the docking fees were mounting every hour, but all he needed was something spaceworthy. He'd find a way to cover the costs.

Ganges Shore topside was a paltry little excuse for a city compared to worlds like Tanarive and Andurine, but the owners who lived here lorded it over their little world like they were the kings of the galaxy.

It was an arbitrary night on topside. Domeglow had been dimmed to allow stars to become visible. Real night had been going on for two days, and real dawn would come when the station rotated out of the shadow of Xerxes 7b into sunlight again.

Here on the street, the night dazzled with lights. The downbelow might be all shipping and gas-filtering and maintenance, but topside was playtime. There were even people who came for entertainment—the ones who couldn't afford a real dirt-side vacation. To them, Ganges Shore Topside was high society. Skylar shook his head. He'd grown up in the downbelow, but even he had been to better places than this.

He nudged and weaved his way through the street-crowd toward the second ring of the city where the tourists thought they were in high-society because they came into City Center for operas and art galleries and dinners that would cost a year's wages for some of the downbelow working class.

He passed a very attractive woman in a priceless bright pink Edweyen fur cloak that complemented her olive complexion. He met her eyes and tried out his dimples, but she only wrinkled her nose.

Nettled, he picked up his pace. Probably someone's pampered pet. Lords who wouldn't want to risk her livelihood by entertaining someone other than her keeper.

Skyler rounded the corner and barreled through the doors of the four-star hotel. He was running late. James was going to be in a foul mood.

Halfway across the tiled atrium, he looked up just in time to stop himself from slamming into the tall, midnight-blue waiter standing in front of him. He recognized those full lips, and his own curved in a

smile. “Reggie.” He ran a quick glance down and back up again. “Keeping in shape.”

“Sky,” Reggie said. “I didn’t know you were back in town. How was your trip?”

“Honestly, it could have gone better.” Skyler brought out his dimples. “Want to welcome me back?” Reggie would be the perfect antidote. Skyler hadn’t wound down from flirting with the lush Cappellan ship-owner, and there was still a little sting in the memory of the pretty woman with the snooty nose.

“I could use some company tonight.” Reggie curved his hand around the back of Skyler’s neck and bent to bring those luscious lips within a breath of Skyler’s own. “I’m on duty for four more hours, but I’ll be around later. Give me a call.”

“You can count on it.”

Reggie straightened and assumed his high-class snooty waiter pose. “May I take your jacket, good sir?” Reggie moved behind Skyler to catch it as it fell from his shoulders.

“Thanks. You can take the rest later.”

Reggie smiled his professional waiter smile and folded the jacket over his arm. “I believe your associate has been waiting for you.”

“Ouch. Better deal with that. I’ll see you later.” He turned and walked through to the bar on the other side.

“Where in the lowest dog-crapping hell have you been?” a furious voice with a hint of a lisp snarled from a table opposite the bar.

Skyler turned to see his floppy-eared friend sitting at a table with three empty mugs in front of him and a full one in his hand. *Oh boy, he’s already three cups deep.*

He smiled. “Jimmy, buddy.” He placed his hand on James’s furry white shoulder. “You see, what happened was...”

“I don’t even want to hear it,” the bunny said, taking another swig of his drink, which left a bright green ring in the fur around his mouth.

Skyler sat across from him. “You’ll want to hear this. I happened to wander into this tavern in the downbelow...”

James took another swig of his libation. “Why were you slumming it down there?”

“Call it a hunch.” Skyler’s eyes twinkled.

James rolled his enormous brown eyes. “What’s her species?”

“It’s not like that. She just might be the answer to all of our problems.”

James slammed his drink down on the table. “That’s how you fucked up our last job, thinking with your little head instead of your big one.”

Skyler winked. “Well, they’re actually both pretty sizeable.”

James tucked his long ears back. “Let’s see how funny you think it is when Willy cuts both your heads off.”

Skyler winced. “Yeah, but seriously, this dame just inherited a ship. If we can get her to transport our cargo to Yurgo, then we’re home free. We’ll be able to unload the rods there and make a fortune.”

“How are you going to get her to do that?”

“With my good looks and charm.”

“I hope you have a plan B.”

“When have I ever let you down?”

“Do you have all day.”

Skyler waved off the complaint and stood. “I’m going to hit the head.”

“Don’t get lost. Reggie’s been looking for you.”

Skyler looked back over his shoulder. “He found me.”

“I bet he did.” James went back to nursing his beer.

On his way to the necessary, Skyler spotted Reggie helping patrons at another table. He gave him a quick wink and then slid through the door. Fresh-scented blue liquid sheeted down from the tops of all four walls. He had the place to himself for the moment. Skyler unzipped. Just when his stream found its rhythm, he heard someone behind him. “Hey, Reg,” he said, “I’m all for a teaser, but maybe someplace a little more romantic.”

“Skyler Rysen,” said a voice he didn’t recognize.

He zipped up his pants and turned. “Who wants to knnooooo...” Something cold and metallic, pinched the side of his neck, sending what felt like a gigawatt of electricity through his body, paralyzing every muscle. He fell to the floor, struggling to speak, but even his tongue was now immobile. The dark figure above him placed a hood on his head, and after that, Skyler saw nothing but darkness.

No Escape

E.J. GETZ is a nonbinary dyke and current PhD student at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. They are there for science and not writing, but are not 100% sure how or why that happened. When they are not doing science, though, they are writing about bees or god or anything in between.

The District Clairvoyant had given Bailey a sympathetic once-over. He hadn't said anything. He'd just handed her a pamphlet entitled *Empty Lives & Poor Decisions: What Did You Do to Deserve This?* Then he'd kicked Bailey out of the office with a copy of her Public Soul Record, and that was that.

One person can live an infinite number of lifetimes, over and over again. One person can be a lot of different people. That is not a guarantee that any of them will be Special. Like everybody else, Bailey has been around for a lot longer than Soul Records have existed. But according to hers, she has never been Special. She has never been Special even once. It isn't fair. But then again, when is it ever?

A block away from the D.C. office, Bailey tosses the pamphlet into someone's curbside recycling bin. She gets about twenty steps before she goes back to pick it up again. Bailey would like to know *What She Did to Deserve This*, actually. She really would.

#

2013: Lemon tree, blight.

That is what the little card says. At some point, Bailey is a lemon tree. Interesting, a bit, that Bailey had been very much alive in this current human form of Bailey in 2013, too. At a ripe age of twelve, painful pubescent memories abound. Pubescent tree memories do not.

Interesting, maybe, but *time is not linear*, says the pamphlet. *Do not expect it to make sense in straight lines*. Bailey tries not to think in straight lines. But it's train tracks as far as her mind can see.

A Special person might be smart enough to grasp the twisting, cyclical nature of time. A Special person might be a lot of things, and may, once, have even been a lemon tree. But Bailey is not smart about anything, especially not about temporal physics. She is not especially dumb, either. She is somewhere in the midrange of mental capacity: an Average person, through and through.

She was probably an Average tree, too.

#

The sun through green leaves. A million billion connections in the roots at her feet. Fruits for the children, the animals, the bugs: she grows them all with love. Life is bright, life is eternal. Life is light and water and golden earth.

But there is a virus.

There is the pain. The sun through grey leaves, dying leaves. A million billion connections in the roots at her feet shrivel away in fear. They abandon her. There are no more fruits for the children, the animals, the bugs: she has love, but nothing will grow in it. Life is getting darker, life is finite. Death will be dark and dry and frozen dirt.

No escape, no escape. A tree cannot run. There is nowhere to go but down.

#

When life gives you lemons, you're supposed to make lemonade. But what are you supposed to do when life makes you into lemons? Drown yourself in sugar water and hope for the best?

#

1223: Mongolian horse, stab wound.

Is what it says under lemon tree. It doesn't list who stabbed Bailey, but she has to assume it was probably Genghis-related. Most Mongolian horse-deaths in the first part of the 13th century were Genghis-related. Powerful guy, very influential. Special, for sure, but the impetus behind quite a lot of dead horses.

In her History of Souls class, Bailey learned that Genghis Khan had been coincidentally stuck in horses ever since that body died, although in 2223 his soul was set to become a janitor on Mars. Which was better than Bailey could say for her own soul in 2223. All that was listed on the card for that year was a bunch of squiggles and a grease stain.

Sometimes, clairvoyant employees can only understand an iteration of your soul in the abstract. So do not be concerned if you cannot figure out who you are at any point; just because the district clairvoyant cannot explain you does not mean you are not real! says the pamphlet.

Bailey wants to believe the pamphlet. But it would not be wholly unsurprising if the clairvoyant in charge of Bailey's file had just gotten so bored with her meaningless existence that they'd dropped french fries all over it.

At least Bailey can sort of remember being a horse at some point.

#

We used to believe that space and time were one continuum, inseparable from one another. But now we know that this was a misconception. It appeared that spacetime was a singular entity, because the reality we normally perceive only exists where the fields of space and time intersect. The discovery of dark matter and clairvoyant space, however, have allowed us to separate these two aspects of our existence.

#

Bailey supposes she should be grateful that she's walking home with her soul card and pamphlet right now instead of being carted off to a think-tank or a temporal rehabilitation center. She still remembers the bitter taste of heartache that came when first Skye, and then Jess, had each turned eighteen, and the government scooped them up as the Sagan and Einstein reincarnations they were to work at the Boson Institute.

That had hurt, but at least Bailey still saw her siblings now and again. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd seen her mother. Skye told her that Mom had been taken off to the Schrodinger Rehabilitation Center when Bailey was three, and no one had heard from her since. That had been the year the International Criminal Court ruled that souls guilty of any major twentieth century war crimes would be placed into the temporal rehabilitation centers. Mom never got the chance to tell them what exactly on her soul's record had gotten her locked away for the rest of this lifetime, but the news said the cutoff was for major players only.

Jess had always been sure Mom was Hilter at some point anyway, even before they'd taken her away. Skye said that was ridiculous but never with quite enough conviction to quell Bailey's concerns.

Bailey had hoped once Skye and Jess got their temporal physics degrees and full clearance at the Boson that they might be able to find out who their mother had been. But if either sibling knew anything more about it, they weren't sharing with Bailey.

#

Time slows when you fly through it into battle, blood on your mind and a warrior on your back. Armies fall before you. The world is a simple division of speeds. When you are fast, you are the blade, and the world is yours. When you aren't, the blade finds you, and you are dead.

And pain is just the pressure of the soul moving on to the next round.

#

With the proper technology and training, we can view any sentience in its entirety through the timefield. Every interaction it has with matter leaves an impression in our reality, one that is stored temporarily in the electrical impulses of living cells or in the patterns of atoms in stardust. One iteration is not separate from any other, however; rather, a being exists across all of reality as a loose collection of temporal memories. You might not remember what you have done or will do in another round of existence, but that does not mean you have not done or will not do it.

#

At the McDonald's where Bailey works, Michael asks her what the verdict is. Even though it's obvious that Bailey has never been Special because otherwise she wouldn't have come back after her eighteenth birthday ended. It's polite to ask, though. You never know if

someone turns out to be Princess Diana or Beyoncé or Leonard Nimoy in another life. Michael is nothing if not polite.

Bailey tells him that the most interesting version of her was probably the time she was a ladybug on JFK's shoulder. Michael gives her a solemn nod of understanding. The dream of every high school McDonald's employee is to find out they're Special on their eighteenth birthday. Michael had been just as disappointed as Bailey on his.

It had been worse for him, actually. He'd already received acceptances from a bunch of colleges—Bailey hadn't even bothered applying—but of course they were all conditional on the content of Michael's other lives. He could be the perfect student this time around, but one screw up a lifetime ago was more than enough for the offers to be rescinded. Michael's soul record had turned up neutral, though, which was almost as bad. Without any Special lives to back him up, even the state schools he'd been accepted to were no longer interested in offering him the scholarships he would need to attend.

Michael was a bright and happy kid, even still, but after the D.C. office handed him his soul's history he was never quite the same. He used to write beautiful stories and draw intricate sketches in his free time and show them to Bailey when they got bored. But now his favorite hobby was getting stoned behind the dumpster in the library parking lot after their evening shifts ended. Bailey supposed she couldn't really judge Michael for his new number one choice of pastimes. It was hers, too.

#

There is, in fact, free will in this universe, but it may not feel this way to most, because—since time is not linear—every choice simply happens at once.

#

The space program is only ten years out from a full Mars mission. NASA hasn't actually figured out all the details yet, but the general clairvoyant consensus is that all the people necessary for the journey will be the appropriate age in 2029. Clairvoyant consensus is never wrong so the agency set a date.

It's always been Bailey's dream to go to space. When her soul's record says nothing about the lifetime in the stars she's hoped for... well, she isn't exactly surprised. But it still hurts to know she will be tied down by Earth's gravity for the rest of this life and throughout every other one.

If Bailey could remember even a second of flying from when she was a ladybug or a pigeon or a pterodactyl, that would maybe offset the despair of knowing she's bound for eternal mediocrity. But outside of the occasional dreamed snippet, Bailey's memories are limited to the body she inhabits now.

The pamphlet says *you have to find meaning in what you have here and now*. But Bailey isn't sure how to find meaning in nothing. She figures that's probably why they made weed legal, though.

#

Life as a single wave in the southern Pacific is short and disorienting. Most waves never feel anything beyond the water. Some are lucky enough to carry living creatures, above or below. Most are not. To exist between the crests of other waves, to have that existence defined only by the current and the wind, only by that which surrounds you; it makes you meaningless.

But the vast ocean can't exist without you, either. Even if you're only there for an instant, you are not inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. Every wave is part of the whole.

Imagine a life on earth without an ocean. Before you disappear into the endless movement of the sea, remember that this pale blue dot is blue, in part, because of you.

#

Is there an origin to your mediocrity? Of course. Free choice means there is a first choice, somewhere, that caused all of this to happen to you across time, in all directions.

But it isn't something even the most skilled clairvoyant with the most advanced technology could pinpoint. If it were, then it might be possible to change the decision and thereby change your own fate. Perhaps there is a future where we can find the mistake, or maybe we have already found it and discovered that we cannot change things. However, no clairvoyant as of yet has been able to uncover either possibility and current calculations on the subject are murky at best.

Whatever the choice was, is, or will be, you have to live with it over and over again. So the sooner you accept that there's nothing Special about the entity that is You, the sooner you can move on with your present life.

#

Jess found out she would be on the Mars mission not long after she found out she'd been Einstein. It didn't say on her card that she'd be on the first colony mission, of course—it's not an exact science—but it hadn't been hard to put the pieces together. Not once the NASA clair-

voyants announced that the whole crew was to be comprised of gay, female-bodied scientists from the Boson Institute, and that Einstein's reincarnation would be among them.

Jealousy might have eaten her alive, but Bailey loves her sister. Mostly Bailey is just concerned for Jess's safety on the red planet. The fact that Skye is in charge of designing the colony base helps, though, and at least they know that Jess is guaranteed to get there safely. The clairvoyants had seen her on Mars—Special and working hard—not floating dead in space.

Clairvoyants can't see where, when, or how anyone's present life-time ends. There's just too much interference from their own timelines. But it's pretty much a sure bet that Jess will die on the fourth planet from the sun and that once she's left for it, Bailey will never see her again.

Jess and Skye had helped design an ansible in preparation for the Mars mission, which was supposed to have one. So at least they'll be able to video chat in real time. Whatever that means.

#

In the end, it's really up to you to decide what Special means. The government has criteria, but just because you've never met them doesn't mean your life can't be worthwhile.

Being alive in a day and age where we can know that no one ever really dies, know that you won't even remember the trials and tribulations of the present in your next round—that's pretty special on its own. And there are plenty of versions of you where it isn't the case. So be grateful that you can even have this existential crisis. Floating in your own nihilism won't always be an option.

Be grateful that you have the time to think thoughts so much bigger than yourself.

#

Skye and Jess are sympathetic when they hear the news. Skye sends a book and Jess drops off a box of Bailey's favorite chocolate caramels from the bodega next to their childhood home. They don't really know how else to show their love for their baby sister, the paradoxically ordinary oddball in an extraordinary family.

Bailey understands the message anyway, though. She may never have been a genius, but she can still understand it. Even when the genius communicates in a language that it is too aloof to speak fluently.

#

One day, Jess will be living her little sister's dream in space. One day, Skye's dream of becoming director of the Boson Institute is set to come true, too, and then Skye will be too busy thinking about the nature of time to spare any for Bailey. One day, Mom might even come home from the center, cleansed of all the crimes she can't remember committing, to find her least favorite child offworld and a house to herself. One day, they might all be happy. One day, one day, one day.

But there is really no point in looking forward to some promised happiness for Bailey. Not when her fate is sealed. No point in anything, really.

When she explains all this to Michael at the end of their Thursday night shift, though, he laughs at her. And when she gets angry and asks him why he's laughing, Michael just smiles and says if there's no point in waiting around, they "might as well be happy now."

So Bailey and Michael go to the library parking lot and get high lying on the hood of his car. Stoned, they try to guess what the grease and squiggles on the card of Bailey's soul *really* mean, and make each other laugh about it until neither one can breathe anymore.

And then they decide it doesn't fucking matter, and laugh at the stars instead.