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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Archaeopteryx</i> , by Kristine Ong Muslim	1
<i>Gossamer</i> , by Ken Liu	2
<i>High Tide</i> , by Alexandra Seidel	22
<i>The Sorcerer Next Door</i> , by Therese Arkenberg	23
<i>The Fading Light of Summer</i> , by Lewis Humphries	38
<i>Homecoming</i> , by Daniel Preston	39

ARCHAEOPTERYX

By Kristine Ong Muslim

"Only a reconstruction," the curator insists.

I do not believe him.

The reptilian bird waits - the predatory

posture intact through the years.

It will raze again. It will stay low,

close to the ground where

the weak creatures scamper. The glass box

only keeps its hunger, keeps it small.

GOSSAMER

By Ken Liu

"I've never read a line of poetry that's beautiful," Peter said to me once, before I left him.

Laura thought he said it just to hurt me, which probably was true. Peter was like that. He never backed down in a fight and he gave no quarter. It was why I loved him.

I'm thinking back to the time, years ago, when Peter first stopped me in front of the library. "I disagree with you."

"That's okay," I said.

"There is an absolute standard for beauty. If you weren't so afraid of offending people you'd see it too."

I gave Laura a look. *Weirdo from another planet.*

She looked back (this was before she became blind). *He likes you.*

"Come with me to the Haidian exhibit, Emily," he said. "I'll show you why you are wrong."

We never got to the Haidian exhibit. That was the day the Gossamers landed.

~

The piece I'm supposed to review is called 'Momentum'. The attendant, a young man from the city college, lets me in. It's February in San Jose, 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

I'm inside an old warehouse, the sort of place first occupied by the garment sweatshops, then by the hardware sweatshops, then by the software sweatshops, and then acquired by the city college when the hi-tech fever died. The air conditioning is very good; you can barely hear it.

There's nothing on the concrete floor or the wooden walls. In the middle of the

warehouse they've built a square enclosure the size of an office cubicle with cinder blocks. It's dim because all the sunlight comes in from three windows along the side of the building.

The young man takes me around the enclosure, and now I see that the wall on the opposite side is made of glass. He hands me a flashlight and indicates that I should turn it on.

I move the bright circle of light around the darkness enclosed within. There are hundreds of Canadian Geese inside the enclosure, their feet glued to the floor with epoxy. When the light moves over them they flap their wings desperately and stretch out their necks, trying to lift off with the floor attached to their feet. It's a confusing boiling sea of feathers and muscle strained beyond hope of recovery. I think the noise must be intolerable, but I don't hear anything; the insulation is very good.

I turn off the flashlight in a hurry. I imagine the geese will still flap their wings and stretch their necks uselessly for a few more minutes before the dim light will sooth them into quieter, slower pain.

"Good momentum, isn't it?" says the young man.

~

When I got up Laura had already made breakfast. The kitchen was filled with smoke. Laura was a chain-smoker, which was beyond just unhealthy since she was also a dancer. First thing she did in the morning before even opening her eyes was to paw the mess on her nightstand until she found her cigarettes. She pulled hard on her cigarettes, like a condemned woman. She said that was what she felt like: condemned to lung cancer and carbon monoxide poisoning. We had a hard time finding an apartment that would let her smoke. Except for San Francisco, the whole state had been declared smoke-free for years.

She handed me the paper. "Extraterrestrials Sighted Across the World," the headline read.

"Did you get this from across the street?" Laura sometimes liked to buy the tabloids there. We'd read them after we finished the comics, or while we waited for a date to show up.

"It's the *Examiner*."

I looked again. So it was. "Oh my God."

The photographs showed indistinct silhouettes of cigar-shaped oblongs along the horizon. They had landed in small groups of three in two hundred thirty-six different locations across the world, distributed across the hemispheres, continents, urban and rural areas. Most of the landing locations were close, but not too close, to metropolitan centres.

The details were sketchy. No one had yet seen an alien. The ships were silent, immobile in the deserts, savannahs, abandoned airfields. All attempts at electronic communication had produced no results so far, but then again, it had only been less than thirty-six hours since the first landing.

Peter and I disagreed from the start about the ships. He called while Laura was doing the dishes.

"Have you seen?"

Peter and I were both second-year grad students. We were in a course on Aesthetics together, which was too pretentious for me but Peter loved it. I turned on the TV while answering him and remembered that he was supposed to take me to the Haidian exhibit.

"Never mind that. Do you want to go see the ships? They are out by the airport, so beautiful."

I told him that I thought they were rather bland and unimaginative. Functional, like a penis. No, I didn't say that.

"Emily, you need to see them up close, in the sunlight and with the open space around it. We might even catch the aliens when they leave the ships!"

It was a date.

Laura thought it was a pretty cheesy move. "He doesn't have to spend anything."

You are driving out to the airport for a first date?"

"Well, maybe I'll be able to write something up and sell it to the Sunday magazines."

"Hope you see some aliens then."

In retrospect, Laura was remarkably calm. Most people are when something happens that will change *everything*.

~

The young man takes a picture of me as I turn off the flashlight. The Polaroid fades in to show me with my mouth twisted in a grim, determined look of dull surprise, as if I were trying not to throw up. He pastes the photo into an album of photographs of other visitors before me.

"This is the other part of the exhibit."

I look through the pictures. Most people have the same look of stupid surprise. A few have expressions of outrage or horror. A few are grinning. In one, a woman is trying to shield the eyes of her daughter from the geese, unsuccessfully, so you can see the curiosity on the child's face.

"The momentum goes from the observed to the observer. It's the conservation of energy." The young man hands me a pamphlet summarizing the piece.

"When will you be done?"

"Probably in a few weeks."

He's disappointed. That seems too long. But he's deferential towards me. I have a lot of power. The Gossamers trust my judgment. I finally realise that he's not just the attendant; he's the artist.

"So, did you like it?" he can't resist asking. He has to know. He probably holds an MBA and there's a business plan behind the piece; the venture capitalists who gave the money for the geese (surely a fresh batch would be needed every few days), the warehouse, the publicity campaigns, the lunches and dinners with the editors at the

Review to get me to come out here are probably breathing down his neck for some hope of return for their investment. He has to know.

"I don't know yet."

~

We stretched our necks and stood on tiptoe, trying to look over the crowd around the airfield. A police line about a hundred meters from the airstrips stopped us. The crowd surged, held in check by that flimsy piece of plastic.

"That's a great deal of energy in reserve," Peter observed. We stood a little ways back on a small dirt mound.

The ships gave off a dark metallic blue sheen in the sun. They dwarfed the 747s beside them. There were three ships, all identical, with no external protrusions or indentations to mar the smooth cigar shape. I couldn't tell if there were any wheels or landing struts. I had the absurd wish that the ships would start rolling on their sides with the next breeze, frolicking in the sun like children in April.

"Perfect geometry," Peter said.

"Ummm."

"No one will ever write a poem with that kind of perfect geometry."

"Probably no one will," I answered, watching the ships not rolling away with the next breeze.

This was his way of courting me? I was a poet, or thought I was. I had had a few poems published in prestigious journals by then, and I was freelancing for the weekend journals to pay the bills. In the evenings I took classes that I thought would make me a better poet. I was twenty-five, what did I know?

The evening before we had argued in class about the purity of different forms of art.

"Music."

"Not pure. It's all based on the human auditory system, which is specialised for

language."

Peter believed in absolute standards of art, which he thought would enthrall an amoeba as much as a man. He also believed that no human art so far approached those standards.

"Painting."

"Not pure. It's all based on the human eye, which is specialised for frequencies and intensities useful on the savannah."

"Sculpture."

And on and on. Poetry he denounced as the most human and therefore most relative of the arts. It couldn't even be translated from one human language to another. What good was it to an amoeba?

The whole class was up in arms against him. He defended himself with a glee that bordered on insanity.

And he had asked me out. Me, a scribbler of poems.

When it happened we almost missed it. One minute there was nothing but the ships in the distance. The next the air above the ships was filled with the shimmering rainbows of flickering wings.

They were about the size of a grown person's forearm. The bodies were divided into four segments; the second and third segments each had a pair of wings. It wasn't obvious which end was the head at first because as they flew, the bodies slowly rotated, parallel to the ground. They resembled helicopters with two rotors. Later on that impression would turn out to be more accurate than I had thought. They flew by rotating their four wings overhead, much as you and I would rotate our arms or legs to tread water. Like bumblebees, you wouldn't think they could fly, with their bulbous bodies. At the same time, they gave the impression of floating more than flying; graceful, like blimps.

The crowd was silent as they flew closer. There were darker patches at the extremes of the two terminal segments that were probably sensing organs. They hovered close overhead. Small, centipede-like legs, the only obviously biological parts

of their anatomy, rhythmically moved down their bodies, beating the air. They were so light.

The news crews were running around like crazy, trying to get a good shot. Because we were on a mound and set back from the crowd, a reporter rushed in with her mike.

"What do you think?"

Peter didn't say anything. He was too absorbed.

"Gossamers," I said. It was the first thing that came into my mind. *For only Gossamer, my Gown-My Tippet-only Tulle-*

Peter gave me a startled look. "No! That's such a terracentric thing to say!"

"At least it isn't anthropomorphic."

~

I take the subway from the airport back to the commuter parking lot where I left my car. I like taking the subway because of the stations. When I was an undergraduate here with Laura I sometimes managed to convince her to come with me on one of those "muse-hunting trips." We would take the subway from one end of the Green line to the other end of the Red line and then back to the other end of the Orange line. The stations had such evocative names - Orient Heights, Alewife, Prudential, Symphony, Bowdoin - which I thought would inspire me to write good poetry. (Laura said it was the only way she would ever get to see the rest of Boston, from underground.) And the artwork. Every station had its own theme, executed down to the last tile on the wall. Some were obvious, like the photographs of ocean life at Aquarium and the black-and-white photographs of the school's history at MIT. Others were more fanciful. There were three-metre chimes that you could operate with an oversized handle on the wall while you waited for your train. One station had a seemingly interminable escalator on which, if you were going up, you would see clouds painted on a blue sky on the hanging vertical panels that formed the ceiling, but if you were going down, you would

see a series of trains puffing steam painted on the other side. My favourite was the large bronze hand that gave leaving trains a blessing, the middle and index fingers crossed over the tunnel. Once we spent a whole afternoon looking over every tile outside one station, on which children had painted scenes of what they liked about life, and copied down those that struck us.

When we moved to California, that was the one thing I missed the most about the East, the subway stations. There is no real underground public transportation in California, the legacy of earthquakes and cars.

Years later, when I told Peter about the subway stations, I tried to make a point. Those stations to me were the height of art, better even than the Mona Lisa or *Pericles*. They had no institutional authority behind them, no volumes of criticism, no books of reproductions, no glass cases and armed guards. A few crazy college sophomores can come by and declare: that's art.

"That's not art, that's just decoration," Peter said.

"That's just semantics."

"No Gossamer would ever think so."

"Not until I review them." Resentment flickered between us. He was already jealous then, I think, of the power that I didn't ask for.

We argued; then we made love. Then we got coffee. I remember liking the way the cup was shaped, with its oversized handles and the picture of cows grazing on the side. We chatted quietly and civilly about the possibility for me to work from home so he could avoid the publicity that came with my public interpretations. We sat across the table from each other, avoiding silence.

Back in my house now, I take a moment to write down my impressions of 'Momentum'. I always write down what I remember about a piece only after I've gotten back from the airport. It allows time to filter away the inessential and leave behind those impressions that are strongest and most cohesive.

Feathers, pain, yearning, primitiveness, blood, concentration camp, objectification, death to bourgeois values, feathers, how will they clean it up, darkness, blindness, light, palpitations of

the heart, feathers, heat, closeness of bodies, death, sound and fury, feathers.

They will like it because of the feathers, I think. The light drifting snow of feathers in that souvenir glass box, the energy pent-up and released into useless blasts of air to keep the feathers floating, calmness above the fury below, these are the kind of things the Gossamers appreciate. The young man and his investors will be the next big thing and spawn thousands of imitators. If I were a goose, I'd go to another planet.

~

Peter thought we got picked because he made calls every hour to the phone number of the Committee, getting to know the receptionist, then Dr. Lester, then the Coordinator. He was good at that sort of thing. It no doubt helped with his election campaign later. I thought it was luck.

In any case Lester, the chief scientific advisor for the contact team, was in our apartment on the Sunday a month later. He was appalled by Laura's cigarettes and ashtrays, refused my offer of coffee, and drove Peter and me downtown to the Courthouse.

"So, Emily," he said to me across the metallic surface of the table in an interrogation room, "what do you do?"

"I'm a writer."

"A poet," Peter added.

"Can you see how you can be relevant to what I'm trying to do?"

I told him I couldn't, not unless the Gossamers expressed interest in poetry.

"Gossamers." He winced. That's the sort of thing he disliked. Playful names that were sentimental, had no scientific merit or the ring of hard, useful data. That sort of thing removed the wonder of the truly alien for an ignorant populace, Peter would say. I thought it made them understandable, familiar enough to be grasped and reasoned about. *They are so fragile.* In any case the press liked the name, and it had stuck.

"We've had very little luck with communication."

That much was true. Four weeks, and the contact team had nothing to show on the fronts of mathematics, physics, astronomy, chemistry. Reels of data had been collected on the audio and visual output of the Gossamers and hundreds of linguists had pored over them with no results. The Gossamers did not dance like the bees or sing like the crickets. They appeared to understand nothing that we had said or shown.

"We want to try something unusual, outside the first-contact protocols." I wasn't aware there were any first-contact protocols, but I supposed that was the sort of thing you thought up when the public had watched enough *X-Files* and expected you to have one. "We are falling back on art."

"You want me to recite *Ariel* to them?" Ridiculous.

"Maybe." He shrugged. "If that's what it takes. Sing, dance, finger-paint. You pretty much have free rein to try whatever you want, as long as you manage to elicit some kind of communication from them. Back-and-forth, call-and-response, that sort of thing. We need to know that they actually built those ships and aren't just giant parasite wasps drifting through space after all the sailors on the ships died of scurvy. Otherwise we are just wasting time. And since you named them," he shook his head again, "it's also good PR either way."

I imagined the *Pinta* making landfall in the Bahamas, Christopher and all his crew dead, the rats rushing onshore to the astonished stares of the natives. It wasn't as comical as I would have liked.

Peter and I were driven to the airport, which by now was completely sealed off with barricades, fences, and lines of soldiers. A few die-hard conspiracy theory nuts carried signs and shouted at the soldiers. Next to the oblong Gossamer ships a field of olive tents, like mushrooms after a night's rain, flapped in the wind.

We walked into the tent, which was filled with fluorescent lights and bulky electronic equipment set on flimsy foldout tables. Cables ran everywhere. Two Gossamers hovered in a corner, surrounded by cameras and microphones and linguists idly sitting by with blank notebooks.

Lester came into the tent after us, carrying a box of magic markers, origami paper,

glue sticks, finger-paint, chalk. "They are my daughter's," he said as he handed the box to me.

Peter was more of the visual artist than I (his focus was on sculpture), so I was surprised when he didn't go for anything in the box but took out a piccolo and went up to the Gossamers. I always thought a piccolo made a man look silly.

"We've tried everything from Bach to the Beatles, nothing elicits a response," one of the scientists said to him.

Peter ignored him and put the piccolo to his lips and began playing. I imagined it was some atonal piece from the late twentieth century, probably even something he wrote in college to prove his theories. I could make no melody, harmony, rhythm out of it. I wasn't even sure if there were any notes.

The two Gossamers hovered closer to Peter. The larger one, whom I had decided to call Schoenberg because one of its end segments was slightly larger than the other, making it look vaguely like a violin case, seemed to focus all the sensory organs at the larger end at Peter's face and hovered barely inches away from his nose. The other one, who had slight protuberances at both sensor ends that resembled the high noses of the German nobility, I decided to call Webern.

The scientists and linguists and Lester were excited. Evidently this was more reaction than they'd ever gotten. The cameras whirred and captured everything.

Peter stopped playing. Schoenberg and Webern hovered further back and began beating their wings faster. A high-pitched whine replaced the low-frequency buzz that was the usual background noise to their flight. The whine modulated itself in pitch, and could be vaguely discerned as a repetition of what Peter had played. Everyone stood up in the tent, fascinated by the buzzing made by these giant insects. The total effect was far from pastoral, however, even though Dickinson thought that *to make a Prairie it takes a Clover and one Bee*.

"What was that piece?" Lester wanted to know.

Peter shrugged. "I don't know how to play the piccolo." He handed the piccolo to me.

What the hell. I took the piccolo and, because I didn't know what else to do, waved it around like a conductor's baton, vaguely in synch with the whining of the Gossamers. I self-consciously blushed, feeling even more ridiculous than Peter had looked.

The Gossamers began to fly around, describing the same arcs in the air as my baton. Their humming clarified and got louder. Schoenberg and Webern replayed Peter's random improvisation the whole afternoon. It was like listening to an enthusiastic child with no musical talent practising the piano, doggedly repeating some random sequence of keys exactly over and over. No further attempts that afternoon produced any response. We could not get them to stop playing Peter's piece, even when I stopped waving the piccolo. When Peter and I got ready to go home that night, Lester informed us that reports were coming in from around the world indicating that Gossamers all over the globe have begun to reproduce Peter's music. We couldn't go home any more, "for security reasons."

I told Peter, before we went to our respective tents, "I hope they stop buzzing like that tomorrow. It will drive me nuts."

"Beethoven isn't so universal, is he?" He had a large grin on his face.

"Neither is your randomness." *Or mine.*

"You'll come to like it. You'll see."

~

At the terminal I duly compose my review for 'Momentum', frustrated, as always, by the absurdity of pretending to understand what I don't really understand and the suspicion that I will again, despite my ignorance, be successful.

In ten years we have not made a single advance in communicating with the Gossamers qualitatively beyond the miracle that Peter and I created that day in the tent out on the airport. Their ships are hermetically sealed mysteries to us, and we dare not approach them until we can communicate with them meaningfully. The Gossamers live inside and about the ships, subsisting somehow with no visible intake of food, baffling

all the biologists in the world. They won't leave the vicinities of the ships either, so we go to them, building elaborate networks of terminals and access chambers so we can bring our offerings to them, hoping for another sign, a breakthrough.

Once in a while a Gossamer will still hum Peter's song. The noise is produced by short bursts of air from the ends of the Gossamers' bodies causing the bristles near the terminal orifices to vibrate. It's not exactly humming, but I don't know what else to call it. Peter's random sequence has a title now: "Miracle," of course. The London Symphony has made a recording of it. The Gossamers have also taken a fancy to a few other selected pieces of our new artistic endeavours. The competition to present a piece to the Gossamers is intense.

I wish we still made music like we used to, even the sort of thing I had scorned in college, the nubile teenage girls singing lyrics they barely understood written by overweight white men older than their fathers. I could at least dance to it, and scan the mechanical meters. Peter was partly right; people have learned to like the kind of music the Gossamers liked. The radio stations don't play anything else and people have learnt to dance to it. "It's universal," the music critics say.

I place my hands in the metallic mesh gloves next to the terminal; a faint red glow indicates that the machine is ready. The holographic projectors located around the world will bring my performance to the Gossamers in each location in real-time. The projection fields will surround the ships with their uncommunicative inhabitants. Thousands of cameras and people are watching my performance over the network, waiting to see if this will be a favourable or unfavourable review.

I have no methodology, despite all the interviews I've given to indicate otherwise. Lying is also part of a poet's art. Reviewing a piece for the Gossamers is a little like translating a poem, I never know how to start until I start.

So I wave my hands, watching as the virtual hands on the display mimic my movements. To represent the geese I fill the projection field with white triangles. A gentle swipe and the white triangles begin to circulate around the Gossamers and their ships. I turn my head to look at the other displays, showing what the Gossamers are

experiencing from a few of the locations. The white triangles are gliding through them and their ships. Most of the Gossamers are motionless as the ghostly white images pass through them. I lower the lighting level so the entire projection field is gradually enveloped in purple darkness. I turn on the sound synthesisers so that the flapping of wings fills the air. From my tinny speakers they sound less like the wings of birds than the wings of bees. *Per fare un prato occorrono un trifoglio ed un'ape*. I recall my attempts at rendering Dickinson into Italian.

"That's good momentum," I whisper to myself.

Then suddenly I change the whole scene. I force all the white triangles to the floor and turn up the volume on the flapping sound of the wings. I bathe the projection field with pure white brilliance, and as the human audience members looking in on the performance are robbing their eyes the white triangles turn into real geese, with feathers and death in the air above them. I tell the cameras focused on the human audience to freeze and compose all the faces into one collage. I project the collage right away to the holographic field, in the midst of the Gossamers. The human faces, contorted in glee and boredom punctuated by sadistic pleasure, lack shame.

I look at the other monitors, showing the reactions of the Gossamers. Nothing, they seem to have completely ignored the entire performance. The review is a failure.

I sigh with relief, for the geese, and with sorrow, for the young entrepreneurial artist, who'll have to find another idea. But then the computer alerts me to the screen showing the reaction of the Gossamers outside of New York City.

One Gossamer comes into view. It has brought several companions. They fly around their ship lazily, in circles. Suddenly they land, clutching onto the ground with their tiny legs, and begin to beat their wings furiously.

Within moments my terminal is inundated with congratulations for discovering yet another masterpiece of universal aesthetics. The young artist in San Jose is now a celebrity. I think tomorrow we'll find that the stocks for the geese farming industry will have risen more in a single night than they have for the previous fifty years.

I want to cry, so I leave the room.

~

I told Laura about Peter's and my adventure when I got back two weeks later. We had tried singing and painting, dancing and reciting, and acted like wild Bacchanalia participants. None of our outrageous antics had worked.

"Did you know that I thought I would be an archaeologist when I was in high school?" She leaned back in her wicker chair, her dancer's legs bopping in the air.

"No, you never told me that."

"There was a theory, now discredited, that the Mayans fell because they tried to please the gods with everything they did, their art, government, sacrifices, dances, rituals. They could never figure out what the gods wanted though, so they went to more and more elaborate constructions, bigger temples, bloodier sacrifices, more grotesque body modifications, until they spent all their energy trying to please the unfathomable gods and collapsed overnight. You must try harder if you want to please the Gossamers."

Laura could keep a straight face when she said things like that. I could never tell if she was serious.

"You and Peter are just the beginning."

We giggled, while Dr. Lester announced to the world what Peter and I had done.

~

On my bottom shelf is a box of juvenilia, poems and stories written before I went to college. On the shelf in the middle is my thesis: a book of poems, one for each of the fifty states I travelled to the summer between my Junior and Senior years. On the top shelf is half a notebook of just-begun scribbles dated after graduation. Tautological specimens of the faux-creative mind, Peter would have called them.

The *Review* hired me ostensibly to review art for their readers, but really because

of my proven record of interpreting humanity to the Gossamers (if you can call a sample of one a record). I wrote about Picasso and Chagall, Schoenberg and Webern, Peter and me. I was quoted. I was invited to do more reviews, and interpret more art for the Gossamers. I was quoted. I wrote about what I thought the Gossamers responded to, and theorized about their aesthetic sense. I was quoted. I fretted, I worried, I rode on more aeroplanes and received more sophisticated equipment to convey my impressions of each piece to the Gossamers. I was quoted. I lectured, I taught, I defended, I published textbooks of art theory. I was quoted.

The momentum built until I believed in it. I taught others what I thought was the theory behind the Gossamers' artistic sense. There are other reviewers that the Gossamers seem to like, but we are a select club, and we guard our membership jealously.

I try to explain to myself, daily, why the Gossamers would accept Li Bai and reject Dante, or why they would accept dying geese, but not a burning woman. The momentum built, *but when I cannot make the Force / Nor mould it into word.*

~

It's night by the time I wake up. My apartment is dark and quiet.

Amherst at night is the same as it has always been since that other Emily, whom I admire so much, had lived here, or so I'd like to think. The Five Colleges still generate the same seasonal and yearly migration patterns. And people still mind their own business.

I walk into the living room on my way to the kitchen to get a glass of water. A stray cat meows from the darkness, startling me. As it jumps out the window I notice that it had been playing with my terminal, which I had left on.

The computer alerts me to the Gossamers on one of the monitors. They are moving back and forth rhythmically, swaying in the glow of the holographic light around them. I am confused.

The editor at the *Review* has a high-priority message waiting for me. I open it before all the thousands of other messages waiting for me in my inbox. It congratulates me on discovering yet another piece of great art but is slightly peeved that I had done it without consulting him initially. He wants to know the artist's name.

I'm confused. Is he talking about the geese? I had been sent there at his request. And the name of the young artist in San Jose is well known by now.

I call up the logs and have the computer replay the last holographic performance it had projected.

The field fills with neutral, grey darkness, and the rhythmic sweeping back-and-forth of a single spot of light, looking for all the world like a ball of yarn being batted between the paws of a cat.

Then I remember the stray cat that had been playing with my terminal, and my heart skips a beat. The cat must have been fascinated by that spot of light and had been playing with it. The Gossamers had liked what the cat did enough to have copied it.

All the careful structure of theory and practices that I had built up over the years in my capacity as interpreter of the arts for the Gossamers is falling apart around me like a house of cards. The Gossamers had responded to a cat randomly chasing after a spot of light.

~

When I finished packing my things, Laura and I took off our shoes and rolled up the carpet (which was mine) in the living room. We mopped the floor until it was shiny and smooth, like ice. Laura wanted to play a game. She told me to stand with my back to the east wall while she stood opposite at the west wall.

"Run to me, gradually increase your speed until you are running as fast as you can when you run into me. Don't worry, I won't let you crash into the wall."

Laura was like that, crazier than a cat on a leash, as my father would say. I was already beginning to miss her. I crashed into her with a bone-jarring snap. We

collapsed onto the floor, breathless.

"Do you know what shape you just made?" she asked when we sat up.

"A human pretzel."

"No, I mean when you were running towards me."

I told her that I didn't know.

"You made a logarithmic curve, a very small piece of a very long curve. Uniform linear acceleration and the constant rotation of the earth bent your straight line of motion into a spiral, look,"

She drew a curve with the tip of her left foot on the floor. It's like the curve of a snail shell, and I said so.

"Yes." She looked at me. "It's also the path a moth makes as it flies into a flame."

Then Peter came to pick me up. We were going to get married, in Las Vegas, which was his concession to my conventional sensibilities.

By then "Miracle" was already beginning to be played on the air. Peter kept jumping from station to station the whole way, listening to that composition of his that he thought had turned two thousand years of music theory on its head. I wasn't going to correct him. He deserved a few days of triumph, I thought.

We climbed over the last hill, and the lights of Las Vegas spread out in the desert below us. The new mechanical, neon Gossamers, of all sizes, shapes, and colours, were everywhere in the city, covering all the buildings, fluttering their primary-coloured wings at us. Peter stepped on the accelerator as we plunged toward the lights. I felt like shouting, *An Hour to rear supreme / His Continents of Light*.

I thought then, somewhat irrelevantly, that Laura was wrong. What I had made wasn't a perfect logarithmic spiral after all, since gravity had kept my feet on the ground and bent my path into a circle. Laughing, I told Peter what I was thinking.

"Laura was never very good at math," I said.

It was pretty much over by the time they let me see her. Laura had recovered enough to sit up in her bed, sipping soup. She had lost all her hair and much of the skin over her face in the fire, so her head was wrapped up, like a mummy, with an opening for the mouth.

I sat down. "Hey."

"I fucked up the math."

She had miscalculated the length of her cord so that she had swung right into the fire instead of just outside of it. She had intended to swing around and around the fire, describing ever-closer arcs until she could cut herself loose and dance gracefully into the lake on the other side of the fire.

"How was the review?"

The Gossamers had not responded to it, whether because of my distracted translation or because they simply had no interest in her piece. I told her it went fine.

"You're lying." She turned her face towards mine. "Remember that story about the Mayans I told you about? I always thought about how I would have felt if I had lived in those times, trying my hardest to please the unknown and arbitrary gods."

I waited.

"I think I know now how I would have felt. I would have felt free, utterly free."

Afterwards Laura tried to teach dance. She died a few years later when she fell from her sixtieth-floor window. I pictured her falling as the tangent momentum of earth's rotation and the acceleration of gravity pulled her towards the burning centre of the earth, falling faster and faster, describing the beginning of the opposite of a logarithmic spiral. I had a hard time imagining that curve. I was never any good at math either.

~

It's not good to find out that you've been so good at lying that you've managed to deceive yourself.

I think of Peter, with his piccolo, and how he reviled my 'translations'; how he stopped believing that the Gossamers are intelligent, and turned to giving impassioned speeches decrying the loss of art and culture; how he tried to get into politics, surely the most human of the Arts. I think of myself, with my reams of translations and interpretations, my reputation built on them. I haven't written a poem in years. I wish I had painted even a single one of those tiles in the subway station. And I remember that day, when Peter and I realised that we were like two beetles at the opposite corners of a room, crawling toward each other in a spiral yet somehow never getting any closer, until we ended where the other had started.

On the display, the Gossamers are still swaying back and forth, like that imaginary mouse chased by the cat. In my mind, I see the rats from Columbus's ship on the shore of the New World, expressing wonder and boredom at everything, at nothing. The natives rush over, wondering at this new race of gods. For the Gossamers, how is art distinguished from noise? *And they will differ - if they do - / As Syllable from Sound -.*

The momentum is gone. I turn off the terminal. I feel free, free enough to write a poem.

[Author's note: All quotations from Emily Dickinson are taken from her *Collected Poems*]

HIGH TIDE

By Alexandra Seidel

The other day
my boss told me he'd have to let me go.
Stunning shock and initial dejection
faded like a drop of blood in the ocean
and were replaced by the sharp pain of inadequacy
when he explained
they had replaced me with a seal. The seal,
my boss continued, balances a rubber ball on his nose,
looks cool while doing it, has amiable huge brown eyes
and always looks glossy and competent,
which I do not, he finished after a significant pause.

I am now unemployed and watch my former colleagues
through my former office window
applauding the ball-balancing seal; it really looks
like some party in there. With all this new-found time
on my un-seal-like hands, I have taken to practising
how to balance a coffee mug on my nose. I know
I'd rather drink the coffee and it shows
and so instead of looking cool
the person reflected in my wall length mirror
looks old, confused and somewhat crazy
at best a stranded jellyfish.

THE SORCERER NEXT DOOR

By Therese Arkenberg

He didn't look like a wizard.

I knew he was, of course. I couldn't forget. My mother attended every single meeting, every protest at the town hall, signed every petition circulating the neighborhood to keep him out of this garden in this house next door to ours, all in vain for whatever bureaucratic reason. But he didn't look the part.

He was good-looking, for one thing. He had a nice face, shaggy blond hair, delicate hands sticking from dark sweater sleeves despite the heat – his knuckles were turning red with sunburn. He wielded the garden trowel carefully, as if afraid of hurting the soil.

He looked young, maybe early twenties, maybe even younger – only a few years older than me. Far too young for someone who had served his sentence. Thirty years for sorcery, cut to twenty for good behaviour. He had to be almost fifty.

So my first experience with magic was when I met someone not looking magical at all.

I started a little at the realisation, and he must have either heard my muffled hiss of surprise or seen my jump from the corner of his eye, because he spun around as if expecting to find someone behind him a lot scarier than a sixteen year old girl.

"Hey," I said, as casually as if I hadn't just been caught watching him. I never thought I could be so brassy with a magician – if Mom knew, she'd rip her hair out – but then, I never expected a magician to seem afraid of me.

But the fear vanished from his expression as if it had never been and his lips quirked in a small smile as he said, "Hello ... neighbour."

I had never seen anyone speak while smiling before, without changing the curve of the lips, or the brightness in the eyes. I looked away – it was hard to meet his gaze, so

wide and blue and obviously trying to be friendly – and saw the leafy plants in their cartons that sat waiting for transplanting.

“Anise, chamomile, comfrey, bay, and dill,” he said. “I’m thinking of making tea or a chicken rub with them, not potions.”

My face heated. “You just *talk* about it like that?”

“Why not?” he said mildly. “You know what I am – or do you stare at all your new neighbours like this?”

I realised then that whatever he was afraid of, it wasn’t me. I was just a kid, and though he might look like the same, he was a felon.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was curious.”

“So.” He tilted his head like a bird. “Is it your mom you wanted to annoy by coming here, or your dad, or both?”

He might look young, but it was obvious he wasn’t. “My dad’s deployed overseas, and my mom would pitch a fit if she knew I was over here but that’s not why I came. I was curious.”

“About what?”

I shrugged, and every drop of blood in my body rushed to my face when I realised what I’d said. It’s the dirty secret of the world, that all of us want to know more about magic from the moment we first learn about it, but it’s obscene to admit it.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I—I really shouldn’t have come here. I’m so sorry –”

“Go if you want,” he said, still so mildly. “But you don’t have to. I’m not offended.”

How could he not be? In saying what I did, I had offended myself.

“I didn’t want to bring up anything you’d rather not talk about...”

“There is nothing I would rather talk about.” His mouth twisted, as if it hadn’t liked forming the words. “But I suppose it’s impolite to say that. Now let me apologise for offending *you*. And then let’s put all of that aside. What did you want to know?”

“I guess I wanted to know what you’d be like,” I said. “I mean, you are living next door to me, and I’ve heard a lot about you but it’s all seemed ... really one-sided.”

“You thought so, too?” And his mouth untwisted, straightening into a smile. Not a happy one, but a good one nevertheless. I couldn’t imagine Mom really disapproving of something with a smile like that.

Or maybe I could, and I just didn’t care.

“For one thing,” I said, “how could a wizard expect to keep undercover if he stays as young as you have?”

“Ah,” he said, and there was enough pain in that syllable that I knew he hadn’t meant to let me hear it, but then he made it part of his answer. “Ah, but I didn’t cast the youth spell until after I was ... found out.”

“Oh.” And there were a hundred more things I wanted to know, all brought up with that one sentence, but I didn’t have the heart to ask about any of them.

“Any other questions?”

With his smile, he looked eager. He probably knew they were there, in my skull, trying to claw their way out ... as desperate to be asked as he was to answer them. Desperate. Maybe just to talk.

I remembered where he had been – and though he didn’t look it, he had been there longer than I was alive. I remembered hearing the hierarchy inside prisons, and that sorcerers were flat at the bottom of it.

“Yeah. I was wondering if maybe you wanted help planting ingredients for your chicken rub?”

He looked down at the garden earth between his fingers and I heard a sound from him, a sigh like a sob. Intimate and embarrassing, it betrayed the depth of his relief, and the despair that went before it.

“Yes. I want that ... Thank you.”

“Dad used to plant tomatoes,” I found myself telling him. “Grew them in a pot on our porch. I helped him pick them ... Other than that, I haven’t done much gardening.”

“I haven’t in a while,” he said. “Here ... tip it out of the carton ... Careful, keep the soil around the roots...”

What felt like a short while later, I caught sight of the numbers on my watch.

“I have to go,” I said, standing. “Mom’ll be home in twenty minutes. And Ms Gillian—on the other side of our lawn—usually beats her by five minutes...” And might look out her back window and see.

He nodded, not looking at me. “Thank you, Miss—?”

“Li...” I stopped, swallowing the rest of my name.

He looked up. “I’m sorry? I didn’t catch that.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Oh.” He rubbed dirt from his hands. “I’ll tell you mine.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Listen. If we exchange names, you’ll have just as much power over me knowing mine as I will over you knowing yours.”

“How’s that.”

“*Listen*. People call me a sorcerer, a wizard, a magician.” He said the filthy words woodenly. “It’s convenient. But it’s not entirely true. It makes it sound like I’m different—like there’s *my* kind, the magicians, and *your* kind, decent people. But I used to be like you—it was a choice, to cast that first spell, and to keep casting every one thereafter. You’re just as capable of working magic as I am ... whoever you are.”

I backed away, until my heels struck the reassuring hardness of the sidewalk.

“My name is Alasdair,” he said.

“I’m Lisa,” I said. “And you have the advantage of me, Alasdair, because I don’t know what kind of spells you can work with a name. I’m *not* a sorcerer.”

~

When I got home from school, I had almost two hours before Mom returned from work. Maybe a little longer if there was traffic, but I preferred playing it safe. The good news was that Mom returned relatively early for the working population of our street, except sometimes Ms Gillian, and that population was extensive, so I knew for a fact that Alasdair and I were the only people home on our street for at least a good hour and

a half a day.

That was why Mom campaigned so heavily to keep him away.

I wondered if he was looking for a job. It couldn't be easy, with his record.

Yes, I was pitying him. It was pity – for that scared look in his eyes, for that eagerness to be liked in his smile – more than anything that brought me back.

He wasn't in the garden. So I had to stride up the gravel walk, ring the doorbell, then knock when time passed and it became apparent that no one had heard. I knew I was committing myself – but I wasn't sure to what. Him and his lot, I guessed – it sounded drastic.

The door swung open and Alasdair and I stared at each other for a while.

"So," he said, "you came back."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "I'm still curious. And –" I added with the feeling of a plunge into cold water – "I'm lonely, too."

He looked surprised.

"So..." I shifted from foot to foot. "Do I have to do anything special for you to let me in?"

"No." He smiled and said softly, "the myth says it's *magicians* who have to be invited in. Obviously, it isn't true." His eyes danced up and down the street – empty, except for us.

"There's something you should know," he said. "It's only fair to warn you."

I shrugged. "Fire away."

"I'm not ... a *reformed* magician. I haven't repented ... changed my ways. Right now, I haven't worked magic in twenty years, not since my youth spell..." A hand went to his unlined cheek and then fell away. "I did it because I always wanted to, and after I was caught I could finally get away with something so obvious. Well, not get away, but there was nothing more they could do to me... I knew the next years would be hard – I didn't know how hard – but I didn't want any mark of them on me."

"I..."

"Excuse me. Please come in – but first, you do realize what I'm saying, don't you? I'm not sorry."

"I understand."

"They say it's hard to reform sorcerers. That's why we're so dangerous." He looked away, a dusting of pink over the skin below his eyes. "I'll probably do it again."

"Magic?" I whispered.

"Yes."

I took in a deep breath. "All right."

He stood aside from the door. I went in.

It was a very bare house. An unsteady desk balanced a small, inexpensive-looking desktop computer. A table stood in the dinette, its six chairs scattered around the house, including before the desk in its corner of the living room. The only other furnishings were a sofa and armchair, both understuffed, and a stained coffee table spread with a deck of cards.

"You play?" I asked.

"Solitaire. And ... there are a few other things..."

"Fortune telling?" I had never said the word aloud before. I blushed.

"Yes. I've been telling my own, mostly – there's nobody else's to do." He raised his hand before I could speak. "Don't volunteer. And don't ask what I've seen. Honestly, it's not very interesting."

So we sat and played hearts, the only game I knew well enough to keep up for an hour. It relieved the loneliness, which I think was what both of us wanted. The novelty of playing cards with a sorcerer didn't affect me, mostly because I didn't think about it after the first few minutes. I was too busy being defeated by Alasdair – who wasn't competitive, just an excellent player, or perhaps lucky.

After my third straight loss, I looked at my watch. "I have to go – Mom's home soon."

"All right ... Thank you." As I stood, he offered me his hand. I shook it. It wasn't

as awkward as it might have been.

“Why didn’t you want me to volunteer to have my fortune read?” I asked at the door.

He shrugged. “Working magic for other people ... anyone besides myself ... complicates things. It’s what landed me in prison.”

“Oh.”

“It was a sting.” He shrugged again, then held the door open for me. “See you again sometime?” His tone was too carefully neutral.

I smiled. “Of course.”

~

Magic can only be worked on living things, not objects, and only on people when the magician knows their names. That’s why Alasdair couldn’t do anything about the kids who threw eggs at his house, and why he had to clean the egg off by hand. Alone. I couldn’t help until after school.

He didn’t talk about magic often, but when he did he told me a lot. For example, he knew the original versions of several children’s stories – I’ve never been able to look at Cinderella the same way since. He told me *how* to tell fortunes with a deck of cards, but he never told any – mine or his. He didn’t cast any spells in front of me, but sometimes I’d come in and see black or purple candles burning in odd corners, and the air around them was thick with a strange smell.

He finally got a job telecommuting, customer service for a firm that didn’t care about criminal backgrounds. The neighbourhood got used to him – it helped that he didn’t go out a lot, except to work in the garden – and though they still crossed the street to pass by his house, they stopped throwing eggs.

My mom printed and distributed pamphlets with his face on them.

How can you Trust somebody who doesn't follow Natural Laws?

WHO could be under his Influence? WHO KNOWS?

Keep Your NAME to Yourself.

Don't let Unnatural Criminals think they're Welcome.

I stayed home on weekends. For all anybody could see, Alasdair and I didn't know each other, and I avoided him as much as anybody.

~

"Does your father know about me?" Alasdair asked.

I drew another card. "That you served twenty years for sorcery and now you live right next door and God, isn't it a disgrace? We don't know but we'll wake up with donkeys' heads one morning—"

"Reminds me of a lost Shakespearian play," he murmured. "I learned about it from my lawyer while we were negotiating a plea bargain. Talkative woman, you'd think she really got into the stuff ... Never mind. I take it he's hearing everything from your mother."

"Yeah." I sighed. "Honestly, I think it's pretty tough for him. He knows we're in danger—at least, he thinks we are—and there's nothing he can do about it."

He looked at me as if I had confessed something. "It's hard, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Where is he stationed?"

"Some town in the hills – I never could pronounce the name – but far from any of the hotspots."

"You keep telling yourself that, and it feels like it's helping. Because really, you're helpless ... you know he's in danger and there's nothing *you* can do about it."

I sipped chamomile tea while trying to think of an answer. It was good tea—flowers and leaves picked from Alasdair's garden and dried in a sunny window. Not a potion, but it was strongly relaxing. "Did you ever know someone in the military?"

"Not closely. But you gave away a lot in your voice, and ... I know what pain like that feels like."

“You do?”

“It’s hard to stop thinking about him, isn’t it?”

“Always. I try to think of other stuff *consciously*, I do, and I manage...but whenever things get quiet, or I’m alone ... it’s cold and it feels like something’s eating me from the inside out, alive.”

“And there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

“I pray for him. It makes me feel ... a little better.”

“I don’t pray.” He swallowed. “So there was nothing I could do ... nothing ... until I felt ready to do anything, anything at all, to help him.”

“Who was he?” I asked.

“Not family. Just a friend. A close friend.” His fingers knotted together. “I’ve never had many close friends, so the ones I do have are very ... close to me.”

“Important enough to do something for them that ... maybe you shouldn’t?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d they find you?” I asked. It was an intrusive question, but telling me how I felt about my dad was pretty intrusive, too.

“The way you find any magician. Things become unnatural. My friend had cancer—lymph nodes, very, very bad—but he recovered. Medical miracle, not so bad. But my other friends ... they became suspiciously healthy, too. Like when a cold’s going around, and a health spell means you don’t even sniffle. But what got me was my garden.” He rubbed his forehead, looked away. “The plants growing there were ... strange. You can only work magic on people, but that doesn’t mean it won’t affect other things. It *is* unnatural.”

“I guess.”

“I knew it. I knew I was doing something dangerous. The thing is, casting spells on people is dangerous for *them*, too. You’re doing something unnatural to them, and in my case, it was without their permission. Something could have gone wrong—after all, when you remove cancer from someone’s lymph nodes, you’re unweaving their reality. The, hopefully, you can put it back together again.”

It was always like this when he talked about magic – coming out in a painful rush. It had happened when he told me about the sting where he was caught, when someone called him using a friend’s name and begging him to come over with the equipment for a prediction spell, because they’d just done something *really* chancy and had to prepare for the worst. The one taking chances hadn’t been the investigator on the other side of the phone, and the worst was something Alasdair had never dared prepare for.

“At first, I tried making excuses. I’m like everybody else – I *knew* magic was wrong, I read the papers, heard about the protests; I’d thrown eggs at convicted wizards’ houses myself. I tried to justify it – I was saving a man’s life, surely that was worth it. And then latter, I didn’t bother with justifications. Magic, when you get used to working it, feeling the power of it ... is kind of fun.”

I swallowed my reply. The thing was, I could imagine what he was saying, and it made sense. I could easily understand how manipulating reality could be heady. I understood how you would want to excuse it.

“I’m sorry.” He drew a shaky breath. “You didn’t need to know all that.”

“But Alasdair – it worked, right? The people you tried to heal were healed? And nothing went ... wrong?”

“No. I’m good at what I do.” He said it with quiet disgust.

I touched his hand. It was a liberty I had never taken before; I saw him almost pull back. “Help Dad.”

“*What?*”

“Help him. Cast a health spell or a protective spell or something – please. You can work magic – *good* magic – I mean ... You said you were going to do it again. Why not this?”

“You want me to –”

“I want Dad to be safe. You can do it, can’t you?”

“In a way.”

“Then do it. Please.” I squeezed his hand.

Slowly, he squeezed it back. “You want this? After hearing all that?”

“Yes.” Maybe it meant I was depraved, immoral, even insane. Maybe I had just, like Alasdair, justified it.

Maybe asking was my way of telling Alasdair I accepted him, all of him, even that part he didn’t seem to accept himself.

“Then I will. Tomorrow?”

“Do it today. I don’t want to wait.” Now that it was possible, I didn’t want another day to go by without Dad being protected. That, and I wasn’t sure Alasdair or I would have the courage tomorrow.

“All right.” He rose and went into the kitchen. It seemed so simple. He returned moments later with a purple candle and matches.

“The flame helps me concentrate, but it’s not essential,” he said as he lit it. “What I do need is his name.”

“Dad’s? Jonathan.”

“Is that what he answers to?”

“Jon.”

“All right.” He looked into the flame for a long time. I sat on the other side of the candle, waiting, feeling oddly as if I were looking into a window from *outside* wherever he was. The room was very quiet. The cool scent of the chamomile tea blended with something else, rich, sour, like the odour of blood mixed with autumn leaves. Alasdair’s gaze was fixed on the depths of the flame.

It didn’t look like much, but I could *feel* something happening, feel it in the way the air was changing.

“Jon,” Alasdair whispered, so softly I could barely hear, “Take care. Be safe. Your daughter’s at home waiting for you. Take care...”

Surprised, I blurted, “It’s up to *him*?”

“Sort of,” he said. “All magic is a command, but sometimes it’s so weak it’s hardly more than a request. In the end, it’s up to him—but I don’t think there’s much choice.”

I nodded and he went back into wherever he was, quietly repeating my father’s name.

A lot of time passed. I didn't know how much until the front door flew open.

Our neighbourhood was the kind of place where front doors were locked, not because neighbours weren't trusted – although sometimes they weren't – but because the people who owned those front doors would feel the same way with them unlocked as a medieval knight would feel without armour – naked. Alasdair hadn't been raised with that mentality, or maybe he grew sick of locks in prison, because his door burst in under the pressure of my mother's fist. I think she meant to knock.

She and I stared at each other while Alasdair fought loose of the spell, and then she started screaming.

"Lisa! What-are-you-doing-*here*? What-Why-How-*You*," she said to Alasdair, and it was horrible because while she had been speaking to me she began to cry, and I had never heard so much hatred along with tears in my mother's voice before.

Alasdair couldn't answer.

"I'll get you thrown back in there for this!" she cried. "Lisa, get home! You'll – later! *You*. I've said already, you're deceptive, dangerous, perverted scum! I never thought you'd *dare* –"

In her hands, it was over. Alasdair would be arrested, again, and second offences from sorceress brought some of the harshest penalties in the criminal code. People already said they were incurable, irredeemable. There was no hope of mercy, and he knew it. That was a terrible look to see on someone's face.

Anyone can work magic. All it takes is a name, and some concentration, and *knowing* you can do it. I knew it. It's terrifying, really, how easily someone's reality can be undermined. But it's especially terrifying when it's *you* undermining it.

"Lisa," my mother said. "Get back to the house. You are – And when I call the police –"

"Grace," I said. Her head turned, automatically, at the sound of her given name. "Forget it."

Her mouth fell open, as if there was nothing holding it up. "I..."

"Forget all of it. Go home. Alasdair's reformed – believe that. Forget you came

here today. Forget what you say, Grace. Go home and forget.”

I don’t think anyone Alasdair cast a spell on ever fought him. I don’t think he ever tried casting one fuelled by pure fear and directed only by knowledge from rudimentary observation. It became a battle of wills—it’s hard to explain how I knew what was happening, but it *felt* that way, like I’d grown a sixth sense—and I had never won a battle of wills against my mother before. I don’t think anyone living had.

“Grace...” I said. “Look what I’m doing. You have to forget. Please...”

A low blow. I hit her where she was weakest—where she loved me. That love had given her the will to try to run Alasdair off before, but it wouldn’t help her land me in trouble. And I would be in trouble, if she didn’t forget all this. It would be her duty before the law to land me in it.

She wanted desperately to avoid me being hurt, to avoid hurting me. So in the end, that will of hers turned against itself.

She stumbled, then, staring blindly—I knew she couldn’t see anything, and when I saw her face I knew sickeningly that she couldn’t be thinking, not coherently at any rate—she staggered out the door.

I closed it after her. Then my knees gave out.

“Lisa,” Alasdair murmured.

“I’m sorry,” I said, to him, to Mom, to myself.

“The ... spell went through,” he said carefully.

I winced.

“I mean the one for your father. The shielding one. It went through. He’ll be all right.”

“Thanks.”

I glanced out the window. Mom stood on our porch, fumbling with her keys. She opened the door and walked inside like an automaton.

“Is it always this easy?” I asked. “This simple?”

“This simple, yes. It’s never easy.”

“Oh, God—”

“Here.” His hands on my shoulders raised me to my feet. “It’ll be all right. Sit down. I’ll get you some tea.”

“I should go back.”

“Not yet. Rest.”

I sat on the couch and rested. When he brought me it, I sipped some flavourless tea. When I could stand it no longer, I stood up. “I should get back.”

He let me go.

The door opened easily under my touch. Evening had fallen, but a light was on in the kitchen, my mother sitting at the table beneath it.

I swallowed. “Mom?”

Her face lit up at the sight of me. “Lisa! I was just about to go out looking for you!”

“I’m sorry. I was out walking ... lost track of time.”

Her gaze drifted to the window. Beyond, Alasdair’s house was dark.

“Grace,” I said, softly, “Alasdair isn’t so bad. Trust him ... just a little ... please.”

She smiled. “Well, don’t worry me like that again.”

“I won’t. Sorry it happened.”

The next afternoon I helped Alasdair pull up every weed in his garden. He gave me some herbs to take home. They tasted delicious on Mom’s chicken, and when she asked where they came from, she didn’t seem to notice my glance next door before I said someone was selling little packets of them at school.

She never *trusted* Alasdair, exactly, but after that day she was easier around him. Fewer suspicious glances out the window and no more pamphlets posted. I don’t stay so long at his place anymore, anyways.

When I do I start wanting to ask him questions – questions that begin with *How do I...?*

And that’s illegal. And immoral, whatever excuses I might make.

But I never even felt the need to make excuses when it came to Alasdair, and what he did.

Dad’s coming home soon. I’m glad, and though I’m relieved that he’s going to be

all right, sometimes I look at Mom and wonder if it was worth it. Not Alasdair's spell, but what happened afterwards, and what it led me to do.

I try to resist temptation, and so far I've succeeded, but it's hard, knowing it's so simple. That anyone could do it. We all think we're normal and moral, straight and incorruptible, but really it's so easy. Anybody could try it.

But I haven't made any excuses. I haven't given myself permission to go farther. And I won't.

But that doesn't change what I am.

I'm a sorcerer.

THE FADING LIGHT OF SUMMER

By Lewis Humphries

God damn the meek, obliging sunlight,
a fading glow from dusk's pink skies,
that lies down still beneath the twilight,
then falls in sleep, and rests its eyes,
in tame resistance to the new born night,
its soft, hushed voiceless lullabies.

Then acquiesces in surrender,
to the birth of season's change,
as thickset clouds disturb the splendour,
of summer's brightest, emerald planes,
now touched by rainfall fallen tender,
a landscape doused by fresh tear stains.

How he would long to see the summer,
berate the autumn's whispered cool,
and see it rage with prideful rapture,
in place of tearful, strangled mewl,
whilst still its brightness gently tempers,
when met with infant winter's rule.

HOME COMING

By Daniel Preston

The Dean sat alone under the Northampton Crest at the High Table, wrapped tight in scarf and coat. The cold laid siege to his bones. Even inside the Dining Hall, his incoming breath burnt his lungs. Coming out, it hung like half-hearted fog over his runny porridge. His saggy old nose was red and sore. *Drip, drip*, it went, like a leaky tap.

The fire in the Hall was tired and nigh defeated, fluttering as weakly as a bird with a broken wing. He pulled his hat down further over his ears and looked out the window, pushing Miss Coddinmirth's porridge about with his spoon. In the thin summers, the chattering of young boys swelled to a unitary roar in the Dining Hall. The students ran and played rookball on the quadrangular or flowed to and from class like the blood in the school's veins. But the Northampton School for Boys was empty of their clatter and energy, devoid of their vital pulse, and would not see them back until summer. Instead, winter had taken up residence.

It depressed the Dean. What could be more useless, more pointless, than a school with no pupils? He waited in the cold for the new term, sitting alone and sifting through his porridge, looking at the snow draped over lawn and rooftop, looking at the curved fangs of ice that hung smooth and snarling from the eaves. The beards of ivy and creeping vines that swarmed the walls were aged white with snow. Even the buildings hunkered and huddled together against the cold. It would be long months until the thaw, when the icicles began to release fat drops to spatter on the shrinking snow.

Almost all of the staff had left with the boys until the new term, making the trip by cart down to Northampton Shrupping and taking the steam train, gone before cold winter sunk her teeth into the school. But the porridge getting cold in front of him

testified that Miss Coddington was still about somewhere, wrapped in her muffler and mittens and feeding her cats. And the Dean could see the Groundsman smoking his pipe in his shed, the embers glowing red and strong in the drab light as he enjoyed a cup of black coffee after a night on the roof. He had stalked the roof-line, letting fly with his blunderbuss at the delinquent little gargoyles that pulled off the shingles and swung from the gutters and knocked giggling on your window after the sun went down.

No doubt the Janitor, Mr. Undersink, pushed his broom down a chilly corridor somewhere as well, shirking and moaning and shifting dust from pile to pile. But aside from the four of them, these leavings, these remnants, there was no-one.

The Dean sighed, pushed his porridge away, and went out into the shocking air. His hands hid deep in his pockets. Winter had even scared decent daylight from Northampton. Grey uncertainty was the best the day could manage. The deep snow smothered all sound.

All sound?

The Dean searched the quad with blinking eyes. What had *that* sound been?

He heard it again, and lifted his eyes to the shambles of sagging balconies, crooked chimneys and icy walkways that sprouted from the chaos of the Northampton rooftops. The sound had come from high, he was certain.

There it was again, and he furrowed his brow to further open his ears, and he could make out a little of it now, a sad little voice, "... home home ..." and his eyes fixed at last on a high balcony. Standing forlorn in the cold was a small boy.

"Come down!" ordered the Dean.

The boy didn't move.

Snowflakes settled.

Grumbling to himself, perplexed because two weeks had shivered by since the last pupil had left, the Dean went into the building. He lit his lantern and went by stair and hall up into the creaky heart of the school, coming at last to the balcony. He opened the door and looked out.

No one.

The Dean stared at the empty platform. He rubbed his eyes, and then closed the door, walking back down into the courtyard. He stamped his feet against the cold and shook his head at his imagination.

"Please, I want to go home."

Standing behind him was the boy.

He was small and stooped, his uniform was ragged and threadbare, and his thin little legs stuck out pale from his shorts. From under his cap, his face was almost translucent, in colour more like the icicles that hung from everything than human skin. His eyes were enormous.

"By the Hounds, boy!" the Dean exclaimed. "What are you doing here? You must be near dead from cold!"

"Please," said the boy in his quavering voice. "I want to go home."

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Miss Coddlingmirth's little pot-belly stove kept her rooms warm and cosy. The Dean's hands thawed painfully as the two of them inspected the boy. Even in the glowing light, his skin was grey and his huge eyes blank.

Miss Coddlingmirth felt his arm. It was freezing cold, even though he wasn't shivering. She wrapped him tight in a blanket.

"You poor dear," she murmured in her kind voice. Miss Coddlingmirth, the school nurse, was the recipient of an unrequited, absolutely hopeless love directed at her from nearly all the boys and a good chunk of nervously sweating young teachers as well. Even the Dean, old as he was, was often flustered by her pretty face.

"Please, I want to go home."

"That's all he says," the Dean told her.

"Two weeks in the cold," she said. "No wonder. What's your name?"

The boy stared at them, unblinking. "Please, I want to go home."

"I don't know him," admitted the Dean. "There are so many boys, and one has no

sooner fixed a face in memory than the boy is grown and gone." His memory, the Dean feared, was as old and failing as his body, as leaky as his nose.

"His parents must be worried sick." She checked his forehead with her hand. He was not warming up.

The Dean glumly contemplated the school board berating him for leaving a precious boy behind. "We need to get him to Northampton Shrupping, and on the train down valley." He sighed; the three mile walk was bad enough for his creaky bones without the cold and snow.

Miss Coddlingmirth looked at him. Her young face frowned. "Dean, you cannot be taking the walk down to the station. Not in this cold."

"Miss Coddlingmirth, I could not let a lady make the journey."

"I assure you, Dean, it will pose no problems."

"Perhaps Mr. Undersink or the Groundsman—"

"My good Dean, I myself collect supplies from Northampton Shrupping on a weekly basis during the winter. I am accustomed to the walk. I must insist."

So it was that Miss Coddlingmirth and the boy, both swaddled in coats and hats and woolly layers, set out over the snow for Northampton Shrupping. The Dean stood at the Arch to watch them go. The Crest was carved into the great stones above his head, and the school motto, *Seus Verdat par Thysé*, etched beneath it, which even the most indifferent scholar could have translated into 'be true to thyself'. He laid his palm against the chilled stone, taking comfort from the familiar words.

"Be careful," said the Dean as they left.

"We shall," she promised.

"Please—" said the boy.

"Yes, dear," said Miss Coddlingmirth. "I'm taking you home."

The Dean watched them merge into the snow. The valley funnelled down and away. In the milky distance, wood-smoke rose from the village.

The Dean paced restlessly in his study, peering out the window at the Arch. He waited the long day for Miss Coddinmirth to return, but she did not. He deduced that she was taking her night's lodgings in Northampton Shrapping. On account of this there was no supper for him, and he spent the night in bed aching from the cold and hunger. His mind kept returning to one thing again and again, the declaim of the boy: *please, I want to go home.*

It was an awful cry, the Dean decided, because it was a terrible thing to be kept from your home, whatever or wherever your home might be. The Dean imagined the young Miss Coddinmirth, her home a place of purring cats, pikelets and warm stove. And if the Groundsman was to have a home, it must surely be in his shed with crackling fire and keen-edged tools. The Dean approved of both Miss Coddinmirth and the Groundsman, and the residences which so encapsulated their characters. Was that home? A place where you were comfortable being yourself? Where you could be true to your nature?

The Dean had spent many years at Northampton, and he was pleasantly trapped there. He supposed that he would be there for the rest of his life, which is to say that he expected to die there, being spoon-fed broth with a hot flannel on his forehead and his hand held by someone as young and agreeably pretty as Miss Coddinmirth. The thought of ending that way was peculiarly comforting; less of a death than a long sigh.

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In the morning he dressed quickly. Out into the quad he went, peering through the Arch towards the village. No one.

He turned, and his gaze travelled up to the balcony.

The boy was standing there.

The Dean exclaimed, and moved as hurriedly as tired old bones allowed up through the building. The boy was still on the balcony, as cold as yesterday, his eyes

opaque as mirrors. There was no sign of the coat he had been wrapped in; he was back in his shabby uniform. Likewise, there was no sign of Miss Coddlingmirth.

"Please, I want to go home."

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The Groundsman pulled his furry hat down over his forehead, the large flaps over his ears. The stove in his shed flared and flickered red, and his pipe answered likewise; wherever the Groundsman went, great trails of pipe smoke went also.

The Dean and boy stood in front of the heat of the stove. Janitor Undersink stooped at the side, blowing into his cupped hands. Shovels, spades, rakes and pitchforks dangled from the ceiling and walls beside scythes and sickles and heavy hammers. They carved dark, sharp shadows out of the air, like stalactites hanging in a cave.

From the heavy beam that spanned the doorway hung three rabbits, strung up with wire from their ankles. The Groundsman had newly skinned and gutted them, and their blood had dripped from them, pooling stickily on the snow. The rabbits would keep near enough to forever in the cold. Their skins, beautiful white winter coats, he had inside to cure, and the entrails bubbled in a great pot on the stove.

"Awful cold out there. Yet more cold it were yesternight." The Groundsman shook his grizzled head. "The boy hisself is nigh dead from cold. I fear somethin' mighty for her, Dean."

"So do I," the Dean answered. "She must have had an accident." He thought of her, lying somewhere out in the snow.

"Please," said the boy, "I want to go home."

"Will the boy say naught else?" the Groundsman wondered aloud.

The Dean shook his head. "It appears to be the limit of his vocabulary."

"We'll follow their tracks, Dean," the Groundsman told him. He was wrapped in his hides, as furry as had once been his rabbits. He bound snowshoes to his pack, hung

a big knife by his side, and shouldered his battered blunderbuss.

"Be careful," said the Dean. "I have a bad feeling."

"Is for that that I say 'we', Dean. The Janitor shan't mind helping me look to the safety of the good Miss Coddlingmirth, I'm sure." He looked unblinking at Mr. Undersink.

Mr. Undersink looked sour and unwilling, but the Groundsman could have outstared the winter itself. Finally Mr. Undersink sighed, his long face growing longer yet. "I'll find another coat," he grumbled.

"Soonish serves best," the Groundsman told him. "Time is against us." He fixed the boy with his old eyes. "And the waif," he told the Dean.

"Would he not be better kept here?" the Dean asked. "He is as frozen as a fish."

"He was the last to see her, Dean. Mayhap he'll regain his tongue afore long."

The Dean nodded. "Wrap him up warm, Groundsman. It grows colder by the minute."

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How foolish he had been to ever think Northampton lonely without the boys. Now he was truly alone save for the cold companionship of icicle and snowflake. He begrudged the winter its existence. If only it would thaw!

He sat in his study. His teeth chattered loosely, his nose dripped and sniffled. He flicked distractedly through dusty books, feeding the fire scraps of wood. He pulled the curtains and shut out the night. The Dean mistrusted the world outside. The routines of the school pleased him; the ringing of the bell to wake the boys, the curfews and bed-times, the structured days and carefully followed timetable. The Dean loved this regulated life, but he knew that the bleak land out there did not share his view. It was chaos and darkness out there, and its very nature was that it wanted to tear down the walls of the school; the order that the school imposed was a humiliation to it, a deadly affront. Under summer sun the school was strong, bolstered by the vigour of the boys

and by their learning, even if that they had to be dragged kicking and shouting to the table where they were force-fed their knowledge. But the strength of the school waned as the boys left for the year and winter came, and the land grew hungry and powerful and remembered its desire for vengeance.

His stomach grumbled and gurgled, and he found a leg of salted beef to chew on. The dark, dark night of winter swallowed all outside light, and he fled to his bed. It was the longest, worst night of his life. He did not sleep at all. Even a gargoyle pestering him at his window would have been welcome, but they were still slinking and squeezing into nooks and crannies, shy and sulky after the Groundsman's hunting.

The sordid fingers of dawn inched into his room. He was light-headed, near delirious, but rose and dressed as best he could. Down into the quad he tottered. No smoke rose from Miss Coddlingmirth's chimney, nor from the Groundsman's shed. He was about to walk to the Arch, to see if the snow was churned with new tracks.

But he paused.

His skin prickled.

With a shudder he turned and looked up to the balcony.

The boy stood alone.

The Dean swore, and rushed into the building. Panting and puffing, he forced himself up stair and down passage. He threw open the door to the balcony.

The boy stood out in the cold. The Groundsman's furs were gone. He was again in only his tattered uniform.

The Dean seized him by his skinny arms. "Where are they? Where are they? Where is Miss Coddlingmirth? Where is the Groundsman?" He shook the boy roughly.

"Please," said the boy. "I want to go home."

With a cry of disgust, the Dean pushed the boy from him. The boy was flung back against the old railings, which snapped on impact. The Dean ran to the edge, seeing the small body tumbling limply through the air, before striking the snowy ground with a wet thump. The boy lay far below, his limbs bent at strange angles.

The Dean moaned, aghast at what he had done. He turned and rushed back down,

his chest heaving and his rusted joints dragging against his haste. Down, down he went, down in a hobble through the rabbit-warren of corridors and corners and doors and openings, down the rickety old stairs, down out onto the courtyard.

The body was not there.

The Dean wheezed, clutching his head, wondering if madness was taking him.

He lifted his hands from his eyes.

The boy was standing before him.

Unhurt.

"By the Hounds, boy," the Dean whispered hoarsely. "Who are you? What are you? What do you want from me?"

For the first time, the boy showed expression, lost his blankness. His large eyes narrowed slightly, skin crinkling at the corners. Beforehand there had been no trace of character to be spied within those impassable eyes. But now the Dean read something in that gaze, a glimpse of its nature, a glimpse that said that this thing was already home. It stood before him draped in the cloak of cold winter air, in the season when it could strike back against roll calls and hourly bells and all other insufferable constraints laid on this wild land.

It leaned forward conspiratorially, holding a cupped hand beside its mouth and opening the mouth slightly as if to whisper a great secret. But then its mouth turned up ever so slightly in a sly smile, its hand fell back to its side, and when it spoke its voice sounded deep and ancient beyond years and filled with malignant humour.

And as it spoke the Dean looked over its head, up at the Arch. Hanging from it by their ankles beneath the crest were three bodies, swinging gently this way and that from creaking rope. Blood dripped crimson to the snow beneath. They had been stripped of their skin.

"Please," said the thing, dark laughter dancing behind its words. "I want to go home."