

# Empty Oaks



*Weird Fiction for Weird People*  
Summer 2015

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## Editorial

*The first thing that happened when we started trying to put this project together was that people started attacking it. For those of you who haven't read our submission guidelines, one of our advisory points to potential contributors was that they give a bit of thought to gender bias in their stories. This seemed to piss a lot of men off; a guy called us small minded on Facebook, and told us he wouldn't be submitting work to us (it's lucky he warned us about that too otherwise we wouldn't have noticed). Other men (and they were all men) made less snarling but more sneering comments about how they thought our guidelines were off-putting; clearly the male protagonists of their stories were no more comfortable sharing their narratives with the opposite sex than they would be sharing a bathroom. One guy sent us a story but told us in his cover letter that he had deliberately chosen to ignore our advice. Thanks, mate.*

*I nearly gave up, until we started to get some proper submissions. It's good to know that not everyone was put off by a zine that publishes women as well as men. Once the submissions started rolling in, Empty Oaks took on a momentum of its own (or gathered momentum), and the finished article is a greater collection of work than I ever imagined it would be. The common quality between these stories is something elusive; there's both a simplicity and a sophistication to the works here which owes more to writers like Bernhard Schlink than to genre pot-boilers. And whilst stories like Kira Messell's identity horror and Phoebe Reeves-Murray's zoo-spoiler inflict anxieties that are real-world, these are off-set against a transcendent, dream-like science fiction in the work of David W Landrum and Charles Bane Jr.*

*Writing the submission guidelines was hard; in truth, I wasn't sure what I was looking for from our contributors until I found it. If there's one thing that unifies the stories below then it's these contrasts; somewhere between the simple and cerebral, the real and the weird, is a kind of comfortable paradox that feels like half-waking from a dream. So sit somewhere comfortable; you can lose whole days in this feeling.*

# The Play's The Thing

*By Stephen Whitaker*

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**H**e stood straight against the brick. My God he pulsed. Brooded. In waves. Like in those old terrorist films where the camera pans in on the one anxious dark skinned man in the crowd. Something about him put the hook in me. My friend Kate could see that I had engaged his root directory.

“Really, March? Really?” She shrugged and took a hit of her vape. “Well, he’s kinda hot with the dreads. Don’t see those much anymore.”

“Not cityside,” I said.

His skin was a bit darker than most, and he wore black pants, and a cable sweater against the autumn air.

“If you’re thinking about breaking contract early, just let me know,” Kate teased, “Professor Walker has intimated that I join him in Paris for the convention.”

“Get out.” I had noticed Walker had been massaging her about the convention; he’d even asked her to stay after class. “Don’t worry, sweetie.” I squeezed her hand and leaned in to kiss her cheek. “You still have me for another month. You just might have some competition.”

“Ouch, girlfriend.” Kate laughed and walked around me so I could cruise tall dark and handsome’s root. Jack Stas. 23. Russian father, deceased. Mother, Caribbean. Professor of Proscriptive Literacy NYU. I cruised his social network as I passed by him, hoping he’d look me

in the eye, but he was distracted and didn't see me, didn't even cruise my root. Needless to say I was intrigued.

"Well?" Kate asked, leaning close to my neck. "What does the March hare say?"

"The March hare says I need to check him out again." I smiled. "When he's willing to pay me some mind."

We laughed and went out into the stream on assignment for class. Advanced social engineering, a class held in the world, in the stream. Human interaction, that's what we were supposed to be filming and recording. Kate and I swung through the shopping district. Getting anywhere cityside is a long exercise in patience. So many people. We went with the flow, and window shopped.

"I have no photographs for this spread," Kate sighed, searching through her bag for a makeup wand. "I'm gonna need your refill cap, I think I left mine in the room."

We shared everything in those days, and I was fishing through my own pockets when I saw him again. Jack Stas was walking towards In Vino Veritas, the boutique wine shop on the corner. For a second he looked over to us, but he didn't see me. He stepped downstairs, to the basement like he was on a mission.

"Kate."

"Yeah," She was re-applying her eye shadow. An obsession of hers.

"Kate."

"What?"

"Jack Stas just walked into the basement of that wine boutique."

"And?"

"Come on." My body was in motion and moved towards the crosswalk. Kate had no choice to follow me. She read on my root my anxious arousal. I read on her root a tepid annoyance.

I sensed her hurt as she walked behind me. The subtle way she stomped her feet, the way she snapped closed her handbag. Noises and actions that didn't show up in root. Kate played tough; she was jealous of Jack.

The basement sunk into the street, and we ducked to enter the space, recently painted in nano-paint, currently a black satin. Thirty or so others sat on the floor or on chairs facing what appeared to be a raised floor. I didn't know it was a stage 'til I sat down. I had never seen one before in person.

"True love?" Kate purred in my ear. "There ain't no such thing. Not for me. Not for you, either." Her vapour turned blue and curled and coiled like a snake before dissipating. "You wanna talk about true love? I can see that you are aroused. You cannot lie to me."

"Look at this place." I had never been in a basement before and this space was not how I pictured it. The outside world streamed by, and I could hear them, thousands of people walking by, unaware that we were inside. The feeling made my stomach feel tipsy. Strange.

Wind slammed the shutters against the cafe's windows. Overhead, an air quad's shuttle hummed, foot traffic increased, sounds of feet, the occasional shout. Jack hadn't seen me yet, but he was sitting across from me, feet away. It was then I realized my root wasn't backing up. Kate tugged on my elbow. She pointed to homemade Wi-Fi blockers, painfully obvious to anyone who cared to check out the basement.

"I'm out of stream, so are you," she said with distaste.

"We all are," I replied. And that was when the lights went out. We were holding our breath in the dark, and then from the ceiling, a single light shone on a stage of black. Curtains of red closed and then opened to reveal a bust of a white man on a stool. It appeared out of place until it wasn't out of place anymore; it became a stamp upon the air. In memory, there were fat minutes where nothing happened. As if the world held its breath. If we were rooted and synched the audience would know its own tense anxious wonder. But we weren't. There was fear from being separated from the group, and it manifested in a nervous haze. I still didn't understand what was about to happen.

She entered wearing white, a simple smock of satin with lace trim. All citywide girls own something like it once in their life. Her hair grew copper under the light, and she moved as if she were the happiest woman on the planet. Instantly I knew her to be in love. Swelling, she sighed, and she made motions with her hands as if she were gazing in a mirror. But it was as if we were the mirror, the audience. Her reflection was all of us, staring back at her in the dark, peering closer and closer, the smell of her perfume telling us all we needed to know of her intentions.

She moved with a light beat to her spirit.

Kate held my hand, and pressed into me. Our skin flushed together. She caressed my fingers, and put her head on my shoulder.

He entered next. Tall, thin, but aged in the eyes. Dark skin, but it was a glamour. But I believed it, not because it was expensive nano make-up, but because when he entered the space he engaged her, read her body, put his hands on the right places to begin a dance around the stage. Around a room. Together.

It was when they spoke first that I felt Jack's eyes on me.

The woman began, and her words I did not understand, so lush and open, strange. Jack distracted me, his eyes catching me deep in their spoons. We must have stared at each other for a minute or more, and I blinked and waved with my fingers. He smiled and his look made me blow a kiss, a half kiss, a puff of air. The woman's queer words fell silent.

We turned back to the stage. The man kissed the woman full on the mouth, and his hands were on her waist, and pressing her in a way that made me jealous of her, for he was a man who knew what to do with his lover's body.

Because they were in love.

Lights darkened. Kate pulled on my elbow.

"What the hell were they saying?"

"I..." And before I could respond.

“They are in love, a passion greater than the whole of their world,” said an older woman with plastics. She gestured to us with an open hand. “There is something lurid about it though, can’t you feel it?”

Someone emphatically grunted, and the lights faded, and the man, and the woman next appeared in plain green clothes, only the woman was a man now, her hair pinned up, and her voice a no nonsense hum. I wanted her voice to strangle me, and wrap me like a cloak for it was so pleasurable to hear her soothing cadence.

I didn’t look at Jack Stas again until the end, when the man wrapped his hands around his wife’s neck, and put her light out. It broke my heart, so many of us cried out. I heard Jack’s voice, and we looked at each other across the dark, and I whispered the words. I love you.

And his eyes fell through the world to me, and I knew he loved me back.

After the couple bowed and vanished through a small door behind the stage, we met face to face. We did not speak.

Instead we held hands and matched our intensity.

“My name is Jack Stas.”

“I know.”

“You have me at a disadvantage.”

His skin was perfect. Its smoothness leapt from his face and his eyes were electric blue. His index finger pushed a strand of hair over my ear. “March Hayes.” My stomach felt like it had been turned upside down.

“Should I be impressed, Ms. Hayes?” He smiled, and took my hand, and drew it to his lips. I swallowed loudly.

“Back to stream,” yelled a man in a work-shirt, and a civic work helmet. He turned the blockers off, and suddenly we were in sync, our dash flashing to life.

“In two days here, dusk,” Jack whispered, “the next show.” And then he placed his finger to his mouth to shush me.

“In stream,” I said to myself. Soon as I was backed up I locked into his root and saw that he was locked into mine.

“I must go,” I said, but he already knew.

“Yes, your father...”

And then he turned and walked up to the street, his eyes tracking me as Kate moped into my range, and regarded me with mock shock.

“Way to cut to the quick,” Kate said. She smirked, and turned, and walked ahead of me, and up out the door. “I guess I’ll say yes to the professor.”

\* \* \*

Kate didn’t speak to me for almost two hours, an eternity, punctuated by the eerie time hangover from being out of the stream for two hours. The spell of the man and woman’s queer words hung in my mind like stained glass, the light amber, and bright, and blue burning through them.

I directed our afternoon towards her favourite restaurant, which she picked up on after a few moves west.

“It’s not going to help,” Kate grumbled, her heart just under her tongue. Her biometrics were within the curve of someone whose anger was waning.

“I’m sorry. I do not know what to say.”

Kate did not speak for a while. The crowds slowed things cityside. The Bear in the Pit had a line around the corner, but if we queued up, we’d be inside by dinner time. So we queued.

“The slide, that’s what my mother calls it,” Kate finally said. My biometrics gave it away, but I covered, a weak gesture. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean, I can tell. There’s no lies anymore.”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

Her face matched the bounce of her amygdala regions, her mouth moving up into a hill surprise.

“Really. I...something about him brought me to attention. Woke me up, I think.”

“That was,” she hushed her voice. Those near us could read our anxiety, and fear on our root. “That was what we saw. That man and woman. Those words.” Kate looked back and forth as if the Jack Robbers were already sidling up next to us for conspiracy.

“What was that?”

“A show. Something from the old world...It made me sad.”

“Me too.”

“I liked it,” Kate said, her lips up in a grin. I treated her to dinner, roasted vegetables, protein blocks, bread, and artificial wine. Kate and I came home full, warm in the belly. We did not speak of the man or the woman, or of the strange words.

Of course Jack and I were talking, messaging, learning about each other. Until we didn’t. What was there to speak about? I counted the days ‘til next week when Kate and I hiked to In Vino Veritas again.

And Jack leaned, dreamy, his jacket draped over his shoulders. He didn’t see us. We were just another pair of rich girls walking to class on a fresh autumn morning.

“Hey, handsome,” I said.

He turned to us, and our roots matched, and locked, and I reached out for his hand.

“Kate.” He greeted her with a nod. Behind him, one of the Wi-Fi blocker’s antennae stuck up against the basement window plate glass. Any citizen walking by could ID it for what it was.

Do you know what language can do to the mind when unfettered by data? By all rights we were guilty of potential treason and conspiracy to be out of stream for so long. But the odds, just a handful of folks, off line, at irregular times, on the city floor? Not an emergency. On a quad, no way. Jacksquad would come down on irregular streams like white on rice. But not on the street. Not in the city. The old world interrupts the new every now and again.

Under In Vino, one of the shopkeepers had set up a table with a single red rose in a vase, and a few bottles of wine for the audience. We sat with little plastic cups and drank red wine and waited.

Jack and I held hands. We made plans to meet. Kate rolled her eyes, and teased me when Jack wasn't looking. She'd forgiven me. We were almost out of contract anyway.

The lights went dark, and the man entered first this time, face bare of glamour, his eyes two sharp jets moving through us. Kate leaned into me, and whispered, "I'm gonna sign his contract, for sure."

We laughed, and a woman in front of us, broad faced, short dark hair, light skin, turned to us. "That's his wife, the woman. They've been in contract for years. That's what I hear anyway."

Someone shushed us. More wine was passed around.

When he began to speak it was clear that he was a lord. He wanted love, ached for it, and the broad words rolled, and echoed in the air. The woman came on next, entered as a man, and the two entertained a world, switching roles, and laughing. At times I did not know if the characters were in love or out of it, but it did not matter, for the flutter of breath, and grace of their movements gave the words wings.

The speed and dexterity of their tongues kept our eyes moving up and down as if we were clouds created by their humidity. Gender made no difference to their costume. Their emotions stirred our own.

At one point Jack leaned to kiss my ear.

I lurched into my body, and its pleasure, and I grabbed his thigh and I knew, without root, without the stream, that we were experiencing love together, at the same moment, in the throes of the alien language, and symphonic rhythm.

And time? No longer accounted, it betrayed my space and my emotions. The artificial wine did its work as well, and Jack's caresses. And Kate's too, her warm body next to me as the story progressed to a love knot of mistaken identity. The couple's fire and ice did something to our bodies. The on and off again characters did not matter, it was all the same; their love, their fight,

their hate, their kissing, their breaking apart...a long breath of a great love spoken in a way that made your head light.

Jack came home with me that night, and Kate went out with Cass, and we shared a night locked up together, memories of our time out of stream right next to each other, but unknown, in the dark, like our performance.

\* \* \*

“Your father, is he still?”

“In it to the hilt.” I laughed at Jack. Part of me was taken aback, just a little. A tug of aggression. And of course he could read the elevation in my blood, and see the spike in my adrenaline.

“Is it working?” Jack asked. His naked chest was a smooth stretch of muscle. He smelled vaguely of lemon, garlic, spices. “This master plan.”

“My name will guarantee me a government job, if I want it, or a private sector gig.” He rubbed my back. “So yeah, I guess it is working.” I gave him a fake scowl, and he swatted me with a pillow.

“All those brothers and sisters,” he laughed. “And you couldn’t see my pillow attack. I don’t buy it.” He swatted me again.

And then, of course, it was on.

We ended up in the floor, and each other’s arms, on top of the pillows. After, we agreed to meet the next week. At night, this time. For the next performance.

\* \* \*

When you feel attracted to someone time contracts. Even in the stream, time shrinks, and enlarges its own account. Waiting for Jack’s IM, waiting to interact with his root, which pricks the heart to touch, waiting to hear his voice in the ear. Waiting to feel his skin on my skin.

Where Jack found the paper I cannot say. The letter, a small square of white parchment, was left under my door. I knew it was him, that the letter was for me. Kate knew too, and rolled her eyes when she saw it.

“You must be worth it. Must have cost him a month’s work,” she said. It was one of the last moments we shared in contract. She and Cass were hitting the bars. Though I believe Kate did so to make me jealous, or perhaps to seek a respite from my feed. She knew how I felt, and I knew how she felt, and she wanted a firewall between. “Letters. I know I don’t rate that high.”

I had never touched paper before, and when I opened it I was afraid it was going to fall apart in my hands. Kate watched me, and her root showed that her anxiety and anticipation matched mine.

The writing was careful, all the lines straight and precise. It had an odour; cologne, and something else. A distinct smell. I know it to be ink now, but the smell was alien to me and sharp as his words of love for me. When he wrote it, I cannot say. I found no images of it on his root, and deduced that he must have written it out of stream. *My love for you has turned me inside out, and upside down. I am an empty bottle, poured out, without your sweet wine.*

No one had ever written me before, and I had never seen handwriting, which looked so fragile, as if a tear, water, or a finger could swipe across those lines and ruin it.

“Your root,” Kate reminded.

I waved her off. I cared not if anyone could see what he had written. But there are no private thoughts in the stream.

My father contacted me shortly after, the spell of the words and the letter still running through me.

“End it before it begins,” my father said. He was working at the state office, interacting with air quad water filtration regulation officers. “I urge you to avoid a long term contract with this young man. I remind you of your family obligations.”

“Dad, it’s...”

“Avoid a long term contract. No children with this man.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Your mother and I are following your root carefully.”

“And what does she say?”

“She’s in line with the Hayes tradition. She favours a six month contract. Her idea. Not mine. I like Kate, personally. You should extend with her until you are ready for children.”

“Mother hasn’t said anything to me.”

“Does she ever?”

Mother was in Paris, hanging above the city in her comfy quad with my youngest sister.

He did not ask any further questions. Whether he had backtracked through all of my feed or if he had read my highlights, I do not know. The information was his to know if knowing was what he wanted.

\* \* \*

The night before the performance Kate met Cass for drinks before a date, and then left Cass to her fun. This freed me up to meet Jack early, to spend an extra hour in the basement with him, unfettered.

The cityways throttled with people. Ten abreast on the walks, the streets crammed with humming trolley cars. Professor Walker had been dropping into our streams all week, commenting on what was in our feed. His IM flashed in my corner as I passed the state shelters. “Conflict and interaction everywhere. You have some promising material to incorporate into your presentation.” My father IMed me about my obligations. So did two sisters, and my oldest brother. Lip service. Polite conversations. Nothing out of the ordinary.

The sun went down on the old brownstones, and roasted meat hung the air. The hanging vines of the heated garden buckets in the windows, the arching beanspreads in the little corners of the city. It enabled my love, all of those people, those hearts beating right next to yours. Another mind, sometimes a few inches from your own mind, I could read their root, and still not know the passion behind the body.

It was being out of stream and being in love with Jack that brought forth my spike in biometrics. I should have foreseen problems. I should have used the stream.

But I didn't.

I did what they tell you is treasonous to do: conspiracy.

I went underground into a buffer zone to see the play. To meet my love.

The jackrobber blackouts were bent at angles, like handwriting, a slanty I, a longing Y. And I thought of my letter as I entered the basement of In Vino Veritas. At first I worried, for my root flickered and did not go offline, and I grew fearful that I had made a mistake, a tactical error. That I would be picked up in a stakeout. But then the root went silent and cycled into buffer.

"You're early," said a tall man, his eyes looking right into me. He had stacked a few crates of artificial wine next to a service entrance.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I'm meeting someone here."

"Happens all the time." He smiled. He looked familiar but I could not place him.

"You came last week," he said.

"And the week before last. I loved it." Then I understood, blushing, embarrassed. "It's you."

He laughed. "Right now I am only me. Small and ordinary. But in an hour or so, I shall be transformed." He bowed and bent to his task, and opened a crate, and took out the bottles, and placed them on a table.

I was about to ask about those wonderful words he spoke, I had so many questions, but could not think to ask him, so shocked was I to find him unmasked, doing drone work. Then, Jack entered with flowers, and his own bottle. He looked dashing in his forest green, and black, the grey trim brought out the metal in his eyes.

He took me in his arms, and I must admit, time slipped into a trance. A lovely moment of hunger, and ache. I cannot explain it any other way. I cannot recall a few minutes, for we kissed,

and touched, and I could hear and feel his heart beat next to my own, so passionate we were. Like falling through the bottom of a wave into a warm clear lagoon.

“My God it has been so long,” he said, his hands fluttering across my face.

I leaned into him, wanting to be enveloped by his warmth and safety. Like I fit there, like we fit each other.

He took me by the hand, and we went into the dark corners where the wine shop stored boxes, and crates; a long corridor of storage that stretched beyond into a cave.

“The shop is built into the earth, and long ago there were storage rooms dug out of rock. To think the city built into the earth, before the streets, before the overcity, and the quads. My apartment is over Midtown. The top of 40 Rock is a small point below the lowest deck of my arch. Weird to think that below buildings, not so long ago, people lived and worked, and stored wine.”

“Yes, it’s...”

He shushed me, and leaned in for a kiss, and I lost my breath in his, and we fed each other breath in our embrace. He touched me on the neck, and my knees quivered. We made love on his jacket, our skin goose fleshed from the cold basement air, and the shivers of our pleasure. By the time we joined the crowd we were buzzing on each other, and the real red wine he had spent a week’s worth of salary on, a dusky red. The old city sung in my bones that night as we took our seats in the packed crowd. I did not see Kate, nor think to look for her.

They entered together, in the dark, by candlelight, and the shadows played across our faces as we listened to their doublespeak. Troubled families in the wake of hate, and malice. And again we slipped into their world of switching character and position. The throated breath tightened, and loosened the words as they slipped, and knotted, and cried, and loved from their mouths. I didn’t see the jackrobbers slip in behind.

And there was no black feed, their calling card when they spread their cloak through the stream. We simply just didn’t see them coming.

On stage, the woman was slipping away from a bloody accident in the street, some fight over name, and pride, and the man was crying from his friend's death when the lights snapped on, and our signals started to rebuffer and stir to life.

"Jackrobbers!" Someone shouted, and we rose at once to bolt for the exits. The woman and her husband slipped the knot, for when the jack cops started cracking skulls and arresting citizens, they had vanished into stone.

Jack took my hand and we broke towards the cellar, the stores of wine. We entered its throat and started to run.

"Stop!" Voices behind us blended into chaos.

I had never ran anywhere but the gym, and hit my arms and shoulders against the sharp corners of the storage racks and cabinets. Jack looked back at me. "Tunnels. The old city will save us again."

From behind, the jackcops started to fire the riot guns. The burst of electric bolts turned the air blue, fried ozone filled the air.

Jack led me by the hand and we turned the corner and ran behind. The stone floor bottomed out, and ahead I thought I saw a flashing dash of red. The woman, her husband! Ahead, we ran into darkness, where there were no windows and no lights.

Heart in my throat, and pounding in my ears, I thought we were going to die. We were not in the stream, and to my untrained eyes we ran at low stone walls, and around old stone wells, for there was the sound of water dripping, and the dank smell that hangs about the river.

Behind, the call of a jackrobber. A single shot rang and bounced against stone.

Jack led me in the dark for a stretch and we ascended a small flight of stairs that led to the alley on the other side of the street. And in a flash we were up above the dark.

The street air hit us in the face. Jack leaned over and kissed me, pushing his hands over my breasts and thighs. "Kiss me back. We're in the stream now. They must not read our fear."

And I understood. We were in stream now and IMs flashed across my sight. My own biometrics showed me in fight or flight.

“They’ll be on us in a second!” Jack said, panicked. He pushed his tongue into my mouth, and I bit his lips and dipped the bowl of my groin into his.

And then we were trapped, live and in flux, two jack cops combing the alley entrance behind us. But there was no black feed. No emergency bulletin. Across the way, the jackrobbers lined citizens up, and pushed them into a car bound for prison. The magistrate, judge warden, and the legal team milled around smoking vapes on the street. They would make short work of the treasonous, and the careless would be unlicensed, and forgotten.

I moaned with pleasure and sent my biometrics into the pleasure zone.

Jack took my hand. We hustled out the back of the alley. And when we hit the main drag, we tried to laugh, to fake it until our emotions steadied into invisible plainness.

“Time, perhaps to take a break from this side of the city.”

I didn’t respond. I scrolled through my dash, pretending that my life was normal, uninterrupted: Where did you go? Are you alright? Your feed? You didn’t respond? There is a raid near your location! I ignored them all and kissed Jack.

“Are our houses so different?” I asked, pulling away for a moment. I wanted to kiss him.

“Too much, I’m afraid. Time...it’s time.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m for the European border states. A job, or more likely, a studentship.”

“Just like that?”

“It’s better this way,” and he looked back to In Vino Veritas. When I looked my throat leapt up, and I coughed to clear it. Jackrobbers leaned against the buildings, cruising the feeds of the men and women who passed them by. A man I recognized from the show was being yanked into the street and cuffed. In pairs they searched for those who escaped.

For us. And the couple.

“We must go.”

We said no more. When he kissed me the last time, I knew I would never again feel such passion. I’ve been alone in the stream ever since.

\* \* \*

*“The world depicted in “The Play’s The Thing” is a futuristic, over-populated, over teched world. This world government has outlawed many things, including live theatre, and Shakespeare. In “The Play’s the Thing” a couple (consisting of two female grad students—we are post-gay in this world, btw) nearing the end of their romantic contract, stumble across an underground staging of Shakespeare. The magic of Shakespeare intrigues them, and one of the girls falls in love with a fellow audience member, much to her lover and her father’s dismay. She risks her relationships, and possibly her freedom to be with this man, and to continue seeing the underground, illegal plays, whose alien language holds her in thrall. The title is taken from a line from Hamlet; the dark prince is plotting to lay a trap for his Uncle Claudius.*

*“The Play’s The Thing” was inspired by overheard conversations between friends who were discussing how they stalk potential romantic partners via Facebook and Twitter. In the story, the characters exist in a world where there is no privacy. The world is crowded, expensive, and held together by “the stream,” which essentially the internet, or what a future permutation of the internet. To be “out of stream” is to commit treason. When you are out of stream the government assumes you are up to nefarious deeds and villainy. Hackers, instead of trying to infiltrate systems and infrastructures, are trying to keep the infrastructure from infiltrating private life.*

*In this futuristic world (dare I say dystopia?) everyone is directly rooted into the stream. When you get close enough to someone you can read their feed. For example you walk to the store to buy milk, and if you choose, you can “see” what everyone you come into contact is doing, thinking, feeling (by way of biometrics), and reading, who they are interacting with, what kind of web activities they are into and up to, etc. It’s not explicitly stated, but this feed can be seen without the use of wearable tech. It’s hardwired into you. You are the stream. This is a world without secrets. Everything is out in the open, your political leanings, your sexual fetishes, your private particulars can be accessed by anyone. All for the better good, eh? Be careful what you google.”*

## Rustle-y

*By Rudy Koshar*

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I'm on the outside now. I'd better keep my nose clean, or I'll land in the hole again, and then it won't be months but years. I'm at Annika's, and I'll be happy to see her. I'm hoping she'll be happy too. It's nine in the morning, and I'm standing in front of her Berlin apartment building, looking at the nameplates. I look over my shoulder like a perp in a detective story. Why? Because I've been inside and now I'm outside, where I have to watch myself. That's rich, isn't it? What the Nazis have managed to do is get me to watch myself. In other words, self-police. Spy on myself.

I find Annika's name and I ring. The few seconds it takes for the heavy wooden door to click open are longer than three months in Dachau. When I'm inside, I see the black and white checked linoleum in the foyer, and that's familiar. I see the heavy, dark wooden railing winding up to the fifth floor, and that's familiar. The smell in the hallway outside Annika's door is familiar too, a mix of cigar smoke and bacon from the family across the hall. But when Annika opens the door in response to my knock, her face is not familiar. Three months have meant five years for her acorn-coloured eyes. There are faint lines in the skin around her mouth. She frowns but not angrily. It's an anxious frown. I want to say, "Annika, what's wrong?" And she'll say, "oh, nothing, come on in, Berthold, haven't seen you for so long." But I can tell that won't work. Right now, I have no words to match Annika's look, and Annika has no words either. We stare.

I feel I have to say something. "I'm out" comes from somewhere in my throat, and I regret it the moment I say it. I wish the words had stuck in my craw like fish bones. I don't see Annika for three months, I've gone through hell, I thought several times I'd never see the outside again,

the Nazis would do me in, out by the latrine maybe, where they'd beat me to death, or maybe they'd do it simply with a bullet to the base of the skull. One less Bolshie, they'd say as they pissed on my sorry-ass corpse. After all that, and I manage only to utter the obvious.

Annika raises her finger and signals me to come in. In my dreams, that thin, beckoning, assertive finger has often meant a world of soft, perfumed skin and clean sheets and waking up with her head in the crook of my arm. It has made me imagine how she would sigh under the weight of my body. The kind of dream I was having when they rousted me out of bed and sent me to the camp. But her silent finger doesn't do that for me now. No, it makes me even more worried. She doesn't hug me, doesn't even look me over to take inventory. It's as if she knows what she'd see anyway. She closes the door and says, "Sit." I've never heard that tone from her before. It tells me there's only one choice. I sit.

She goes to her bedroom, a room I've been in just once and then only by accident because of too much schnapps (my fault) and too much imagination (also my fault). Annika laughed about it the next morning and told me how she'd shuffled me out and deposited me on her faded green living room couch, where I awoke next day at noon with the Berlin subway careening through my head. It taught me a lesson, namely that schnapps plus imagination make a man an idiot. Yet from idiocy comes insight, and so I learned a second thing, namely that I'm not her type.

She walks out of her bedroom now with someone I've never met, though he looks damned familiar. He's quite a bit shorter than me—I'm a little over six feet—and he's dumpy in a pear-shaped way. He approaches me like a gravedigger; the expression on his face says that when you know what I do you'll run like hell. He's introduced as Heinrich but I know he's no Heinrich. I know Heinrichs, and he's not one of them. A Heinrich looks like someone ready to serve a summons or foreclose on a poor widow's property. This character is beyond that kind of mundane evil. His hair is wrong for a Heinrich too—it slants down over his forehead instead of being combed back and greased with pomade. He's got almost a full beard; he's in the process of growing it out, it would appear. I see something through the beard that reminds me of someone else, and I wonder if my eyes went to hell when I was in the camp. I recall several years ago seeing some bigwig, a movie star or politician, strolling on the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin, but I'd only seen pictures of the man, so I thought it couldn't be him because I was still looking through an image my mind had formed.

I look at Annika and I see her eyes flutter, which is a nervous tic she often has. But now those acorn eyes flutter a lot, so I know she's nervous a lot. My eyes return to this Not-Really-Heinrich character. And then it hits me.

"Jesus!" I say. Then, "I can't fucking believe it!" That should be enough to express my surprise, I figure.

Annika's lovely, tired eyes are about to flutter out of their sockets while the alleged Heinrich smiles a smile that looks like a brass-knuckle smash to the face.

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Not too long ago, before the camp, my friend Toni took me to a film by some guys called Dadaists. That's a fucked name if there ever was one, but I'll have to say they were thinking differently than anyone else. For them, what was fucked was okay, and what was okay was just the opposite. And the girls in that film, oh my, they looked like Annika. Bobbed hair, real sharp, angled. Long, slim bodies, with clothes that made them look boyish—which is fine with me, some guys like that, and I'm one of them.

What I like most about Annika is the way her movements make her stockings and dress rustle. I think she has something rustle-y about her entire personality. She reminds me of the sound of birch leaves in a northwest wind. Makes me relaxed and worked up all at the same time. Is that possible?

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Annika and I sit at the kitchen table while Un-Heinrich grows his beard in the other room. Annika's brought me in here to calm me down. She's given me a glass of beer, which should taste damned good after all these months, but it tastes like warm piss mixed with horse sweat. Still, I'm gulping the stuff.

I've come to see her because someone in the camp slipped me a note. It was from the resistance, and I was supposed to go see Annika immediately after I was released. For me, "immediately" wasn't soon enough. I was outside her apartment only an hour after I got back to Berlin on the night train. I had something else in mind too. I wanted to find out what was going on

outside, maybe even get a tip on a job that would keep me out of the camps. I wanted to see her because Annika knows just about everything and everyone these days—this is what people with rustle-y personalities are like. But I got something I didn't bargain for.

“Who the hell do you think I am?” I say.

“You're Berthold, and I trust you. More than anyone else. And you are the perfect person to do this job. No one would expect a recently released political prisoner to undertake such an audacious scheme—and just after being freed no less.” Annika keeps looking at the kitchen door. Her eyes have stopped fluttering but I can tell she's still nervous by the way she brushes her Dada hair off her forehead.

“But you're asking me to...what exactly are you asking me to do? I still don't understand. No one's going to recognize him?”

“It took you a little while to realize who he was.”

“But I did recognize him.”

“He'll be wearing a brown fedora, kind of a floppy one, and when he's outside he'll have his collar turned up. I remember the night we walked along the canal. It was last August. You said, 'it's not that hard to make evil look ordinary'. Those were your exact words, or something like that, and I thought that was such a brilliant thing to say! So with the beard and clothes, he'll go unnoticed. Especially since he'll be traveling with you in a first-class apartment we've booked all the way to Munich. There they pick him up and drive him to the Swiss border.”

“And what am I supposed to be to him? A brother? We really look alike, Annika, like a wilted carrot and a hairy cabbage look alike.”

“You won't have to say what your relationship is. You know how most people are these days. They'd prefer to see nothing, hear nothing. But if someone asks, there are plenty of possibilities, and I know you'll be inventive. You might be cousins. Or he's your eccentric uncle who has a lot of money but dresses like a pensioner. That would be very convincing, especially in first class. Or you're just friends. Or lovers. You're the rich man's boy, you know, something like that.”

“Lovers! Christ, Annika! Lovers? I’m no lover of that fucking...thing. That fucking thing! That’s what he is. I just got out of Dachau, and I look it. And you’re telling me people might assume we’re lovers?”

“You do look thin, Bertie. But you’ll clean up. I already have the clothes. You’ll look fine in an hour. Even more handsome than you usually are.” Her eyes glimmer for the first time since I’ve been back, and it makes me happy in a way. The Annika I knew. Yet I’m wary too. There are conditions attached to that brief glimmer.

One of these conditions appears on the table after Annika reaches down to pull something out of her purse. It’s a small black Beretta, a semi-automatic pistol.

I look at Annika in amazement as she slides the piece over to me. It makes a grating sound on the wooden table, like a prison door slamming shut. “You know it’s illegal for an ex-prisoner to carry a gun.”

“You and I and everyone else involved in this are committing treason, Bertrand. I wouldn’t worry about the gun issue. It’s just for insurance, anyway. I think you’ll find our bearded associate to be quite cooperative. You hand over your small bag to our contact when you drop him off.” She shakes her head in the direction of the kitchen door. “The gun will be in the bag. Then you’re done with both, your companion and the firearm. Free and clear.”

I look down and shake my head to show my utter contempt for the whole scheme. Utter contempt is the only thing I can feel at the moment. That and unrequited love, but there’s no need to plow that field again.

“Oh! One more thing,” says Annika. “You’ll have to stop smoking those Red Star cigarettes. They’d be a dead giveaway. We have other cigarettes for you, a full carton.”

Again I shake my head. This time more in exhaustion than contempt.

Annika looks toward the kitchen door again and brushes her hair back. She turns to me. Her eyes brighten, and this time their glimmer is steady, unwavering. She extends her hand across the table. It lasts only a few seconds, her hand on mine, but it’s long enough to send my heart on a

wild journey. “Won’t it feel good to travel first-class after what you’ve been through? I bet it will be the first time in your life you’ve travelled first class, Bertrand. Right?”

“Oh, Jesus,” I say, knowing what I will do. Who can turn down Annika? Then I feel the spot behind my ear where the storm trooper lit into me.

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Four in the morning and several SA storm troopers busted my door down screaming “Death to Bolshevism” and “Out of bed, Bolshie swine!” Then came the chop to the side of my head by a skinny little thug with an ill-fitting uniform. He resembled something a rich dame’s dachshund drops on the sidewalk: All brown and curled. They threw me in the back of a Dachau-bound truck with a bunch of other guys who, like me, had been Red Star boys before ’33. So I was a “political,” but what did that really mean? I’d been eighteen when I joined three years before. No job. Both parents on the bottle. Everyone twisted with hate and anxiety because of the Depression. Toni had come to me and said I could kick ass in the Red Star uniform and even get free food in one of the Communist party’s soup kitchens. He showed me his lapel pin, which had a sharp-looking red fist on it. So I said, “why not?”

That’s how I met Annika. She’s a mover and doer in the party, and I think every guy in Red Star dreamt about her the way I dreamt about her the night the SA came for me. All the boys tried to impress her by beating as many Nazi goons as they could. Those were the days when you could see swastikas and hammers-and-sickles daubed side by side on building facades in my neighbourhood. Brown graffiti competed with red graffiti like bone rubbing on bone. Then everything changed in January of '33 and my current traveling companion was in charge. The Nazis began their slash-and-burn campaign through Germany, and Communism was worth less than what I shovelled out the door when I worked at a tannery, one of the few jobs I had before hitting the unemployment line.

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Un-Heinrich and I sit in a train compartment as the Bavarian countryside streams by our window. We’ve been on the train for several hours, but it feels like half the Thousand Year Reich has gone by. I’m sure that by now people have noticed Ersatz-Heinrich is absent without leave.

We face each other. The burgundy seat feels plush under my emaciated butt. I've learned that My Exalted Passenger is checking out of Germany. He's had enough. He's risen to the very top but he's said to hell with it.

"I'm a bohemian at heart," he says, as if I should congratulate him for this. "And bohemians are artists, not politicians, though I do like all the banners and flags, and the swastika is rather stylish, and red, white, and black are my favourite colours. Still, my goal is to be a great architect. I want to open a studio and have rich Jewish clients who will pay me fantastic amounts of money to build mountain retreats and ski lodges and anything else their wealth will buy."

I see the whole picture now and draw the appropriate conclusion. "So you have to get away from all your supporters and hangers-on before they suck the life out of your Aryan ass."

"My chieftains need me so much they'd kill me to keep from losing me," he says with his brass-knuckle smile.

"How sick is that?" I say.

I learn he's turned to the Communist party, which carries on a shadow existence these days. They say opposites attract. Annika and the comrades have somehow managed to work a deal for him to go to Switzerland in return for a hefty amount of cash from anonymous sources that want him out of the picture. The Communists will use the money to fight the Nazis. It seems too crazy to contemplate, especially in today's Germany where surveillance is so thick it's like they're shining a flashlight up your colon. But when I think about it, it makes sense in a bizarre way. The man sitting across from me has said that people will believe The Big Lie if you tell it often and simply enough. So why not also believe you can hustle Double-Un-Heinrich out of the country right under the Teutonic noses of the Gestapo, SS, and SA lords?

"And may they choke on their acronyms looking for you," I mutter under my breath.

"What?" says Un-Heinrich.

"Nothing."

My situation is as bizarre as the plan. I'm a courier, escort, travel buddy, and maybe even bodyguard. I go from Dachau to sitting in a rich man's train compartment with none other than

The Great Non-Heinrich himself, who's doing a crossword puzzle in the Sunday paper while I wonder if I'll have to use the Beretta. A crossword puzzle?

I look at his floppy brown fedora. What a sorry piece of shit to put on a man's head. What a contrast to me. Annika has picked out the right clothes and given me plenty of time to wash up and shave and clip my nails. She even did a quick clean-up on my hair around the neck and ears. It's like we've been married thirty years. She knows exactly which shirt and tie to buy—light blue for the former and regimental stripes of darker blue and grey for the latter. She knows which dark blue trousers I need after spending time at the Dachau Weight Loss and Spa Retreat. The old Red Star guys should see me now. They'd be jealous, and they would think I was getting trim from Annika.

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Herr Brown Fedora looks up from his crossword. His eyes widen and I can see a tiny gap in his beard open slightly. I see his pink lips and the tips of yellowed teeth, which disgust me. He looks as if an idea has just popped into his hairy head, and he speaks. "You are the kind of young man I tried to help. Working class. Unemployed, and with few prospects."

He acts as if I should be grateful to him. I say, "You're the reason my favourite grey trousers no longer fit me." That's a lot to say to the man since I always prided myself on looking sharp, but I know there is much more. "You're the reason I did nothing but breathe in danger for three months. It felt like there were shards of glass tearing at my insides the entire time." I have the urge to get up, pull the Beretta out of the bag, and do the man right here, not for me but for my comrades, women and men better than me who have died fighting this bastard. But instead I take a long breath and compose myself. In the window of the train car, I see a reflection of my shaved head and marvel at how long it is, and how it looks like a bristly pistachio.

His beard grows a half-inch in the silence that follows. All we hear is the rush of wind outside the train window and the occasional opening and closing of compartment doors up and down the aisle. He keeps up with his crossword puzzles and I think he must be putting any old letter in each little box because how long can anybody think up so many words without getting pissed off?

“I am a man of the people too.” The words come from somewhere inside Not-Quite-Heinrich’s thick beard, as if there is a hidden orifice in there. “I was born in a little town in Austria. My father was just a minor civil servant. He beat me. I failed to get into art school, twice. I worked construction in my days as a young man in Vienna. I was in prison.”

“Bloody hell,” I snort as I gaze out the window. I want to open the window and throw Anti-Heinrich out and watch his pathetic pear-like body bounce like a soccer ball. I want to wire him to the ceiling like one of the hanging carcasses I saw at the tannery.

“The less we speak the better,” I say.

“You will have a nice sum in your pocket once you deliver me. You will get something for your trouble,” says Beard-Man.

“And what do you think my life will be like when the Gestapo finds out I was your escort? Do you think the secret police will give me a Lifetime Achievement Award? I’ll have to lay low for a long time. Go underground. How long do you think I’ll live? A year? Six months?”

“Freedom sometimes comes in unexpected forms.”

I shake my head. All I need is for him to start philosophizing.

“You can go back to Annika,” says Ersatz-Heinrich.

“Yes, so I can be her poodle again.” I think about this for a moment and figure, well, a dog’s life is better than no life at all.

“Ah, you haven’t read the signs have you? You need to be more perceptive, young man. I think you’ll find that Annika has a special place in her heart for you. I could see it in the brief time I saw you two together, and how she talked about you before you arrived.”

I’m stunned for a moment, but then doubt starts to hammer away at me, as it always does. “What? Are you like one of those columnists who give people cheap advice about their love lives? Even if it were true, what kind of life would we have together? Annika is married to the resistance.”

“But the resistance may accomplish its goals more quickly than you think. I predict things will fall apart rather soon when the full shock of my departure dawns on the party leadership.”

“They’ll just continue what you’ve started.”

“The party chieftains will fight among themselves. Who knows? They may all shoot each other, they’re so gun-happy. That’s when your comrades will have to make their move. It will be up to them to grasp the opportunity. If you act decisively, you and Annika and millions of other Germans will avoid the worst—and believe me, I know what the worst entails if the logic of my rule is carried to conclusion. I’m the one who set it in motion, after all.”

So-Much-Not-Heinrich might have a point here. Himmler, Goering, Heydrich, Streicher, Goebbels—you could easily see these puffed-up gangsters lusting for power without their beloved Führer around. It could be quite entertaining, like a cockfight with Walther P-38s and even heavier stuff once they got their hordes out on the streets. The Communists might let them swim in their own blood for a while, and then move in. Still, I won’t concede a thing to the man seated across from me.

“And you?” I say. “You’ve already caused enough evil for a lifetime. And now you want to go off and you...you want to draw? You want to draw and create and make buildings. Beautiful spaces. Beauty? After what you’ve done? Christ!”

The beard trembles.

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We pull into Munich’s main train station and leave the first-class compartment. The place is busy, and I realize how a crowd makes us anonymous.

A man meets us. He’s of normal height and wearing normal clothes, the kind an insurance salesman would wear. He’s so ordinary you can almost see through him. We shake hands, like we’re old buddies, and I hand him the bag with the Beretta. He smiles, and says very calmly, as if we’re discussing the weather, “We must be quick.”

He takes Forevermore-Not-Heinrich by the arm with more force than you’d expect from an insurance agent, leads him to a black Mercedes, and they pull away from the curb in front of the train station. I admire the car in the twilight. It’s swift and silent and ever so German. I’m standing there waving like a nephew seeing off his rich uncle. Everything is going as planned, and although

my hands haven't stopped shaking and my stomach feels like it's full of acid-soaked rags, I feel relieved. In a way, I'm a bit underwhelmed that my little junket with Un-Heinrich has ended in this un-climax. Surely hanging around with The Most Evil Man in the World should have been more exciting.

I turn to go back and catch my return train. Then I hear what sounds like a shot. It's muffled, as if it's come from inside a nearby building. Or a closed car. I look out at the street. The Mercedes has already been carried away by the flow of traffic. Everything appears to be right as rain, yet I know what I heard. I stand there as people look around warily. They've heard something too, so I know I'm not going crazy. Maybe it was a car backfiring. Regardless, there's not much I can do. Report a suspected gunshot to the police? Right. "You see, officer, I was escorting this dictator, and then I heard a sound like a gun going off." I can't phone Annika. Not with present-day surveillance. They tap your phones these days even if your farts sound Communist. All I can do is follow the plan.

So I find my seat in another first-class compartment. I'm happy to sit because my legs feel like wilted stilts. I expect to see police and Gestapo agents swarm like giant carpenter ants, but we pull away from the station without incident. Luckily I'm alone; Annika's people must have booked a full compartment for the round trip.

I try to sort through my jumbled feelings. Fear and anger ricochet inside me. I wonder why Annika didn't tell me about this part of the scheme. Why she didn't trust me with the information. But was the apparent gunshot part of the scheme? I have an image of Un-Heinrich sprawled out in the back seat of a Mercedes with his brains splattered across luxurious black leather upholstery. At least it's black; it will make clean-up easier. I think about his beard and wonder if the blood will soak in or remain on the surface like mottled red paint. I think about the Beretta, and wonder if it's the weapon that was used. I wonder what happens when everyone finds out they've killed him—if that's in fact what happened. Maybe I should get off at the next station and go to ground, never to be seen again. But can anyone really disappear in a police state? And even if I could, I'd be invisible to Annika.

I have no option other than to stew in my questions and return. I'm comforted knowing the train back to Berlin will be on time. Germans do trains like Contra-Heinrich does a beard. I can't

get it out of my mind that the man may have left me with useful information. Annika once said we often get help from fucked-up places. She didn't use those exact words—I favour more poetic language.

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*“I am fascinated by the fictions that hold reality together. In Nazi Germany, a period I've studied and written about primarily as a historian, the regime's fictions were not only monumental but also lethal, and their unreality made them all the more convincing to many Germans. Yet unreality cuts many ways, and I've found that the work of fiction writers—from Hermann Hesse and Ernst Jünger to José Saramago and Ludmilla Petrushevskaya—is of much more use to me in conveying the strangeness of a moment in time that is (scarily) still our time.”*

# The Wood of Suicides

*By David W Landrum*

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**H**e would never forget the first day he was allowed to see her. It was six months after her transformation. A priestess, young, pretty, married (he could tell by the blue band around her wrist) led him to the spot where his sister had been “rooted.”

He had noticed walking through the grove that overcast day that the trees did not look exactly like trees. Something about them was different; he could not tell what. When the clouds parted and the sun broke through, he was startled and then terrified to see that the trees had faces formed in their bark. As he went on, heart pounding, head throbbing with horror, he saw more human characteristics imprinted on trunks and branches: human arms and hands; genitals and breasts; feet and toes in the roots that gripped the soil. He felt nauseous and steeled himself for what he would see at the journey’s end. Finally, the priestess came to a halt.

“This is the tree that roots the spirit of your sister,” she said in perfect but rather academic English. He gathered his courage and looked up.

A white birch imprisoned her. He could see her face just below where the main trunk split into branches. The branches were like her arms. Below, on the trunk, he saw her breasts and a tuft of moss proportionally located where her pudendum would have been. The white bark and flecks of black, vivid against the white, made her half-formed humanity look grotesque—a parody of a human being, he thought. He stared, feeling more and more lightheaded. After a moment, the priestess asked him if he wished to leave.

He worked to appear self-controlled. “No,” he said, “I want to stay a while.” Then he added, “I’ll be all right.” The priestess stepped back.

A mixture of horror and wonderment filled him. He felt the horror at seeing his sister, a living, breathing girl, frozen in a crude likeness of a human life. Her form stood, stark white, motionless, exposed to the elements. They had deprived her of the miracle of speech and motion, and frozen her in a half-human caricature of herself. Anger and sorrow welled from deep inside him.

Yet—he had to admit it, and here was the wonderment—there was something beautiful about the tree bearing her likeness. Trees, gentle forms of life, swayed in the breeze and opened their hands to the sun. He felt chagrin at these thoughts but could not dismiss them as he stood and gazed upon the tree that imprisoned his sister’s life.

After her sentencing he had gone to Major Kroviac, the commanding officer of Terran troops stationed on Anvarga, hoping the sentence might be appealed.

“Why appeal it?” he had asked. “If this was strictly a military trial, your sister would hang just as sure as you’re standing here. As it is now, Bergen, she may eventually be released.”

They did release prisoners, but this was all the information they would give on the subject. When? Trees lived hundreds of years. If the Anva released her, would it be when he was long gone? He brought up cruel and unusual punishment. She had to endure the elements, the heat and the cold, and had been deprived of her liberty. He suggested her being rooted would cause tension and compromise the mission of Terran forces on Anvarga. His protests availed him nothing.

“Your sister murdered someone,” Kroviac said. “I know that’s tough to live with, Sergeant, but I think she got about as good a deal as she could out of this. Would you have preferred to see her swing?”

He had no answer for this. He thought of leaving the Army, but he had to admit that it had not been the Army’s fault. Bria had brought it on herself. And there was a sliver of hope—a faint light. At least the possibility existed that they would release her one day.

As he stared, he wondered why they had chosen a birch tree. Oaks, poplars, willow, beech, pine—all varieties of trees filled the wood. If he had had to choose a tree to represent her, it would

have been a birch tree: slender, delicate, bright, it reflected her personality. Somehow, it fit. When this crossed his mind, the leaves shook despite the fact that no breeze was blowing.

A shocking thought crossed his mind. Was she trying to communicate with him? Was she sentient enough in this form that she felt or sensed what he felt? Many beings in this sector of space had telepathic abilities, although Terrans did not. The shaking ceased. He calmed. It was a coincidence, nothing more. He needed to get his emotions under control. He glanced back at the priestess, but her face revealed nothing. He thought of asking her about it but he knew she wouldn't answer. He returned his eyes to the tree. Did he feel her—feel her spirit reaching out to him—or was it just his imagination?

A short time passed. “Sir, your time is up,” the priestess said in her bookish English. “We must return now.”

He nodded, reached out, and touched the smooth bark of the birch tree. He was hoping for a response but he felt nothing. He kissed his fingers, touched them to the trunk of the tree, turned to the Anva priestess, and nodded. They walked back to the entrance of the wood.

The events of that day ran through Cullen Bergen's mind as the shuttle that had carried him back to the planet Anvarga after a month of duty in space slowed to nothing and, for a moment, hovered above the landing dock. It had been only a few months after she had been turned into a tree-creature, eight years ago.

Anvarga, a temperate planet, spread out below the hovering spacecraft. Looking down from a height of twenty-five kilometres, Cullen saw trees and nothing else. Trees covered the entire planet which had neither seas, rivers, nor lakes, but innumerable springs to water and frequent rainstorms. The Anvar knew the importance of trees to the ecological vitality of their planet. They avoided cutting them. Trees surrounded their houses and office buildings and arched over their roads. As you approached the planet it shone green in the darkness of space. Their absorption of carbon dioxide made the planet oxygen rich, so much that in certain areas where the trees were thousands of years old, Terrans grew ill from the percentage of oxygen in the atmosphere. Earth Command built its military bases in areas where the oxygen content was less. Birds abounded.

Tree-dwelling mammals and reptiles thrived. On Anvarga, most life lived in the trees, not on the ground.

He heard metallic clanking. The engines shut off, he unfastened his safety harness and, like all the other soldiers eager to be back, headed for the door. It swung open. Kassa and his three boys were at the very front of the crowd.

He embraced Kassa and hugged and kissed his sons, wrestling and roughhousing as much as he could in the crowded area. He and his family had been garrisoned here for—could it be nine years? It did not seem possible they had been here that long.

They hurried through the rain, piled into the family car, and headed for the base housing area. Fort Jackson was a city to itself, part of the massive military presence the Alliance maintained here. Anvarga, and the space it claimed, jutted like a stiletto into the boundaries of the Golorian Empire. When the Golorians began to threaten them, the Anva, not a military people, anxiously petitioned for admission into the Terran Alliance as a Commonwealth planet. Under this arrangement, they kept their independence but granted certain rights and power to the Terrans. The Alliance had set up monitoring posts, built space stations and military bases. A formidable defensive ring protected Anvarga from Golorians, who would have forcibly converted them to their Christian religion, setting up the Inquisition, and brutalizing the population with their Draconian religious laws. The Anva people were protected. Back on Earth, voters grumbled at the expense of garrisoning the planet, but when the Anva began to pay for the military presence with the amazing skills their people had acquired, the folks back home knew their leaders had cut a good deal.

As Bergen drove to the Terran military base where he and his family lived, the boys played in the back seat. Kassa held his hand. He thought about the customs of the people on Anvarga and about Bria. The Anva were a hard people to understand. They had never developed large cities, and even though they mastered space flight they had never colonized planets beyond exploration of the area around them, and even this was mostly so they could find medicinal herbs. The civilization's level of technology was high, but the people on the planet lived simply. Their achievements in agriculture and medicine, though, amazed everyone in the core planets of the Alliance and in the colonies as well.

Anva medications cured diseases that had baffled doctors for centuries. Their surgical techniques could restore sight to the blind and repair organs that had all but shut down their functions. Their farming techniques turned colony planets where growing food proved difficult into productive sites that could export surplus crops.

A highly religious people, they maintained a large cadre of priestesses. Convents dotted the countryside (though many of their priestesses were married) and their houses of worship stood everywhere. Their religion gave them strange ways, and the Terran alliance, not wanting to antagonize the Anva, put up with these oddities. Bergen thought again of Bria and the incident that had confined her in the body of a tree.

Bria had always been the wild one of the family. She had been pampered as the youngest, and she grew up strong and wilful. Always in trouble for drinking or sleeping around, Bria had followed her brother into military service, lying about her age to get in at seventeen. She trained as an infantry soldier and qualified for the women's branch of Special Forces. In her first three-year term of enlistment, she was in combat almost continually. As an infiltrator she had helped destroy a secret Golorian base in the territory of the Mervogians, earth's chief ally in the Besrid sector of space. As a sniper she had fifty-seven confirmed kills and won a Silver Star and Meritorious Service Medal; the Mervogians awarded her the Medal of Besrid, their highest decoration. She rose in rank from Private to Staff Sergeant, re-enlisted, and looked to have a promising military career before her.

Then she committed murder.

The case was clear-cut—no question about her guilt. A friend of hers had stolen her boyfriend. Bria got drunk one night, lurked in the back parking lot of a bar where the girl was drinking, and when she came out alone to get something from her car, stabbed her in the back and slashed her throat.

The Anva satellites recorded anything anywhere on the planet's surface. When Bria saw the images of her killing the girl, she had broken down, wept, and confessed.

Because she confessed her crime and pleaded guilty to the charge of murder, the Anva legal system required only a hearing to determine the sentence rather than a trial. Since a woman faced sentencing, the council of three judges were women, one a priestess, one a married woman, one an unmarried woman. Her court-appointed advocate (also a woman) pleaded that the Terran girl was drunk and temporarily insane, but such a defence was no good. On Earth she would have been hanged for murder with malice aforethought, but the Anva did not condone capital punishment. They had put her in the Wood of Suicides.

Only Bergen called the place Bria had been confined by that name. The place in which his beautiful, vivacious sister now reposed reminded him of the etching of Dante's circle of hell to which the violent against themselves dwelt. His family had owned a copy of *The Divine Comedy* with Dore's woodcuts in it, and as a child it had frightened and fascinated him. He could hardly believe that, years later, his own sister would suffer a similar fate.

The Anva did not have prisons. They fined people who committed misdemeanours and punished serious crimes by something that translated as *immobilization-rooting* in their language—and, as he soon found out, the term *rooting* was meant quite literally.

How the transformation was done, they did not say. Their knowledge of the human body, especially of its DNA and molecular systems, enabled them to manipulate living systems to a degree that defied belief. Their skill at medicine derived from such knowledge. Somehow, the living systems of a tree and those of a human being were meshed and melded into one. The human soul, the life of a person, lodged in the tree. Rooted in the soil, caught in the branches, exposed to cycles of weather, the person who had committed a serious crime existed in this form as punishment.

When they arrived at their house, Cullen roughhoused with the boys, gave them the presents he had bought them, and later, Kassa hosted had a party in his honour. When the guests were gone and the boys were asleep, Cullen and Kassa made love. Cullen had not availed himself of the services the comfort women the Mervogian government offered *gratis* (a pleasant concession for Terran soldiers who participated in joint training missions as he had the past month). Most Terran troops who did joint manoeuvres with the Mervogians joked that access to their comfort women would assure the stability of their alliance. Mervogian women were legendry for purring

when they made love. He had been faithful to his wife. They woke up at 2 a.m. and had it again, and again in the morning. After breakfast and after the boys had gone to school, she told him she had something important to say to him.

\* \* \*

It had been raining all morning, and he heard the steady, easy thrum of it on the roof of their home as took a seat at the table. She sat across from him and took his hands. He felt fear, wondering if someone had died, but the look on her face was happy. Was she pregnant? Did the time a month ago before he left work for her?

“The Anva authorities contacted me yesterday,” she said. “They are going to release Bria.”

He stared at her. After a moment he snapped out of his trance.

“Bria? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted you to enjoy your homecoming.” She smiled. “If I’d told you last night, you would have been on pins and needles the whole time.”

“When?” he sputtered. “Where?”

Kassa put the communication on screen. Cullen calmed down enough to read it. The Anva planned to release her at 2:00 that afternoon. They gave the address and no other instructions other than they were to bring clothing for her.

Kassa got out Bria’s clothes; they had stored them in the hope she might be released one day. Cullen thought he must be dreaming. He paced, unable to sit, and waited. At 1:30, they drove to a building surrounded by tall oak-like trees. Like most buildings on Anvarga, it was low to the ground, and seeming to rise up out of the flowers, shrubs, and trees that surrounded it. He had always admired the way they seemed to take the natural lay of the land as a determination for they build and developed their planet. The homes, made of wood, thick, with high pointed roofs (to better shed the rain that fell so frequently) looked rough-hewn, sometimes hardly distinguishable from the flora around them. All Anva structures looked like this. Their hospitals, government

buildings, schools, and temples blended into nature, were not larger than family homes, and dotted the landscape with a monotonous but pleasing sameness.

They walked through the light, silvery rain to the door, and one of the ubiquitous priestesses admitted them. She took them to a small, quiet room and told them to wait. Kassa held Cullen's hand. He felt joy and fear—joy to see his sister once more, alive and human, fear that the Anva might renege at the last minute. After a short while, two priestesses came in with Bria. Two things startled him so much he stood up.

She was naked. But even more alarming than that, she was green.

He gaped. It embarrassed him to see his sister bare. He had thought the change of clothing would be for after she took off prison clothes. Instead, she had no clothing at all. And what also amazed him was her apparent lack of concern about it. She did not attempt to cover herself. Her eyes looked bright, her face intelligent (if a little solemn); she didn't seem drugged or incapacitated. She stood there with her arms to her side as if being nude were the most natural thing in the world.

He would have normally averted his eyes, but her green coloration made him unable to look away from her. Bria smiled at him and Kassa.

"Hi," she said.

Kassa, who had also been nonplussed, recovered and walked forward.

"Let's get you dressed, Bria."

Cullen watched, unable to shake his amazement. Her flesh had turned to a light shade of green. Her blond hair and brown eyes were the same, but a new colour had claimed her body. Despite the eight years she had been rooted, she did not look a day older.

Kassa slipped a dress over her head. Once Bria was clothed, the two women embraced and kissed. Then Bria ran forward and threw her arms around Cullen. He kissed her, and she clung to him with her robust embrace. He felt her life, her warmth, and rejoiced to have her again. But he had to ask her about her colour.

She looked up at him and read the question in his eyes before he asked it.

“You like me green?” she quipped.

He could not reply.

“I’ll be like this from now on,” she said. “It comes from having been rooted. I’ll be like this all my life—though they told me if I get married and have children I won’t pass that trait on to the kids.”

He continued to stare.

“It’s okay, isn’t it, Cullen?”

The note of sadness in her voice snapped him out of his torpor.

“It’s fine. You look beautiful. I can’t express how good it is to have you back. I’m just surprised.”

She nodded then rapidly kissed his face several times, a thing she had always done to show her affection to him. Kassa gave her shoes and socks and a pair of panties. Cullen turned his back when she put them on.

“You can look now,” he heard her say.

He turned. The white of her dress made her green coloration even more striking by contrast. She raised her arms above her head.

“It feels so weird to wear clothes after going without them for eight years.”

Eight years, he thought. Bria had been rooted that long. He could look in the mirror and see the effects of aging starting to etch into his face. Bria, he noted again, had not age at all. She let her arms fall, and when she raised them again he thought she looked disturbingly like her former birch-self.

“Let’s go home,” she said. “I’ll explain everything to you. I just want to go home and lay down.”

They drove her home. On the way back she said the Anva had only told her what she had related to Cullen and Kassa, nothing more. The boys got back from school just a little after they arrived. Bria had been rooted before the boys were born, and Cullen introduced them. He thought they would be frightened or fascinated by her colour, but they seemed not to take much notice of her. When he put the boys to bed that night, Andrew, the oldest, said, “My teacher is green like that. And she’s not a Golorian. She’s light green, not dark green—just like Aunt Bria.”

“Did your teacher say how she became green?”

“She was a tree. She killed somebody. She said she was a tree for fifty years. When they made her a human again, all her friends were old.”

“She told you this?”

“Sure. Why shouldn’t she? Did Aunt Bria kill someone, Dad?”

Cullen didn’t answer.

“You need to go to sleep,” he said. “You’ve got school then a soccer game tomorrow.”

Andrew drifted off.

Cullen wondered about what Andrew had said as he came back into the room. Kassa sat sipping tea with Bria.

She smiled sheepishly. Cullen knew he was staring. He didn’t want to give her the impression that he thought she was some kind of freak. He reached across and took her hand.

“So good to see you again,” he said.

He saw her eyes glisten in response.

“So good to eat and breathe,” she said. “And to see. Of course”—and now she looked more serious—“as a tree you eat and drink, but it’s through your bark and roots; and in summer, you get energy through your leaves.”

They stared in astonishment. She went on.

“You can see, in a way. You sense things. You know they’re there. You ‘see’ by feeling. I felt you when you came to see me, Cullen. I knew it was you. It was sweet the way you gave me a kiss by kissing your fingers and touching me. It was so sweet I cried.”

“You cried?”

“You didn’t see, but sap came out of the eyes on my face. It wasn’t a real face, of course, just wood, but the Anva want people to know who the different trees are.”

“Did it hurt you to be out in the weather—in the rain and snow and cold?” Kassa asked.

“Trees adjust. In winter you hibernate; your metabolism slows down, your sap hardly runs. In summer you drink the sunshine. My bark got thick or thin depending on the weather. It was fine.”

Cullen remembered the sadness he had felt on losing her and the anguish at knowing she would be reduced to a non-human form. She noticed the look in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Cullen,” she said. “I’m sorry I did what I did and caused you so much anguish.”

“Let’s not talk about that. Let’s talk about now. We’re just happy to have you back.”

“You were lucky,” Kassa said.

“Well, yes and no,” Bria replied.

Cullen wanted to ask what she meant but she put her teacup down and yawned.

“Cullen, I can’t keep my eyes open.”

They helped her to bed. Kassa stood by her as she undressed. When she held up a nightgown, Bria said she did not want to wear it.

“It’s going to take a while to get used to wearing clothes,” she said.

That night Cullen told Kassa about Andrew’s teacher.

“Well,” Kassa said, “I was going to mention it, but all the things that went down pushed it out of my mind. In the years we’ve lived here, I have noticed green Anva here and there.” She smiled. “I notice things like that, you know.” Kassa was mixed race, Ethiopian and French on one side, Russian and Arab on the other. “I just thought they were a racial group.”

As far as Cullen could tell, the Anva were mono-racial. All of them looked like White humanoids except that they were smaller in stature and some of them blue and green hair. He had never noticed any green-skinned inhabitants of the planet.

“Where did you see them?”

“The secretary in S-1 is green. So is the personnel clerk in your unit.”

“I never noticed.”

“You never speak to them. We know now they’re reformed criminals.”

“I’ll have to find out more,” he said, rolling over, exhausted from the emotional trauma of the day.

Bria slept until ten o’clock. Cullen got up early, activated the information systems array in his study, and looked up the crime statistics from Anvarga. According to Terran military fact sheets, they had zero recurrence of violent crime and a one-hundred per cent success rate at rehabilitating criminals.

Sat at the desk in his home office, Cullen heard Bria go into the kitchen. Kassa was in the laundry room folding clothes.

Cullen went in. Bria had thrown on khaki shorts and a yellow blouse, and, again, the colours made her green skin seem even more vivid.

She hugged him and helped herself to a cup of coffee.

“How did you sleep?” he asked.

“Like a rock. It’s so wonderful to lie down.” She knit her brows. “Cullen, do you realize what complex creatures we are?”

He didn’t know how to answer, “I think I do.”

“I mean,” she went on, “we have ten or twelve systems going on at once. And they’re all coordinated, working in perfect synthesis: respiration, circulation, nerves—all that. When I was a tree I had leaves to get the sunlight and roots to get the rain—and that was it.” Then she added quietly, “I guess that’s what they wanted to show me.”

Cullen took her hands.

“What do you mean, Bria?”

“Well, I’ve been a . . . a *not-human* for a while. I’ve lived as a different life form. I know what it’s like to be a creature that eats, grows, and puts out seedpods to reproduce itself. Now that I’m back in human form, I see how astounding it is to be a human being—what a miracle we are. And that makes it so hard to think that when I murdered Mandy I...

Bria trailed off. Cullen gripped her hands.

“Bria, you know why that happened. You were drunk and got out of control.”

“I know. But I see how precious a life is—and how supernatural. And to think I destroyed her. I brought all of that to an end.”

Cullen reached over and touched her cheek. After a moment she said, “But they brought me back. I get a chance to start over. Another thing about being a tree: you are rooted to the earth and you live in the elements. You experience everything differently.”

The two of them were silent. Then Bria stood straight and tossed her hair back.

“I wasn’t restored to feel guilty,” she said. “I was restored to live and to do right.”

This was something he had wanted to ask her.

“What do you plan to do, Bria? I know it’s early and I know you just got out, but—”

“I don’t know. Whatever it is, I will live right. I may stay here, though I’ll have to move off base if I do.”

“I may stay on Anvarga. I may go to one of the Mervogian planets and try to settle there. They know how the Anva deal with criminals. They’ll know why I’m green.”

“You probably wouldn’t want to serve in the military now, would you?”

Bria looked at him.

“Well, I value life more. But I also have been rooted into the soil. The thought of the Housali or Golorians taking this planet, plundering it, scraping off its topsoil.... I don’t know, Cullen. It’s all so confusing.”

“You don’t have to think about it now. We’ll find you a place and help you get settled. We’ll be here for you. You don’t have to worry about anything.”

Outside, rain poured. The three of them sat, listening, sharing an understanding that was faint but sure as the rustling of leaves.

\* \* \*

*I got the idea for "The Wood of the Suicides" from re-reading Dante's Inferno, where the souls of those who commit suicide are punished in hell by being turned into trees that are torn by birds and subjected to*

*harsh weather. The famous engraving by the French artist Paul Gustave Dore, who illustrated The Inferno, interprets this literary passage with art. Then I got the idea, What if people were transformed into trees not as punishment but as something that would ultimately do them good? What if the result of the human form being altered and distorted had a benevolent purpose? The idea for the story started to take shape.*

## David's Engines

*By Charles Bane, Jr.*

*Charles Bane, Jr. is the American author of *The Chapbook (Curbside Splendor)*, *Love Poems (Aldrich Press)*, and *Three Seasons: Writing Donald Hall (Collection of Houghton Library, Harvard University)*. He created and contributes to *The Meaning of Poetry* series for *The Gutenberg Project*, and is a current nominee as *Poet Laureate of Florida*.*

When my son was born, I had every expectation that I would leave behind me one day an industrious, kind and well-educated young man. Very few are remembered for their accomplishments, but a child will remember you if you are loving and supportive. I would be such a father, and the exact same feeling in my wife sealed our marriage like shutters.

Whatever we had to sacrifice to ensure his success, we would do, in the quiet --and to many, unreasonable--compact that parents live by. You see these signatories wearing Timex watches, buying dress shoes at a thrift shop. Daily, thousands of adult desires stream into savings.

I write of things unseen, because that describes my son, David. But before I go further about him, remember this: the most remarkable child is still one who must play, be tossed in the air, and carried home. I am so ordinary. My great comfort is that I was only needed by David to be a father.

It all became evident very quickly. He had taught himself to read, at three, within weeks, and this seemed to be related to an impetus to be able to write. As far as my wife Sarah and I could tell, and as far as they knew at his pre-school, he had not employed phonics but simply read whole. It was plain that his true interest wasn't in letters, but numbers and he began, playfully, to multiply two-digit numbers in his head. He only wrote them down to show them to me at bedtime.

He was bored in kindergarten; the young woman teaching it allowed him to roam the shelves, memorizing the globe, and the star chart she posted (for his benefit) under which he lingered. On a whim, she brought her undergraduate *Principles Of Cosmology* for him to glance

at. I thought the book too big a leap, when Sarah and I learned of it. We were wrong. For my son, the discovery of the Big Bang was a profound emotional relief. He had found his first genuine puzzle. And I thought my child felt an affinity for a cosmos rushing forward as unbraked as his mind.

I could not slow the spinning in his head, but I could assure myself and Sarah that the world thirsting to know his potential would not rob him of the normalcy of pizza parties, a dog, and sleepovers. Never mind that he commuted to a junior high school to learn, insatiably, geometry and physics in the third grade. I refused to allow him to take the math SAT before he was twelve, though I often lay on the grass in the backyard as my son mapped our neighbourhood stars, and those below our meridian.

When I was phoned by Wesley Schumberger asking to meet David, I consented and invited him to dinner. He was perhaps the leading astrophysicist in the United States, and in an academic realm which I had read was fiercely competitive and often petty, he was of a different way, and much cherished. Schumberger had won the Nobel for his discovery of massive black holes at the centre of observable galaxies, and the stunning discovery that they affected the speed of stars in a galaxy's outer rim. Super black holes and the lives of the galaxies they fired into being, were intertwined in fate.

"David," he said in our front hall, "I am Dr. Wesley Schumberger, but since we are colleagues, you are welcome to call me Wesley."

"Would you like to see my room?" David answered.

"Of course," Schumberger answered, and they set off to see David's model dinosaur collection and Hubble posters.

"What a charming dog," Schumberger said at dinner, looking at our Jack Russell. "What is his name?"

"Laika," David answered, startled, then recovered himself.

"Laika," the doctor said haltingly, "was a dog sent into orbit in the early days of Soviet space flight. He did not survive."

"I know," David said. "I want him remembered."

"David, if I may ask you, what puzzles you the most in your current studies?"

My wife and I served dinner.

David hesitated. "May I ask you some questions? There's no one to ask." I winced.

"Of course."

"Galaxy formation was uniform?"

"That would be my hypothesis, David, but it is unproven. Do you understand?"

"Yes. But each galaxy has within it a super massive black hole? And this black hole is central to the galaxy's creation, and evolution?"

Wesley leaned forward. "It is exactly so, in my mind. What conclusions does this lead you to?"

"I don't want to make a fool of myself," my son said.

"David," Wesley answered, "there are spacecraft, and moon craters named for 'fools'. There is a plot on Mars named for Laika. We forget no one who dares, by enquiry, to enter the mysteries of space."

"I have a formula I'd like to show you," David said, and wiping his mouth, hurried to his room. He returned and set before him a set of equations.

Schumberger looked at the lined paper, and closed his eyes for a moment. He looked at David, pointing to a letter. "This is a constant?"

"Yes," David answered.

There was an utter, beautiful silence at our dinner table.

"The number of universes is..."

"Infinite," David said.

"How could you have known that?" Wesley asked.

"It's the answer most generous," David said.

"94 billion galaxies in our universe alone," Wesley started.

"Playing multiple roles," my son continued, "originators, regulators. My beautiful engines."

\* \* \*

*"David's Engine's" is founded on hard science; the story came about after a long talk with Nobel Prize winner for Chemistry and fellow poet, Roald Hoffmann. I'm honoured by his friendship. I try to stay current with trends in cosmology, and I'm reasonably confident that the role of massive or super- black holes portrayed in the story is accurate. It follows logic that if these contain singularities of a kind that created the Big Bang, they may imitate a pattern as splendid as seasonal change in nature."*

## The Baleful Glare: On Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

*By Ro McNulty*

*Ro McNulty is responsible for putting this whole shebang together, as well as trying to write his own fiction and still go to bed sometimes. He has published fiction and guest-edited with 18th Wall Productions, as well as contributing to Jotters United, and Dark Chapter Press's upcoming anthology on the subject of scary children. In the real world, he works in social care.*

It's a nasty habit of Shirley Jackson's critics to turn to her personal life to explain away her fiction. I'm not a big reader of literary academia, but I only had to look at a handful of articles on Shirley Jackson before I knew far more than I ever wanted to know about her personal life. Her weight, her health, the quality of her childcare and her housekeeping habits all find themselves on the table, dredged up to give causality for the less savoury content of Jackson's work. That this information should be considered public property is ironic; Jackson's work speaks for itself, and her masterwork character studies already tell you everything you need to know about the public scrutiny of women's minds. Pointedly, I'd like to use the article below to talk about Jackson's fiction.

Shirley Jackson is a difficult author to categorize. Whilst her praise has been sung by genre kingpins like Neil Gaiman and Stephen King, neither these, nor any other pulp authors, can really hold a candle up to Jackson's achievements in the field of dark social realism. She's been championed by leftfield literary authors like Joyce Carol Oats and Donna Tartt, who perhaps represent her work more faithfully in their own outputs than the big swinging dicks of horror fiction do. In truth, although I hero-worship Jackson as a sort of pen-wielding rock star, there have been times when I've wondered what I actually get out of reading her work. Each of her novels is unforgettable, in a way that perhaps no other writer's work is. Picking up a Jackson novel for the

first time, though, can be a confusing experience. The emotional realism in her work is a dangerous chemical when mixed with their utterly dismal world view, making the pessimism of her books contagious. Those looking for escapism will be disappointed; Jackson's work is real-world horror, and where Gaiman offers distraction and King offers nothing better than Schadenfreude, the appropriate emotional response to a novel like *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is one of unrelenting anxiety.

Jackson's literary-leaning subject matter means that she has been denied the seat at the horror high table that she arguably deserves, and the potential for genuine, rather than stylized, distress held within her novels may go some way to explaining why she has struggled to find favour among genre critics and readers. Jackson's perhaps unique position on the spectrum between pulp and proper fiction can make her works a difficult undertaking for first-time readers, who may be unsure what to expect. I wanted to look at what it is exactly that makes Jackson's work such a disorienting canon, particularly focussing on *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

I could have chosen a different book to focus on- in fact, part of what makes the Jackson legacy such a nebulous one to study is that there is no single, typical piece of work. There is a great deal of stylistic variety between the nightmare study of *Hill House*, the brutalist fable of *The Lottery* and bittersweet social realism of her other short fiction, but Jackson was as deeply dependable as she was varied. She was consistent in her choice of themes throughout her career; unrelenting, she wrote about class, gender, self-surveillance and madness. Whilst many writers will establish a style and use it to tackle a variety of subjects over the course of their career, Jackson could be said to have done the opposite.

Jackson's stoicism in pursuit of these social truths has often been misinterpreted as a sort of obsessive behaviour by her detractors, who use Jackson's gender and her struggle with mental illness to frame the radicalism of her work as nothing short of self-pity; the waste-product of an unhappy life. However, whilst Jackson's work is undoubtedly personal to her, the autobiographical nature of her novels has been grossly over-stated by her critics. It is a bitter irony that Jackson herself has become so much the victim of the social scrutiny and sexist conformity that she so sharply challenged in her work. It speaks to Jackson's courage that she was never prepared to relent in her social critique, even when Middle America's baleful glare became fixed, Sauron-like, on her.

To me, though, Jackson's long fiction is problematic. One upshot of her stylistic diversity is that the canon lacks a seminal work. There is no single piece of Jackson's fiction that could be considered an archetype, and no easy recommendation for new readers as the best place to start. All of Jackson's novels are flawed in some way, and in a sense, Jackson comes across as being too far ahead of her time. Feminist fiction in Jackson's era was non-existent as a movement, and the late-developing horror genre, like a rebellious A-Level student, was going through a distinctly anti-intellectual phase in the era of James Herbert, Hammer Horror and the horror comic. The literary context of the 1950's and 60's couldn't provide Jackson with a versatile enough toolkit to fully realise her ideas, and the result is that her works, while fascinating, are challenging and often frustrating reads. The overall effect can feel like glimpsing cathedrals through smog.

Too smart for pulp, too jaded for the mainstream, Jackson's fans are a disparate bunch to this day. Jackson herself never really established a literary voice of her own, and tends to be seen almost as a mini-genre in her own right. In some respects, the chronology of her seven novels can be seen as a formative process; a series of increasingly sophisticated prototypes working towards a blueprint that we, the readers, were never fully allowed to see. Jackson died young, and the finished article, the ultimate tour-de-force of forced introversion, spoiled identities and self-imprisonment, went unwritten.

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, as Jackson's last novel, may be the closest we have. At 160-odd pages, the crisp, icy first-person narrative seems almost to melt away before it's fully formed. Certainly, this is the most technically accomplished work of a writer who is often harshly criticized purely on technicalities. Like all of Jackson's work, the power here is as much in what is unsaid as what is said, and successive readings of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* reveal layers of meaning to the apparently random scatterings of dialogue and description that are easy to miss at first. Like undergoing therapy, the reader is required to think, to interpret, to bring something to the table, before gratification is permitted. Merricat's and Constance's actions seem inexplicable until we begin to apply outside knowledge; words like *neglect* and *schizophrenia* cast a stark light on the otherwise shady interactions between these two central characters. This required investment from the reader makes actually reading the novel a deeply, sometimes unwelcomingly personal experience. More than any other novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* turns the glare of

surveillance away from the writer and onto the reader themselves. As a writer whose own personal life has been scrutinized so much, Jackson's mirror trick here is just as well as admirable.

Jackson's works are deeply humane as well as being dark, and this everyday Gothic is at its most overt in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Jackson studiously avoids artificial tension; the murder of the Blackwood family, the antecedent to the book's narrative, is chewed and mulled over so frankly and flippantly by the characters as to become almost bitterly tedious. Horror thrill-seekers often grow bored of Jackson because of this aversion to melodrama. Make no mistake, though; the darkness is there, and once the reader has seen it, like a watcher in the background of a photograph, it becomes impossible to ignore. Jackson's telling of the story from Merricat's viewpoint, from the bottom looking upwards, as it were, helps to distract the reader from the central focus of the novel; Like Merricat, we grow preoccupied and become trapped in obsessive compulsions and crippling anxiety, and we find ourselves unable to face up to the cold, hard facts of the novel's narrative. It is often only on reflection that the reader comes to understand the completeness of the claustrophobic hell which Jackson has imagined.

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is, in places, hard to enjoy. As an advocate of Jackson's steel-smooth and flawless short fiction, I sometimes find the jagged and fragmented structure of her longer works a rocky road. It is, however, instantly engaging and consistently fascinating. Jackson's last novel is a masterpiece of bipolar prose that belies the puerile and whimsical voice of its narrator to call us to witness a horror of real, lived experience. It is an unsettling crescendo to the discordant symphony through which Shirley Jackson wrote and, it has been claimed by her patronisers, lived. Here, though, Jackson gets the last laugh. It is for our madness, not hers, that this novel will reveal its secrets.

# You Have The Body

*By Phoebe Reeves-Murray*

*A writer, teacher, and mother, Phoebe Reeves-Murray has worked with children and teens for the last 30 years. She loves writing about the mysteries of the parent child bond, fairy tales, Jungian archetypes, and strange events that take place in the space right next to our own lives. A huge fan of social sci-fi, she is happy to be part of the inaugural issue of Empty Oaks. Her fiction has appeared in Pantheon Magazine, Devilish Review, Dali's Lovechild, Quailbell, and will be appearing in Rivet, and Chrome Baby.*

The TV was set into the cement block wall of the dark shed. Bars crisscrossed to form a second, smaller room inside the first. 24/7 news had looped a CCTV clip of a man chasing a crying little boy up and down the aisles of a store. When he couldn't catch the boy, the man hid behind an aisle display and as the boy ran past, jumped out and punched the little boy in the head. The man yanked the sobbing boy up by his small arm and a woman walked past and took the little boy out of the store.

His TV winked off.

He shuffled away from the TV, first covering his eyes, then touching his head. His heart was pounding. He reached into the tire swing hanging from the inner room's ceiling bars and palmed a prescription bottle out of the tire well. He licked the inside of the container, hoping, but knowing there was nothing left, not even pill dust. He tucked the empty bottle back into the tire well, climbed into the swing, and rocked, eyes closed.

He'd finished the last narco some days ago. The man with grey teeth who took care of him had unknowingly dropped the full pill bottle outside the shed. He waited until the man left, then dragged the pill bottle into his room. He watched the man every day, watched him stare into an iPad, and push and poke its surface, eating pills as he did. They had used TVs and iPads in the lab, and in the circus, and they fed him pills there too, so he knew pills were something he was supposed to take, and he knew pills made things happen. He knew to dole the pills out, only taking one at a time, when he felt bad, which was many times.

His TV was on 24/7. When the man brought visitors to look at him, the man would always remark, “Can you believe he’s got two rooms and a colour TV?” One time, the TV played a wilderness with trees and sun, and wind and darkness, and animals. No music, just the wind and the noises of animals. He never forgot seeing that.

Usually, when the TV turned off, the heat and the lights went off, too, and it was dark and raining or snowing. He’d huddle under his blanket, picking at the jungle animals on its design as he watched the snow swirl, watched through the shed’s bars as the man eventually came out of his trailer towards him, staring into the glow of his iPad. The man poked the iPad over and over, and things would happen. The lights would come back on. The heat would come back on. The TV would come back on and play cartoons, circus shows, legal dramas, and that one time, the wilderness. But most often now, the 24/7 news. He tried touching, then poking the safety glass protecting the TV. Nothing happened. Only the grey-toothed man staring into and touching his iPad could change it. He wanted an iPad. He would touch it and touch it and then he could make things happen. Like the way the pills made him feel like he was floating. Like making his room warm enough so it didn’t matter that he only had one blanket. Like opening his barred door and swinging up into a tree in the wilderness beyond the shed.

A group of men in dark suits were standing outside his shed now. He recognised them from a news story about someone who looked like him and lived in a cement room and a barred room and watched colour TV day and night. The leader held an iPad and touched its surface. He watched the leader’s hand movements, wondering what could possibly happen. It was already daytime, so he couldn’t be turning on the lights. It wasn’t snow time, so he couldn’t be turning on the heat. The other men in suits looked at the one holding the iPad. The grey-toothed man now joined the men in suits, and held his own iPad.

He climbed onto the square window of his shed, trying to see through the hard green crisscross of lines, cutting the men’s faces into diamond shapes. The group stared back at him as he moved his head back and forth, up and down. The leader of the men in suits moved a stylus, and the other men all hunched over the leader’s iPad once again.

One man came over to the window bars and slid a shiny object through his food drawer. He looked in the drawer. It wasn’t an iPad. He was about to close the drawer when he saw a face

on the round, reflective object. Dark, hairy, a face with two gold eyes looked back at him. This face didn't stare, it looked. He'd seen that face before, once in the TV news report, and before that, in a cup of sunlit water that he held next to the window grate. He'd reached into the water to touch the face and it disappeared, and when he took his hand out, the face returned. As he looked at that golden-eyed face now, he heard the wind and the dark and the animals of the wilderness somewhere, but wasn't sure if it was outside his shed or inside his head.

He turned his back to the men in suits and the grey-toothed man and held up the shiny object. He moved it up, down, side to side. The dark, hairy face remained clear. Behind him, the men's faces appeared still segmented into little diamond shapes by the steel criss-crosses in his window. The leader was making "no" sounds at the others and moving the stylus on the iPad. The others made "yes" sounds back at him.

He tapped each of their faces on the round object, debating what he wanted to happen. His stomach growled. Then, as he'd seen them do into the iPad, he looked into its reflective surface at the old freezer outside his shed.

Nothing happened.

He put down the not-iPad and turned around to face them.

They stared. The stylus stopped moving.

He reached for the stylus but the leader didn't want to give it up. Another person nodded at the leader, took the stylus, and put it in the drawer.

He took it and brought it towards his mouth. He pinched his fingers closed, holding them about six inches from his mouth. They stared.

He waited, pointed at the freezer, and pinched his fingers closed again.

One of them opened the freezer, got out a box of popsicles, and brought it over. Another man pulled a wrapped popsicle from the box, unwrapped it and dropped it through the drawer.

He sat there without taking it. This time, the person offered another popsicle, this one still wrapped.

He took it, pressed the waxy white paper against the frozen pop until the colour ghosted through. Purple. He handed it back. The person handed him another. This time, he could see its red colour as it slid out of the box. He hunched down looking into the shiny object at the face he'd never seen before now except when he'd been with the circus, with his mother.

Another man clapped his hands as the first held the box right up to the bars.

He stuck a hairy red-brown finger through a bent hole in the bars and pressed the wrapper to a pop. This time, orange ghosted through. Once it was sent inside the bars, he unwrapped it.

They waited, staring again.

In the object, he looked at them, looked at the melting popsicle box, looked at the freezer.

The leader pushed the box to the bars again.

He didn't move.

Finally, another man put the box back in the freezer.

The TV pricked on. He ignored it.

They stared.

Growling stomach forgotten, he looked into the shiny object at them, realizing it was more than an iPad as he cradled his melting orange popsicle.

\* \* \*

The leader sighed and the group moved away from his window. "So he likes orange popsicles. It's not like he knows atoms exist." They walked towards their cars, the leader still typing final case notes for the court into his iPad.

The man who'd handed him the popsicle looked back at him.

He was still looking in the mirror, moving it up and down, side to side, the mirror reflecting a flash of late afternoon sun even in the darkness of the dirty cement shed.

The man watched him touch his own reflection, then slowly, his own face. The man walked right up to the shed, and saw him tilt the mirror, and tap the man's reflection.

When the man's eyes met his, he waved.

The man spun around and yelled to the others. When they came running over, the man turned back and pointed excitedly.

All the other men saw was him licking popsicle off his fingers. The mirror was gone.

They walked away.

He slipped the mirror back out of the tire well, and looked into it, watching them go, and searching in its reflective surface for the wilderness and the little boy.

\* \* \*

*“In 2014, animal rights activist and attorney Steven Wise lost a court battle to declare legal personhood, a writ of habeas corpus, for a chimp named Tommy who lives in upstate New York. In his legal brief, Wise wrote: ‘Like humans, chimpanzees have a concept of their personal past and future...they suffer the pain of not being able to fulfil their needs or move around as they wish; [and] they suffer the pain of anticipating never-ending confinement.’ He described his first sight of Tommy: ‘A rancid milk-musk odour wafted forth and with it the sight of an adult chimpanzee, crouched inside a small steel-mesh cell. Some plastic toys and bits of soiled bedding were strewn behind him. The only visible light emanated from a small portable TV on a stand outside his bars, tuned to what appeared to be a nature show.’*

*In the court's rejection ruling, the judges wrote: ‘So far as legal theory is concerned, a person is any being whom the law regards as capable of rights and duties. Needless to say, unlike human beings, chimpanzees cannot bear any legal duties, submit to societal responsibilities or be held legally accountable for their actions.’*

*I wondered; what if Tommy could have been trying to show us something he couldn't tell us about consciousness? And was that his limitation, or ours?”*

## Finroc macFinniel Silmairë

*By Warren Rochelle*

*Warren Rochelle has taught English at the University of Mary Washington since 2000. Rochelle's short fiction and poetry have appeared in various journals, including the North Carolina Literary Review, Forbidden Lines, Aboriginal Science Fiction, Colonnades, Graffiti, Collective Fallout, Queer Fish 2, Jaelle Her Book, and Icarus, as well as the Asheville Poetry Review, GW Magazine, Crucible, The Charlotte Poetry Review, and Romance and Beyond. His short story, "The Golden Boy (published in The Silver Gryphon) was a Finalist for the 2004 Gaylactic Spectrum Award for Best Short Story. Most recently, his short story, "Happily Ever After," was published in the Fall 2014 issue of Quantum Fairy Tales.*

*Rochelle is the author of three novels: The Wild Boy (2001), Harvest of Changelings (2007), and The Called (2010), all published by Golden Gryphon Press. He also published a critical work on Le Guin and academic articles in various journals and essay collections. He is currently at work on a collection of gay-themed retellings of traditional fairy tales and has just finished a novel about a gay werewolf and his godling-boyfriend.*

*With thanks to Sylvia Kelso and Ellen McQueen*

**I** look for him by the river, where I always found him, where he always found me. I call his name: Finn. I hear him humming that tune...

“Get up.”

Killian jerked awake. His father stood by his bed, a guard on either side.

“Get dressed. You’re getting married,” his father snapped.

“What? Are you joking?”

His father made a quick, sharp gesture and the guards, their faces expressionless, stepped back and out of the bedroom, softly closing the door behind them. “My heir. A weakling man-lover. A fairy-lover,” his father said, grimacing in distaste. “Yes,” he snarled, “Today. Get dressed.

This woman gave us gold; I promised her a royal husband in exchange,” he said, his voice cold and hard. “Gods, if your brothers were alive, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Killian sat up, careful to keep his lower body covered. The erection he always had after that dream had subsided but even so he had no desire to be naked in front of his father and hear more snide remarks about how he wasn’t like his older brothers, Alistair and Lachlan.

He stared hard at the King, trying to remember when he was very little and had loved this man. He couldn’t.

“If Finn were here—”

The King slapped him across the face. “Don’t mention that name in the same breath with your brothers. Get up and get dressed.”

“Get out of here if you want me to get dressed,” Killian muttered, wiping blood off his mouth.

“The garden, in an hour,” his father said as he left the room.

If he hadn’t made that promise to Finn, Killian would have left years ago. The promise hadn’t included marriage to a woman, but then, it hadn’t included his father catching him and Finn down by the river, either. He and Finn were to be together forever. Killian pushed away the lasting grief. He had to dress for his wedding.

\* \* \*

Killian first met Finroc macFinniel Silmairë when he was ten, by the river in the park behind the palace late one August afternoon. He knew Finn was a fairy. Finn looked just the way his grandmother had described the fey in her stories: the pointed ears, feline-shaped eyes, fire hair, the faint glow under his skin. Killian told no one but his grandmother that his best friend was a fairy. Even for the King’s son, this was dangerous. People like his grandmother hid their reverence for the fey. The iron laws were strictly enforced; violations meant the death penalty. But the gifts and the offerings were still left in the stone circles.

He told no one at all when at seventeen his best friend became his lover. He had felt guilty

at first; it had been just after Alistair's death. But Alistair, he knew, would want him to be happy, and Killian and Finn *were* happy—until Lachlan's assassination three years later changed everything.

The King ordered new security for the Prince, including armed guards and watchers. Finn and Killian were found out one warm summer night, Lughnasadh, the air close, the shadows green and black, the cicadas trilling. After the services at the standing stones, Killian had let Finn into the palace by a forgotten back door made entirely of wood. They had gone to his apartment, thanking the gods it was a labyrinth of corridors and staircases away from the King.

*We lay together, whispering in the darkness. He told me our meeting as little boys had been arranged. The fairy queen wanted to repair the rift and ease the mutual distrust between fey and mundane. Before she could ask others to volunteer their children for this experiment she sent her own child, her fourth son.*

*Falling in love hadn't been part of the plan. The queen had wanted Finn to stay away then, the risk was too great. She feared King Aloysius too much. He told her he couldn't leave me.*

*I promised him that when I became King, I would fix things. Together we would heal the country.*

A guard had seen them go into Killian's room together. The King, with his necromancer, caught them two nights later, down by the river.

\* \* \*

*Now, the promise includes marriage with a woman. If Father's necromancer hadn't cursed him, then Finn wouldn't have cursed him back—and then Father could marry this gold-producing woman himself. Even so, I still wouldn't have Finn.*

At least the counter-curse had both made the King sterile and given the necromancer a fatal wasting disease.

Killian sighed as he walked out into the palace gardens.

The roses were blooming; the air was heady and sweet with fragrance. "This Caroline Rose

MacLaren—she may be a miller’s daughter and kind of plain, but, I assure you, she has a special gift,” his father whispered to him as they waited for her by the palace shrine, with the priest, in his silver and white robes, standing behind them. Killian shrugged; he had no idea what to say to his father.

“Here she is, took them long enough to get her ready,” his father snorted.

The bride carried a bouquet of small white roses and wore a coronet made of yellow and pink roses, a white dress, and the traditional iron necklace to ward off fairy kidnappings. Killian wore the matching groom’s necklace.

There were stories of fairies stealing a bride, a groom, if no offerings were left. Other stories told of one lover being taken out of spite. The King believed the stories.

Her father walked with her. Killian could tell that Caroline Rose was supporting the old man, who almost fell twice crossing the garden. When he presented Caroline Rose to him, Killian could smell why: the old man was drunk. He glanced at his father. It didn’t matter. He could tell the King was overjoyed to be watching his youngest son marry.

There was no celebration of any kind. Killian didn’t even get a chance to speak with her until that night. He had hesitated at the bedroom door, the King’s commands still echoing in his head, then he reminded himself he had promised Finn. To keep that promise he had to become King. The only way to become King was to survive whatever his father demanded of him.

Killian found Caroline Rose sitting on the bed, dressed in a gauzy nightgown sprinkled with tiny gold stars. Her long brown hair had been unbraided and brushed until it glowed. Scarlet rose petals had been scattered on the bed and the floor.

She looked absolutely terrified.

“I’m scared, too,” Killian said as he sat down in an armchair.

“You look just like King Aloysius. The same dark hair and eyes, the same eyebrows.”

Killian shrugged. “I do *look* like my father. You, on the other hand, look nothing like yours.”

“I favour my mother,” she said with a small smile.

“My older brothers favoured our mother. What is this gold Father keeps talking about?” Killian asked and smiled back.

Caroline Rose looked down at the floor, as if the answer had been written in the wood. “I can spin straw into gold. I could, I mean—only for seven times. I can’t do it anymore.”

“Straw into gold? Really?” he asked, as he stared at her.

*Here, let me show you something, Finn had said. We lay together on a quilt my grandmother had made me. We had found a hidden glade in the park’s forest a long walk from where we always found each other. Around us were the remains of a lunch and our clothes.*

*Show me what, I had asked, half-awake, my head on his chest.*

*This. He had a handful of broom straw picked somewhere on our walk. Humming his tune, Finn wove the stalks together, his hands a blur of motion, and then, he had a handful of golden thread.*

*It won’t last, Killy. Fairy gold always fades away.*

She nodded. “Your father made me do it. Why are you staring at me?”

*Father said the necromancer had transformed him. Could this be Finn?*

“You remind me of someone I knew,” Killian said, watching her. *If I kiss her, will she be transformed, like in the stories? But why would Father do this? Maybe he doesn’t know.* He looked into her face. He could tell it was taking some effort for her to be still, to look at him, to not run away.

“Up close, you don’t look like the King at all.”

*I can do this. This is Finn...*

“You know, I’m not experienced in these matters, either,” Killian said, looking down at his lap. Then he stood and slipped his jacket off.

When they were done, he rolled over on his back, his eyes closed, to catch his breath. *I broke the spell. When I open my eyes, I'll see Finn.*

He saw Caroline Rose. “You’re not, you’re not—I thought—the straw, the gold—I thought it was, that you were really, that you—” He stopped at the look of total bewilderment on her kind face.

“What did you think? Did I do something wrong?”

Killian stroked her dark brown hair. It remained dark brown; it didn’t become fire-coloured. He touched her face. It remained kind and puzzled. He held her hands. The fingers remained short.

“No, no,” he shook his head. “Never mind. I was just so sure that—never mind.”

He wept. Caroline Rose took him in her arms and held him like a hurt child, and told him it would be all right, everything would be all right.

For a long time he watched her. The tiny hope that had bloomed when she had told him of the straw into gold refused to wither and fade away. A week after the wedding the King insisted that they take twice-monthly excursions across the country, starting late summer until the very end of autumn. The kingdom needed to meet the royal couple.

Killian watched Caroline Rose on each excursion, but he saw no signs of Finroc. By the time they had returned from the last excursion Killian stopped watching. They had become friends. He looked forward to their times together, even the official occasions. Sometimes the King joined them over after-breakfast tea; those visits could be endured. That Killian truly liked Caroline Rose took some of the edge off his grieving. It became more bearable but it never went away. Sometimes he was sure he had seen Finroc—a flash of brightness, an almost familiar face or gesture—and his heart would turn over. Killian learned to endure those times, too.

“Next spring, more excursions, I think, yes,” the King muttered after he gulped his tea. “I’ll be in the vault,” he added and left.

Killian looked at her, shaking his head. “Carrie, I will be a better king, I swear it. I will

change things.”

They were in the little parlour, overlooking the December-brown garden. Yule was coming.

“I will change things. I promise,” he repeated as he stood. Official duties called.

“Wait,” she said her voice sad and heavy. “Something has already changed. I’m pregnant. I’m sure. I’ve missed my period three times.”

Killian stared at her, wrestling with surprise and despair. *Pregnant? I should be happy, but I don’t know what to feel.* Killian wanted to ask why she didn’t seem happy about the baby and why she had kept the pregnancy a secret for so long.

He sighed. *Let her have her secrets. She’ll tell me when she’s ready,*

Thinking he could at least be glad for her, Killian grabbed her hands and pulled Caroline Rose into a hug.

*Father will be ecstatic.*

\* \* \*

A few days later the guard captain came to Killian to tell him his father was dead. Killian listened as the man explained how the King had died. He had been in the vault, where he went every morning. The reels of spun gold had started vanishing, one after the other; the shock killed him.

*It won’t last, Killy. Fairy gold always fades away.*

*I wish I could mourn him.*

Killian gave the necessary orders and then went to tell Caroline Rose.

It was a ten-minute walk from the little parlour to the private family wing, before he was at Caroline Rose’s apartments. Killian thought he would find her in her sitting room, reviewing her schedule with Margaret, but the room was empty. Before he could call for her, he heard voices, two women, coming from Caroline Rose’s dressing room. The door was ajar.

Caroline Rose was crying.

“He said he would come back to take one I loved.”

“You should tell Killian, Carrie. Besides, nothing has happened, maybe nothing will.”

“No, everything has to be a secret. Dear gods.”

“Sit down. You can’t do anything until something happens. Let me brush your hair; it’ll make you feel better.”

*More secrets?*

Killian pushed the door just enough to ease inside and see Caroline Rose’s face in the mirror, her eyes closed. He watched as Margaret combed and brushed at the ends of Caroline Rose’s long brown hair and then began to work her way up until she reached the top of Caroline Rose’s head, and then down, down, to the end of her hair and back again. Long slow strokes. Carrie leaned her head back slightly into the pull of the brush.

He swallowed the questions about the stranger and the news of his father he expected to say next. This moment between the two women, it was not to be disturbed—not yet. Finn had touched him that way. Killian held up his hand to stop the memory and to stop his body’s arousal. *It’s like he’s somewhere near.*

*All right. If Margaret isn’t worried, I’ll wait for them to tell me. Keep your secrets, Carrie.* He shivered, then cleared his throat and walked forward to tell Caroline Rose she was queen.

\* \* \*

On Litha, the summer solstice, Killian, as was custom, led a pre-dawn crowd from the main shrine to the stone circle to the steady beat of drums. He took them down a narrow road out into the countryside, winding by the river to greet the sunlight when it touched the standing stones. Each curve of the road reminded Killian of Finn, of two boys in love by the river.

The guard captain told him his son had been born when he came home. Queen and prince were fine. Margaret answered his knock at the door to Caroline Rose’s sitting room. She

hushed him as he slipped in and led him into the bedroom where they slept.

“You have a son, Your Majesty. Born on the solstice, he’ll have good luck. Car—Her Majesty wants to name him after you,” Margaret whispered as she stroked Caroline Rose’s brown hair that spilled over her pillow.

“Thank you for taking care of her, for being here,” he whispered back, ashamed he had thought so much of Finn and so little of her while leading the procession, reciting the longest-day-of-sunlight prayers, talking to whomever walked by him. But he had left Caroline Rose with one who loved her in a way he couldn’t. He knew she was safe and cared for. He hoped that meant something.

\* \* \*

The next month before the naming ceremony was busy for everyone. Even so, Killian swore he would not be like his father was in the nursery either. As much as his schedule would permit, he spent time with his son. Often he found himself watching the two women as he sat there, the sleeping baby on his shoulder, or as he walked the boy, humming Finn’s tune. The small touches, the winks and smiles, the private conversations their heads together: he envied them, even as they were his friends.

He thought several times of asking them about their secret, as nothing seemed to have happened, decided against it. Just one more story of fairies stealing loved ones; this one had scared a pregnant woman.

\* \* \*

Margaret came to him the morning of the ceremony. Killian was in his office, reviewing the plans for the new hospital and the new train line it would require. He looked up when she knocked.

“Your Majesty. I need to talk to you. Carrie—Her Majesty—doesn’t know I’m here and she might be even be mad, but this is beyond us.”

“What do you mean, Margaret? Sit down,” he said and pointed to a chair. He almost reminded her to call him Killian as he had asked her to do when they were alone, as she called the

Queen Carrie. Somehow saying his name was hard. He sighed.

She told him the story.

The Queen, before she married him, when she was just the daughter of a foolish drunken miller, had made a promise to a fairy. He had done things for her that saved her life, so the Queen had said. Now he was back, to collect on the promise, to receive his payment.

“It’s little Killian he wants. She has to name him after the fairy, the fairy has to be at the naming ceremony, but she also has to guess his name and if she doesn’t, he will take away one whom she loves.”

“How did he save her?”

“She won’t tell me. We’ve guessed name after name, made lists, sent soldiers out to find more names, and today, before the ceremony, is his third and last visit.”

“I’ll be there,” Killian said. “Why didn’t she say something?”

Margaret shook her head. “She wanted to fix things herself. You know how independent she is.”

“I know but he’s my son, too,” he said, shaking his head and sighing.

\* \* \*

That evening, just before twilight, almost an hour-and-half before the naming ceremony, Killian waited in the shadows behind the couch where Carrie and Margaret sat waiting, holding hands. His son slept in a cradle by the couch. He stood behind a dark red curtain, a narrow window at his back, holding his hunting pistol, loaded with iron bullets. Instead of the gas lamps, candles had been lit and placed in all the wall sconces. Caroline Rose had been furious when he had shown up—at him, at Margaret. Then she had cried in relief.

The clock on the Queen’s desk struck the half-hour, a short ting. There was a sudden flash of light, and a tearing noise, and there the little man was, just as Margaret had described him, perched on the desk. Fey, yes, the hair, the eyes, the light under the skin, but wrinkled and

shrunken. The little man was no bigger than a small child.

“What is my name?” he asked softly.

Caroline Rose began reading names out of her day book, the ones collected by the guards, the ones Margaret had collected from the palace staff, the ones Killian had given her just a while ago. At each name he could see the ugly little man shake his head.

Caroline Rose came to the end of all her lists. Swallowing a sob, she looked up. “Please, tell me your name. I don’t know; I couldn’t find out.”

“We had an agreement. Straw into gold. You swore,” the ugly little man said and began humming a little tune as he jumped down from the desk.

Killian gasped, feeling his heart catch. He stepped out from behind the curtain into the candle light. He was trembling. “I know your name: Finroc macFinniel Silmairë. Finn.”

The little man jerked forward, stopped, jerked again, then cried out in pain as he bent over, clutching his head. His body twisted as his neck grew longer, then his arms, his hands, each spurt painful, sharp. His clothes split, ripped, and fell away, until he was naked and he kept growing and crying until he was the same height as Killian. Gasping, he straightened and looked at Killian.

Killian stared back, his hand on his heart. He was staring at Finn. He carefully laid his pistol on the window sill and took a step forward, another, until finally he could touch him and be touched by those long fingers.

“It’s really you?”

Finn nodded. He kissed him and nodded. Not letting go of Killian, he turned to Caroline Rose and Margaret. Killian could look at no one but Finn. “His father caught us together; his necromancer cursed me into this body until I was invited back into the palace and called by my right name.”

Finn took a deep breath, turned to Killian. “That curse had three parts: to be invited back, to be named, and to have to leave. I can’t stay.”

“Name our son Finroc, like you promised, Carrie,” Killian said, still looking at Finn. “Then you can stay, yes?”

Finn shook his head. “No, I can’t. Come with me. That’s why I did all this, not to steal you, but to ask you to come with me.” His eyes glowed brighter and his hair stood up as if his head was truly on fire.

“I’ll go.”

“Wait, wait,” Caroline Rose said quickly, getting to her feet. “You can’t just *go*. You’re the King.”

“I told you I would take one you love.”

“But we found out your name.”

“You didn’t guess it,” Finn said. “Killy knew it. Killy, I have to go and I can’t come back, but you can. You can take little Finroc back and forth, I’ll show you how. You can show Carrie and Margaret how.”

“I’m going, Carrie,” Killian said softly as he finally turned to her. “My dear, you’re my friend and I love you, but not as a husband loves his wife—no more than you love me as a wife loves her husband. Someone else here lives in your heart. I saw it when she brushed your hair.”

Caroline Rose looked back at Margaret, then back at Killian. She started to speak, and then closed her mouth and nodded.

“I’ll come back sometimes, but not to stay. Tell them I’ve gone on a long journey to a far country, for trade; I had to leave suddenly.”

“Can’t you wait, just a little?”

“No, Killy, we can’t,” Finn said quickly. “The sun is going down and we have to leave *now*—and your clothes, they can’t go with you. Hurry, hurry, *hurry*.”

A moment later they both stood naked and hand in hand in the middle of the room.

Margaret stood by Caroline Rose and both women raised their hands together in farewell.

The candles in the room flickered, sputtered, went out, and Killian and Finn were gone.

*"I love fairy tales. A few years ago I set myself the task of rereading all the Lang colour collections, from the Blue to the Lilac. I believe fairy tales are important, as they speak to and comment on what it means to be human. They instruct and delight. Yes, they are cultural products of a time and place, but as they come out of oral cultures, fairy tales have been told and retold, reimagined and reinterpreted, thus reflecting as much contemporary culture as their cultures of origin.*

*I am a big of these retellings and original modern tales, such as those wonderful collections of Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow, such as Snow White, Blood Red, and Black Thorn, White Rose. Such stories can give voice to the voiceless, to those made invisible or marginalized. The powerless have tales worth hearing.*

*Gay people only relatively recently have made visible in fairy tales through these retellings, By deliberately recasting the main characters here as gay I asking readers to both re-examine fairy tales and question the long historical absence of GLBT folk. Left out, why? What happens to the power of fairy tales to comment on being human when the full range of humanity is included? My answer is the power remains, and indeed is strengthened.*

*That's what I am trying to do in this story, and I am hoping to delight, too."*

## Glass

*By Kira Messell*

*Kira is a Danish writer currently living in Berlin, Germany. She has taught languages, literature and history in both Berlin and Kuala Lumpur. Until 2013, she spent 5 years in Malaysia where she wrote a collection of speculative fiction set in South East Asia. Kira holds an MA in Comparative Literature from the University of Copenhagen and the University of Edinburgh. Two of her stories have been published in Rose Red Review.*

**A**s I finally shut the steel drawer and close today's last file, I see my own blurred body reflected in the stainless metal. I lower the temperature of the morgue refrigerator to further slow down decomposition during my few days off. The lower edge of the drawer cuts across my waist and disjoints my features. The reflection leaves only a vague idea of where I begin and where I end. In my white coat and with my head cut off, I look like a ghost.

I must hurry home and change, to become my mother's daughter before I leave the city. I remind myself to pack some extra clothes. Mother always tells me to take care of my appearance. I'm more concerned about keeping sterile and warm among cool bodies.

She's been calling more often lately, asking when I'll visit. She needs help, she says, with all the preparations, though she must know I'll only be in her way. I'm not like her and Po Po, spending weeks in the kitchen, cooking everything from scratch the traditional way, though I sometimes do miss the sounds and smells that I've come to associate with impending festivals. Mother and Po Po chatting in the kitchen to the rhythm of a pestle pounding herbs and spices in a mortar. Fried chili with garlic and shallots, sour tamarind and lime, caramelized palm sugar and rice steaming in the rice cooker. The ingredients transformed the kitchen into a study in colour and form: gnarled roots of ginger, galangal and turmeric, slim sticks of lemongrass and spring onions, red and green chillies, cardamom, pandan leaves, kaffir lime leaves, cloud ear mushrooms, dried bean curd, whole plucked chickens, gaping fish mouths, and pale shrimp with long whiskers.

As a child, I used to love watching them dance around each other as they fried, pounded, soaked, baked and strained. As an adult the memory merely makes me sad. I was always only a spectator to Mother and Po Po's world, never a participant, and I know their Nyonya skills are dying out. The few times she came to Kuala Lumpur, Mother was horrified by my sterile kitchen, empty but for the odd ready-mix. I told her I have a full time job and usually eat out after work. She lectured me on our unique cultural heritage, our special fusion of Chinese and Malay cuisine. But like my colleagues I simply consider myself Malaysian, despite our various ethnic and cultural blends, be it Chinese, Indian, Portuguese or Arab. After Mother went through my cupboards and found only bland white Ikea porcelain, she decided I should have her Nyonya porcelain. As if that would make me naturally interested in her cooking.

The plates and bowls now sit unused on the top shelves, their pink, green and brown flowers, peacocks and songbirds covered in a fine layer of dust. I've always had a strained relationship with her heritage. Everything has to be special; the food, the plates, the clothes, even the language. When mother and Po Po gossiped, an indecipherable mix of Hokkien, Malay and English seeped out of the kitchen shrouded in an odour of palm fat. I always kept to the other side of the threshold, observing and questioning.

This is our kitchen dance: complicated footwork skirting expectations, filial obligations, and unresolved rebellion. She has always mourned my lack of interest in my Nyonya roots, although she never fails to tell me how proud she is of me. A real doctor, she boasts, just like your great grandfather.

Being compared to my Great Grandfather never feels much of a compliment, though. I'm sure my Po Po's childhood would have been less distressing, had she not spent so much time with her father Ah Kong, one of the King's Chinese in Melaka and a man more English than the English. While studying medicine in Britain, he travelled to the Continent and became inspired by the anti-premature burial movement, then on its last legs. After returning to Malaya, he married my frail great grandmother, a woman so feeble some compared her to a living corpse. Her pregnancy sucked what little life she had from her and confined her to bed. The first time she died was just before she was due to give birth to her first child.

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It's not only on Tomb Sweeping Day we pay respects to our ancestors. Also Ghost Month and New Year see Mother absorbed in frantic ancestor worship. She attends meticulously to the family altar with joss sticks and offerings. Only the best for the dead and the living can have what's left. It used to make me feel unworthy when, during Hungry Ghost Festival, the table was set with extra chairs and bowls for each of the ancestors. Father and I sat at one end with all our favourite dishes in front of us: Assam curry, prawn sambal, pomfret fish. "Come, eat, eat," Mother said. Faded photographs of family members looked down on me. I looked at the empty chairs and the loaded plates. I knew it wasn't us she was beckoning.

"Why are the ghosts still hungry when we feed them all the time?" I once asked Mother. I must have been seven or eight years old. "Because of their sins and tragedies in life," she said. "We must ease their suffering and prevent their throats from shrinking. Otherwise they can't swallow and will starve to death." I asked how the dead could die. "They just die a second time," she said; dying a second time would mean they became stuck and couldn't go on to the final realm of the dead. Their souls would hover somewhere in a dimension between the dead and the living. "Is that why Po Po isn't eating?" I asked. "Is she stuck between worlds?" Mother grunted and didn't answer.

This would have been during one of Po Po's fasting periods. Po Po claimed she could do without food and drink for up to seventeen days. "To cleanse soul and body," she said, while making glutinous rice dumplings with sinfully sweet coconut. In the night, I remember lying awake thinking about stray souls. Suddenly a sound from the kitchen. I sneaked out to spy on and maybe catch one of the souls. And there, a hungry ghost was indeed feasting on the leftovers of our supper.

Every year, during Hungry Ghost festival, I am revisited by the image of Po Po in her white nightgown bent over a blue and white bowl of boiled pork belly.

Po Po lived among the dead before she was even born. Her father Ah Kong sat over poor Great Grandmother throughout her wake and refused to bury her. He suggested converting the guest room into a mausoleum for her. He could embalm her, he said, to keep her fresh. With the innocent foetus dead in her womb, he wouldn't hear of cremating her. Imagine being engulfed in the flames of hell without even having glimpsed the heavenly realm outside the maternal womb!

Her family pressed for a burial and Ah Kong had to concede. As the coffin was gently lowered into the grave, one of the men accidentally let go of the rope causing the coffin to tilt and crash. A cry was heard from inside. Then moaning. With some difficulty the coffin was brought back up and opened, and behold! The dead pregnant wife was in the middle of labour. The hard landing had apparently caused her waters to break, and thus Po Po emerged from the penultimate state of life to its very beginning, reversing the normal progression. Great Grandmother magically revived too, although the experience left her feeble minded and even more frail. She died, again, a few years later. Apparently with a foetus of a less fortunate sibling than my Po Po in her womb.

“The women in our family are cursed,” Mother repeatedly tells me, “you must make offerings.” It will ease my fate, she says, to feed the ancestors. I don't want to turn up empty handed, so I've bought tangerines and apples at Carrefour. I hope she'll appreciate the small effort. I know Mother has been cooking for days and will have all the dishes ready when I arrive. She feels she owes it to Po Po and the other ancestors. I feel I owe it to her, at least to show up.

\* \* \*

To help me cope with my difficult fate, Mother gave me the Chinese name Jian, which means strong and healthy. Father ridiculed her superstitions and called me Jean. He died young and diabetic, helped along by generous servings of Mother's rich curries and buttery pineapple tarts. Father was an English teacher and spent most of his spare time in the soft armchair reading, trying hard to get Mother to read other things than romance novels. With time, she took to reading classics with a penchant for the gothic. She loved ghost stories and legends about resurrected corpses. Stories as real to her as the more colourful articles she read in the tabloid press about alien abduction or snakes living in human stomachs. Cheap novels with fanciful titles such as *Whispers from the Grave* were given as much credibility as the odd scientific journals lying around the house. The random facts emerging from this pairing were often more than fantastical.

I used to ridicule Mother's naivety without considering the circumstances of her upbringing. Throughout her childhood Po Po's fasting periods were followed by spells of unconsciousness. Heartbeat and breath would disappear completely until she suddenly snapped out of her trance. It was believed she had inherited her mother's frail constitution. Once she had a fever, probably dengue, and stopped responding to any form of stimuli. Thought dead, she was displayed in her

wedding dress on the dining table for the wake. As if it was her childhood's favourite fairy tale, Mother often told the story with all its haunting details: how beautiful Po Po had looked, immovable and thin, holding white chrysanthemums as a stark contrast to her still rosy cheeks and raven black hair. I pictured a Sleeping Beauty with a neck reduced to a flower stalk.

On the third day she suddenly opened her eyes and sat up, which was considered a miracle.

During my studies I did some research on Po Po's symptoms and could eventually diagnose her post mortem with *lucid hysterical lethargy*. I assume she also suffered from severe narcolepsy which enabled her to go into a deep trancelike state. I read about yogis in India, who deliberately let themselves be buried, just to show that it is possible to shut down your vital organs and be revived a couple of days later. I never confronted Mother with my insights. She created her own theory as a child. For comfort, I assume. Po Po's soul, mother said, choose to leave her body at times, only to come back later. Apparently, nobody bothered explaining Po Po's difficult psyche to her suffering child.

Po Po's fits seem an obscure imitation of her father's favourite objects. Ah Kong founded the *Movement to Prevent Premature Burial in Malaya* after his wife's first death incident. During the day, he worked as an ordinary GP, in his spare time he expended all his energy on creating a waiting mortuary. A copy of what he'd seen in Germany. A grand house built for the dead.

Vivid images from Po Po's stories of the mortuary crowded my childhood. Rows of corpses in a waiting hall. Each body with a string attached to their finger, which itself was attached to a bell. A watchman was always on duty should any of the corpses stir and ring the bell. I know Ah Kong had trouble finding watchmen, and the ones he found didn't last long. Some of the resignations and complaints were kept among his medical records which mother proudly gave me as I enrolled in medical school. I'm sure she never read the actual contents. It's rather horrific. Most watchmen began to see slight movements in the corpses after a while. They complained about bad breath and sleep problems. More than once the bell rang, loud and insistently. It was always false alarm caused by muscle contractions or putrefaction. With no air conditioning or fans, the stench of decaying flesh mixing with gasses must have become intolerable after only a few days in the tropical climate. The guards felt sick. They complained that the smell of the dead crept under their skin.

Eventually Ah Kong had a glass tower situated in the centre of the hall. Like a reversed prison, the guard was inside to survey the corpses without the stench. How they could bear it in the heat, I don't know.

It always puzzled me what a small girl was doing in her father's waiting mortuary. Bloated corpses and marble faced babies hid under mountains of fresh cut flowers from relatives trying to mask the stench of rotting with roses and lilies. I never saw them, but the images from her recountings burned inside my head.

I take comfort in my own hard steel and white tile mortuary with its smell of Dettol and disinfectant, and know that my choice of profession has always been a coming to terms with nightmare snapshots from the family album.

I go through a mental list of things I need to do when I'm back in my own odour-free morgue in a few days. I don't intend to stay long in Melaka. Mother will be disappointed. She will want me to spend more time with her and her dead, but I have my own corpses to attend to. A Belgian restaurant owner is waiting for me to decide whether alcohol killed him slowly or his local loverboy killed him fast with a drug overdose. And there's a young Malay girl. Sixteen years old and with severe bruising. The police suspect her brothers of the murder. She was seeing an Indian boy. I also need to take samples from a Chinese man's stomach and send them to the lab. I assume he died of old age, though his children think differently and have demanded a thorough examination. They refuse to believe he was mortal and accuse his young wife of poisoning him.

Luckily, I don't have to deal with the relatives. I leave that to the police and stick to my autopsies. The real trouble with the dead are usually their families. Something Ah Kong hadn't taken into account when he adopted the European waiting hall. According to their respective cultures, wailing relatives insisted on paying their respect by staying with their departed throughout the wake. Overwhelmed by the smell they often insisted on taking them home. Despite a number of improvements, Ah Kong had trouble getting clients for his waiting mortuary and eventually had to shut it down.

\* \* \*

In the car I think of ways to cheer her up. To compensate, I suppose. At least I can help her with the maintenance of the graves. She won't have done that yet. I will help her set up the joss sticks and burn the hell notes. She will have bought other paper items to burn like clothes and shoes. She recently mentioned how Po Po had asked for new dentures and how she considered offering Ah Kong contemporary medical journals. He would want to follow the latest developments, she said. I didn't comment. It's her world, not mine, and I find all her efforts a waste of time and money.

It will only take me an hour to drive to Melaka but probably another hour to get through the city. I'm late and mother will be waiting. She called again yesterday and asked me to come early. "So busy and no help in the house." I snapped at her and told her I have a full time job. So many dead in the hot weather. People die like flies, I said. At least my responsibility for the dead is something she respects. "I will come as soon as I've finished work."

I take comfort in our routines. Tomorrow we'll go to the market and buy flowers, then pack up the curries, rice, sweets and fruits in baskets and drive to the churchyard. Mother will arrange the flowers while I sweep the tombs. We'll offer our picnic to Father, Po Po, Great Grandmother and Ah Kong before we feast on leftovers.

"Never forget to feed the ghosts," Mother always tells me, "or they will haunt the living." In her case I sometimes think it's the other way round. As a young child I felt less haunted by family ghosts than by her persistent stories about the undead. This was years before my teenage classmates read vampire books and watched splatter movies. "Some ghosts are starving before they get to the realm between the worlds," she said, "the ones that are buried before they are really dead." She had a certain talent for leading conversation to premature burial. A seemingly favourite pastime in our family. She told me vivid stories about gravediggers hearing loud smacking sounds in the graveyard. When they exhumed the coffins they found unnaturally twisted bodies, obviously buried alive and having either slowly suffocated or starved to death. Some of them had eaten their own shrouds, she said, others had been so hungry they had eaten their own fingers or arms. One corpse had been so hungry, he had eaten his entire body. It was gone. She explained how some people have so much chi and will power, they would burst the coffin to dig their way out of the grave.

While I was still at university I showed her some of my textbooks, to make her understand the effects of bodily decay and how that can sometimes be misinterpreted as a sign of premature burial. “No,” she said, “sometimes the spirit leaves the body only to come back and find the body has already been buried. That's why we do the wake. For the soul to come back to its body.” Then I told her about decomposition and gasses building up inside dead bodies. I know, I said, I've seen it all. I tried to give her natural explanations for her bursting coffins and cannibalistic corpses. She just nodded. I knew she wasn't listening. She remained stuck in time and unable to listen to reason.

It was my questions about the dead led me to study medicine. Facts and answers made my student years a revelation. All the stories I'd been fed as a child were deconstructed, one by one. Mother's special mix of Chinese ancestor worship, Taoism and Western gothic stories slowly lost their authority over me. I could dispute all her incongruous truths. I used to go to some length to take her arguments apart. As I grew older, I became more sensitive to her moods, realizing that like my father, I wanted to change her.

\* \* \*

I have a spare set of keys to her flat and let myself in. The special smell of home from years of cooking greets me as I step over the threshold. Spicy and sweet smells mixed with fat clinging to curtains and cushions. I walk towards her kitchen. There's still a hint of fried garlic mixed with chili and *beacon* lingering in the air. Curry Kapitan for the dead. And then I see her. She's in the living room in Father's old chair, reading glasses askew and a book in her hand. I put down my bags and approach while I wish I hadn't spent so much time among corpses. The book is old and has been read numerous times. The pages are crumpled and brown, matching her wrinkled, liver-spotted hand. The print is old fashioned. I take it from her and read the title. Of course. One of her favourites: Boccaccio's Decameron. How often has she read it? I remember bits and pieces of her retellings, but never bothered to read it myself. She stopped telling me about her books once I began my studies. Probably because I was busy pointing out the weak points in the narrative. I remember our last discussion about this book. Mother told me how the young man wanted to see his beloved after her death. He sneaked into her vault to steal unresponsive kisses from her cold lips. An action that, as far as I could tell, seemed to lead to fully fledged necrophilia. “And as he opened her bodice and touched her breast, he felt a faint heartbeat,” Mother said, dramatic voice and eyes wide open. “What was he doing fumbling her naked breast anyway?” I asked. She went

silent for a moment. "Love works in mysterious ways," she said. I opened my mouth to protest but decided to keep silent. I already knew what she would say. "Oh, you don't know life and death." A standard answer whenever she couldn't argue her case.

I look from the book to her parchment thin skin, stretched over bony features. I do now Mother, I do now. She looks peaceful as she sits there, lines and wrinkles smooth, one limp hand on the armrest, bloodless fingers looking like wax. This is how I will end up, is my first thought, I will be next. *Memento mori*. She never said anything on the phone, is my second thought, but she must have known. I go to the window and open it wide. I let in the heat and let out her soul. Then I turn to her and know I should feel for her pulse, close her eyes and call her doctor. I think of the note next to her bed.

"I'm not dead, only sleeping." Nobody was going to bury her prematurely.

"You have to do it the Chinese way, Jian, with a long wake and no confinement in a coffin. I want to be able to breathe fresh air," she said not too long ago. I argued that premature burial does not take place; it's old wives tales. We have ways to determine death. She could rest assured about that. "Aaaiiooo, don't say that. You don't read papers? Just last month a woman in Guangxi was almost buried alive, ninety-five years old. You'd think it was time to go. Her neighbours found her lifeless in the kitchen and put her in a coffin at home for the wake. After six days, *six days*, she left her coffin and was found rummaging through her kitchen looking for food. Imagine that! What if they had put her into one of your hospital drawers in a bag? Or she had already been buried? Just because I'm old doesn't mean I'm dead every time I lie down." I argued back with common sense and science. She argued with superstition, angst and the yellow press.

How can I accommodate Mother's ideas and fear of premature burial with my own medical knowledge? I'm caught between tradition and education. I try hard to think of Mother's instructions about her own burial. It all seems so surreal now. She prepared me all my life and yet I feel completely unready. I must arrange her wake and funeral. I must inform the family. I must act. Put a white cloth over the entrance door; remove the deities from the altar; light white candles; cover all the mirrors.

I go to her bedroom and stare at the Chinese red dresser. Red is the colour of happiness, can't dress the dead in that colour. Did I bring any white clothes for myself? Burial clothes.

Bottom drawer. There's a finely laced blouse, white and almost see-through, and a sarong with a colourful green and blue pattern. Some years back, after Father died, I took her on a trip to Penang and helped her pack. As I looked for a nightgown I found the neatly folded clothes in the bottom drawer. "I never saw you in this," I said as I pulled out the outfit, "it's pretty. You should use it." She snapped at me. "Not until I die. You make sure I wear that for my funeral." A clumsy pocket is stitched on to the *kebaya*. It looks odd and out of place on this finely crafted lace. Did she plan to bring a hanky to her grave? For keys, she said, I shouldn't forget to give her a spare set of keys. For the coffin and for the vault. Just in case. She wouldn't want to be trapped. "You know how I hate confined spaces," she said. Then she squeezed herself underneath the bed and pulled out a box which contained yellowed magazines with crumbling pages, at least fifty years old.

"These belonged to your Great Grandfather." That would probably make them hundred years old. She pointed at an old article with black and white photos of strange looking coffins. *Modern Security Coffins*, it read. I sat down and looked through it. There were coffins with bells, coffins with electrical wiring, coffins with enough food and drink to get you through a week. Coffins with alarm systems that go off the minute you try to sit up. "And which one did you have in mind?" she didn't detect the sarcasm in my voice. She never did. "See this one. With a tube. So I won't suffocate and you can feed me soup." I asked her why I would want to feed her soup when she was dead. "Aah, you never know if I'm really dead. Besides, no harm feeding your ancestors. You should know that." I told her I would make sure to always pay my respects, but I could not see the point in feeding her in her grave. I tried to explain the difference between symbolic offerings on a grave and pouring chicken soup down a tube. She didn't listen but instead pointed out a sketch of a very scientific looking coffin, presumably six feet underground. "See, with a filter so no leaves will clog the entrance and suffocate me. And when you remove the filter, you can feed your mother soup." I sarcastically suggested leaving out the meatballs since they might clog the tube. She ignored me and tightened her lips. We never spoke about her security coffin again.

I settle for a glass coffin. It's a compromise between closed and open, separation and togetherness. I know she required fresh air but I can't place her on the dining table. I find it absurd and unhygienic to display the dead where the living eat. It connotes cannibalism. I prefer dead bodies zipped up, locked away, secluded from the living. I would prefer to take her to my own mortuary and do my wake in sterile surroundings. She would hate that, I know. The glass coffin

allows me to watch her and even press my fingers against the glass for nearness. It's fastened with hinges on one side and a handle on the other so visitors can lift the lid and place gifts and flowers within. I catch myself thinking that this will allow her to easily push the coffin open, should she suddenly awaken. Lifelong manipulations, I remind myself and shake my head.

The priest comes to clean and dress her according to Taoist rites. I hope she realizes what I'm doing for her. He tells me he can see her ghost when he touches her. "Is she...alright?" It's a ludicrous question and I feel like an imposter. The priest scrutinizes me for a long time. "Confucius told us to respect ghosts and gods but stay away from them," he says. I nod and regress to an eight year old in my mother's kitchen, hungry for straight answers.

During the day family, friends and neighbours come round to pay their respects. Traditionally, they should be wailing loudly, but the practice seems to be dying out. Either that or they know there isn't much to inherit. In the evening I sit and stare through the glass while I try to remember bits and pieces of information and instructions. Again, I feel torn between filial obligations and medical knowledge. I lift the glass lid and place an apple between her folded hands. She'll expect me to burn paper symbols after this. I try to picture smoke from a burned paper apple ascending from the temple oven, only to materialize in the other realm. It's absurd, though admittedly more pragmatic than jars full of food and treasures for the afterlife. Why did they take a watered down symbol and make it literal? And why don't I feel the same way? Mother's gifts for Po Po. Po Po's gifts for her own frail mother. The two of them always so busy with the ghosts.

After Po Po died, Auntie and Mother sometimes invited a medium to come to our house to communicate with her. I wasn't allowed to participate but sat in the kitchen, as close to the action as possible. Auntie came to fetch a cup of rice from our kitchen to help the ghosts identify our family. She played the lottery every week and asked the ancestors for auspicious numbers. She once won a fair amount of money after one of these séances. Auntie and Mother decided to buy a paper stove for Po Po so she could cook all her Nyonya recipes. They even bought the paper ingredients and burned them in the big temple oven with lots of ceremony. "She asked me in a dream," Mother told me, "She wants to cook for her own mother."

I never knew my great grandmother, but sensed she was one of Mother's starving ghosts with a needle thin throat and unable to swallow all the dishes Mother and Auntie offered on the altar. Maybe it would be easier for her to cook on a paper stove. I tried to picture Po Po and Great Grandmother feasting on paper food in the realm between this world and the next. I imagined it was a realm between two pages of a book. When closed it was invisible, when opened, the undead jumped out and materialized as white ephemeral ghosts.

I look at her features. Dark veins pattern her translucent skin. Like marble. A rumbling sound fills the stillness of the living room. I stop breathing and listen again. Her lips are slightly parted. Did I not close them? The sound seems to from her throat. I try to think fast. Gasses from the stomach departing through the mouth. Putrefaction. When does it start? Pictures and textbook fragments leap through my head. I stare into the blackness of her open mouth. Was that a sigh? A flaying of the nostrils? Don't be silly, I tell myself and wish I had a stethoscope. Then I put my ear to her breast and listen for even the faintest heartbeat. I close my eyes and concentrate. There's a rhythm, faint and elusive. Gadong, gadong, gadong, racing like a scared rabbit. I feel my own pulse on the side of my throat. Gadong, gadong, gadong. Racing, scared. Even if I do spend most of my time among corpses, I understand why Ah Kong had problems recruiting staff for his waiting mortuaries.

Surprisingly, I find myself using archaic methods to rule out life. I take one of the white candles and hold it under her nose to see if it flickers while aware of the irony of it. White candles are used to keep the corpses from talking and rising from the dead. Is it flickering or is it just my own hectic breath near the candle that makes it move? What can I possibly use without letting my own living body interfere? *Mirror, mirror on the wall*. Of course. I go to the hall, remove the white cloth and take down the mirror. A ghastly pale apparition meets me. *Who's the fairest of them all?* Eyes red and swollen, face white and puffy. I turn it around to spare myself the sight and bring it over to the corpse. *Put a mirror over her face and see if her breath mists it up*. Please don't let her open her eyes and stare at herself. Powdered white and translucent, she would think she has turned into a ghost. What did she always tell me about the hidden mirrors during a wake? If you see a coffin in a mirror, a new death will occur within the family. But will the glass coffin be reflected in the mirror or the mirror in the lid of the glass coffin? And if the reflection is reversed,

what are the consequences? Will the death in the family be reversed, in which case that would mean a resurrection.

Why am I doing this? I look down at her still body. Face and neck are hid by the mirror I'm holding with my trembling hands. I remove it, stare into it, breathe out and mist it up. I have to be professional. Nostrils are still. Check. Breath is absent. Check. Pulse non-existent. Check. Colour is not marble or grey anymore. Why? Has the colour returned to her cheeks? Is she having one of Po Po's spells? No, no, no. Why are my senses playing tricks on me? I of all people should know better than this. Now that the women who shaped me are all gone, I can see their superstitions and angst for what they were: a pathetic inability to accept their own mortality. I, on the other hand, spend my life ruling out life.

I sigh and shake my head, even laugh a little at my own silliness. A rumbling growling reminds me that I haven't eaten properly for the last couple of days. The basket I brought of tangerines and apples still sits on the floor. I take out an apple, polish it with my t-shirt and know I should wash it. And then I hear it, quiet, rising from the corpse like smoke; *come, eat, eat.*

\* \* \*

*"I wrote 'Glass' after my mother had just died. Trying to come to terms with death through examining its interpretation in culture and literature, I was drawn to gothic tales and the 19<sup>th</sup> century European fear of premature burial. In Malaysia, where I was living at the time, I encountered various ethnic groups and their ceremonies on a daily basis. Here I was particularly fascinated by the Baba-Nyonyas, a subgroup descending from Chinese immigrants marrying local women along the Melaka Strait. By mixing elements from both Chinese, Taoist, Malay and British cultures, they created their own special identity. These days though, their culture is slowly dying out as Malaysia becomes more globalized.*

*'Glass' depicts a woman's conflict between her own modern working life and her family's deep roots in the Baba-Nyonya culture. The story also examines the difficulties of merging Western ideas with Asian traditions and a tropical climate."*

## Fluctuations within the Project

*By Russ Bickerstaff*

*Russ Bickerstaff is a theatre critic and aspiring author living in Milwaukee, WI, USA*

It was a simple black box that might have come in the mail, even though it didn't. The first person to open the box looked at a slip of paper that was in with all of the rest of the items in the box. It gave an internet address that turned out to be instructions for assembly. That first person to open the box then started working his or her way through the instructions. Some of the way some of the instructions were worded might have been kind of convoluted, so that first person contacted another person to help, who contacted another person. Before long about a half a dozen people were working on the assembly of this thing that had come in the big black box.

What had started in one person's basement moved to that person's backyard as the assembly got larger. Then it was moved into a much bigger public space, by which time there were over 100 people working on the assembly of this thing. None of the original people involved in the project were working on it anymore, so there was no one to wonder how it was so many components and materials could fit into a single black box.

Time passed. The instructions had more or less ended. Some of the project had started giving instructions on continuation of the project. There were automatons that had been created as part of the project that had started giving orders to those who had put them together. It was subtle at first, but it wasn't long before the assemblers looked to the assembled automatons for instruction and direction in every aspect of their lives.

The project had grown to be so big that those working on it failed to realize that they were also living in it. It had grown to encompass the whole continent by the time anyone realized that it had grown to encompass any one city. The dust had barely settled on that realization before everyone everywhere on the planet was essentially working on a project that had no definite ending.

Those who had assembled the project had simply become the muscle for it without ever knowing what it was that they were building. It had started as a curiosity that had grown into a hobby, an occupation and then a way of life that had begun to enslave the subsequent generations. Those who had never known a life that wasn't a part of the global project had heard of a time when organisms weren't enslaved. They wanted a return to the freedom they never knew, but they couldn't simply demand it. Every attempt to launch a revolution had failed.

Somewhere along the line, someone had come up with the idea of packaging a few materials into a box along with a slip of paper that would direct the automation of the project to an online set of directions that would then be consulted on an entirely different project-within-the-project. The automation gradually grew to be so interested in the project that had been fabricated by the enslaved people that they had completely forgotten they had ever been in charge. All that was left was for the organic workers to maintain enough work to keep the automation busy.

\* \* \*

*“When looking at the way things have been developing, the idea that a single person could have come up with it all seems really, really absurd. Clearly if you look at the universe with open eyes you see that it was somebody's idea of a cute project that just kind of got a little out of hand. This story is a look at that idea.”*

## Two Poems

*By Colin James*

*Colin James was born in the north of England near Wales. He currently resides in Massachusetts with his wife Jane and their son Liam. He has recently returned to school to pursue a second career in Addiction Studies. He has a chapbook of poems, A Thoroughness Not Deprived Of Absurdity, from Paski's Porch Publishing.*

### **The Authoritarian's Imaginary Workload**

Pretension, conversion  
 the quoting of the unnecessary.  
 His girlfriend was worse than naive  
 she was grateful.  
 He sold her to a gang of opportunists  
 and left for a vacation in Saugall.  
 Ten years elapsed lazily  
 then the new north became provincially stable.  
 He advised, sometimes withholding favor  
 to a healthy sequence of disparities.  
 He saw her again only once in Port Sunlight,  
 followed her dressed in a suit that was sensational.  
 She walked like a ship on a table,  
 hers the most political of saviors.

### **Sexless**

The floor is giving way, Apollinaire.  
 No use in caulking themes prestigious.  
 Our aluminum chairs are restless again.  
 They could race off uncatchable,  
 clattering daredevils oblivious to danger.  
 Sleeves rolled up, tattoos exposed  
 du-rag black, half leather.  
 A glove is thrown and caught  
 might we absolve? Expect us to.

*"These poems were inspired by missed opportunities, relationships that never panned out, or even happened at all, but may have if I had behaved differently..."*

## Empty Oaks is

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