

SEMAPHORE

The book cover has a steampunk aesthetic with a golden-brown, textured background. It is decorated with numerous intricate, cut-out gears of various sizes and designs, some of which are layered over each other. A central rectangular area contains a stylized emblem that resembles a combination of a '3' and a '5'. The title 'SEMAPHORE' is prominently displayed at the top in a large, serif font, while the issue information and editor's name are in smaller, simpler fonts at the top and bottom respectively.

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EDITED BY: MARIE HODGKINSON

EDITORIAL



But really, why bother?

The question didn't appear in my head often, but when it did – when the website's formatting went haywire, when my internet had several kinds of fit every time I tried to load the page-builder, when I surfed the web for inspiration for running my magazine and found a host of markets already on-line, magazines that contained stories that were so entertaining, so gripping and so thought-provoking that I could only just manage to beat down my jealousy – it was hard. Why bother, when there's so much out there already? Why bother, when my goal has already been accomplished by what seemed to be a world of other people?

I bothered, because when I turned on my computer and coaxed the internet into working, I found that others had bothered, too. I received dozens of submissions for Semaphore: far more stories, poems and articles than I could ever hope to fit into a

single issue. The fact that these strangers from the internet trusted me with their work, trusted me to make fair decisions and not to run off and try to flog their stories as my own, meant and still does mean a great deal to me. So thank you, all you writers and friends and miscellaneous oddments of society who supported me and helped bring Semaphore Magazine's debut issue into existence. Thank you all.

Quite a sizeable issue it is, too – the problem with receiving so many submissions was that I found it far too hard to say “no” as many times as my budget implored me to. This bumper issue contains a fantastic array of short stories and poetry, along with what I can vouch for as being one very well-researched article. Our guest contributor for this issue is Jason R. Wallace, a new writer whose work I have been following for some years. This issue also sees the first of Kate Smith's wonderful *Night Lights* series of short stories, “Bad Hair Nights,” and the first in a series of exclusive reports detailing the problem of Tea abuse in Dunedin and surrounding areas.

Here's to hoping you enjoy reading this issue as much as I do,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marie Hodgkinson', with a stylized, flowing script.

Marie Hodgkinson

Editor in Chief

Semaphore Magazine

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Fortuna Crapula

By Jason R Wallace

Infinity forks out in fractals
from a near-empty tumbler,
stretching out in
dumbfounding combinations,
a branching tree
of cosmic possibility.

A gymnast quarter,
somersaulting
from the flick of my thumb,
keeps the surrounding stares
drowning
in the dream of brew.

It lands
in a dwindling puddle of whiskey,
Washington in profile.

Damn.

Next round's on me.

Bad Hair Nights

By Kate Smith

Thane da Silva was cross-eyed.

It was a purely temporary condition, lasting all of five seconds, and the result of his lieutenant mentioning “hair” in conjunction with “lost” and “long”.

Their Department regularly dealt with the weirder end of the crime spectrum. All things vampiric were very popular this season as they had been for the last three years. A steady stream of *loup garou* related cases provided a change, werewolves and Paris going together like gargoyles and Notre Dame. Certain members of the general populace could also be relied upon to break the paperwork monotony with calls regarding aliens, garden gnomes, and cat-snatching gangs.

But this was... different.

Thane winced as his brain processed that thought. Maybe he'd been with The Department a little too long if vampires and the preternatural population were beginning to seem normal.

“What kind of crime is that?” asked Thane. “Breaking in and cutting off a woman's hair sounds like Assault. Technically even Theft.”

“Not when the Big Chief's wife's sister's reading group has been studying novels set in New Orleans,” Lieutenant Montgomery said gloomily. The lieutenant was a gloomy man, but this kind of gloom was only a whisker away from despair.

"New Orleans. Voodoo?"

"Affirmative. And because the Big Chief's sister-in-law says so, that makes it ours to deal with and that means it's all yours." Montgomery skidded a file folder across his desk.

Thane automatically fielded the file before it flopped onto the floor and spilled its contents. "Me, alone?"

"You see anyone else here?"

It was probably a contributing factor to the lieutenant's habitual gloom that the department was small. Petite, in fact; just the lieutenant, Thane, the hypochondriac Bertrand, and Genetta Blaise, currently on maternity leave.

Thane acknowledged the point with a flip of his hand. "How close is the media to breaking the story?"

The grooves etched across Montgomery's forehead deepened. "You'll close the case by nightfall."

"Ah. That close." Thane sighed and rose.

"Da Silva." The lieutenant's gravely voice halted him on the threshold.

Thane arched a cynical eyebrow.

The lieutenant examined the clear desk top. Montgomery filed all his paperwork on the floor or stuffed it in the drawers. The habit regularly drove his secretary temporarily insane and she'd start informing The Department of the weather in Rarotonga or Montana with the implication that she was leaving.

"You might wish to get a hair cut."

*

The best thing about working in an irregular department was the location of his office. Thane's office was highly mobile. At the moment it was located in the window of his favourite patisserie and instead of chewed pens and a phone, the table contained the ruins of a hazelnut torte and Thane's third café latte.

And the folder, the papers now annotated in Thane's elegant scrawl.

Thane directed a last forkful of torte toward his mouth and thought about those statements and reports.

Six women from different suburbs had gone to bed with hair to their mid-back or longer and woken up with it sheared off at the nape. All the cut hair had been removed.

One curly redhead, two different shades of blonde, one jet black, an ash-brown and a wavy bitter-chocolate.

A seventh woman had been unluckier. She'd looked in the mirror in the morning and discovered *part* of her hair missing. That, Thane decided, was not because the thief had been scared off, but because the lady in question was not a natural blonde, although how the thief had discerned that wasn't mentioned in the statement. Thankfully, the responding officer had noticed the re-growth and diplomatically

inquired as to natural hair colour. Thane checked the date. Wednesday night having been warm, maybe Ms Aimee Gramercy preferred to sleep *au naturelle*.

Speculation on women's sleepwear aside, it was clear someone in the city had a fetish for natural hair and would go to any lengths - *ha* – to obtain it.

Late morning sunshine through the window massaged between Thane's shoulder blades. Magnified by the plate glass the sunlight threw a golden haze over the wall to his right, veiling the clock as it ticked down slender seconds. Thane trawled through the papers. Nothing else taken, nothing disturbed, nothing left behind, no physical harm done except for the severing of hair.

Some of the ladies hadn't slept alone, yet their partners hadn't been disturbed. That in turn disturbed Thane.

No one was that good.

The Barber probably wasn't a scholar from the university *quartier* who'd cracked after too much intent study of Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock*.

Thane's cake plate was whisked away by Mademoiselle Sophie, who wore her clothes and her smile with a panache that hinted she was moonlighting from her real job as a fairy princess. She paused in the process of turning away when her sleeve caught a photo from the file.

"Now, her I know," Sophie said. "Soy lattes, and a gold ankle chain and bell."

"Doesn't sound like she's a favourite," Thane observed.

Sophie's smile increased wattage. "That's what I like about you, *chere*, you appreciate nuance." She added a flirty flip of her lashes. "But, *non*. Mademoiselle's view of the world is black and white, populated by those who serve and those who own the servers."

Thane winced at the implications.

"Ummm hmmm." Sophie angled her head for a better look at the picture. "We're using the present tense, so perhaps Mademoiselle received an enlightenment? Must have been radical if she changed her hairstyle."

"She didn't." Thane eyed Sophie. He trusted her discretion, and her eclectic take on the world. "She woke up one morning and discovered someone had chopped all her hair off."

"And she was sooooo proud of her hair too. Always doing the *flick* or the *fling* or standing just so to reflect the sunlight off the silky brown locks." Laughter lit the aqua depths of Sophie's eyes. "The big question is, will she hide away until her hair grows back?"

Thane pressed the backs of his fingers to his latte glass when she'd flitted away. Still too hot to drink. He closed his eyes. Jealousy? A pissed-off peasant? An ex-lover or former best friend? Sophie's observations put a personal spin on the situation but while Thane could appreciate someone wanting to teach Mlle Renee a lesson, there was more than a reverse Samson and Delilah involved here.

According to the file, The Barber didn't have a pattern as to how the victims were selected, and that in itself was a pattern. How big a pattern was one question Thane

would like answered. Did The Barber have a number in mind, a quota to fill, or was it simpler than that? Opportunity?

Between the flower stand on the corner and the café door, Thane had passed three women with hair to the small of their backs. And sunset was in little more than eight hours. Tomorrow, would one of those women wake to discover too much in common with the seven before her?

All seven ladies violated had thought themselves safe in their own homes. They'd braided their hair as most longhaired girls did before going to bed so their hair didn't end up in their mouths or strangling their partner. And that had made it easier for The Barber; just a few snips, and he was away with his trophy.

The scariest thing was the potential for so much worse. Rape, murder, mutilation... By that scale of things, a hair cut wasn't so awful – it was the “look at me” aspect that chilled the blood. The “I got inside your home and looked at you while you slept. I listened to you breathe, touched your skin, and you know, if you'd moved or even sighed at the wrong moment, the blade at your neck might have slipped. Might have sliced that artery where your blood pulsed so nice and slow. Would you have felt that, then? And maybe, maybe, I'll be back.”

Thane's skin crawled just thinking about it. How were those women managing to sleep?

When Thane opened his eyes Horatio was sitting opposite, licking away a café latte-froth moustache and lowering Thane's empty glass to the table.

Horatio had a habit of appropriating things, including snippets of arcane and incredibly useful information. A café latte, even one of Sophie's concocting, was a small price to pay for such intelligence.

Horatio glanced at the folder, and read Thane's list of conclusions without bothering to turn the paper right side up. He double-checked the last point, scowled into the empty café latte glass, then fixed his ghost pale eyes on the ceiling. He *hmmmed* and *arred* while his formidable brain rummaged through its memory bank.

"Right." Horatio examined Thane closely. "Can't do much about the clothes."

Thane assessed today's wardrobe choice. The shirt and the suede pants were decadently black and the Italian boots were sinfully comfortable. Another thing he liked about The Department: no dress code.

"Don't throw stones," Thane recommended gently.

Horatio indulged in a sneer. He glanced through the window, gauged the angle of the sun, and winced.

Thane sat forward. "What?"

Horatio fingered his lucky button. "Gonna have to conceal that hair. Can't risk offending your ferocious partner's artistic sensibilities by sending you home with your hair shorn off. Sophie, my little cabbage; you have hairpins handy?"

Sophie produced a zippered bag of cosmetics and hair ties.

"One thing more," Horatio added, digging through the many voluminous pockets of his scarecrow coat. "A-ha!"

*

They were losing the light.

Taking the back way through the twisting alleys and fire escapes may have lost them the niggling sense of pursuit - and please, let it not have been an intrepid reporter

- but it had cost them the white light of noon. They were deep into shades of amber and gold now.

Thane resettled the battered fedora into a Bogart-esque style and studied the arcade from under its brim. The hairpins dug into his scalp and he had to force his hands away from his head.

Judging by his scowl, Horatio caught the aborted movement. "You *want* all that pretty hair sliced off?"

Careful to avoid stepping on cracks in the paving, Thane ignored Horatio and crossed the street, stirring up the drifts of leaves from the chestnut trees. They skirled, twirled and twisted before the breeze only to fetch up against the wrought iron gates shielding the arcade entrance. The ornate spearheads and lavish bosses were stained and pitted, mostly obscured by the same rust that held the gates partway shut.

Thane eased between the halves. His first step inside was greeted with a crack from floor level. The nasty sound of mosaic tile shattering under pressure echoed off the vaulted ceiling and smeared shopfront windows where any gilding had long since flaked away. Like the tenants? Probably. Any left were frugal with the lighting and advertising as if encouraging anyone who didn't know exactly what they shopped for to leave before they forfeited their soul.

Horatio nudged Thane deeper into the arcade, stepped round him, and beelined for the darkest boutique, the one tucked away in the corner. He hunched his sticklike shoulders within his coat and stomped so that the tiles shattered with bubble-wrap ease.

So much for the subtle approach.

Thane swallowed a sighed and followed.

No bell rang as Horatio convinced the door with the blackened brass trim to open. And nothing stirred within the shop as the door wheezed shut behind them.

Thane peered through the murk. Small coffin-shaped objects rested on the rickety shelves against one wall. Keeping an eye on the rear door, Thane approached a shelf and picked up a box. It had a substantial weight, more than he expected. He adjusted his grip and the motion made puffs of dust bloom towards his face. He held his breath, not wanting to inhale. Then he just forgot to breathe.

The lid of the box was glass, and without that shield of dust, the face within was visible.

The box slipped in Thane's hands and the eyelids rose. Electric blue eyes glared up at him, eyes so vividly and angrily alive that Thane thudded the box onto the counter.

Horatio glowered and tugged his collar around his face, swiping at the dust wraiths. "Now you've done it."

An agile form plunged through the rear doorway with half a scalp in her twiggy fingers. "You wake my babies and you do not live to regret, oh no no no. Madame Verona make sure of that if her babies be wakened."

Thane felt his follicles try to retract. "Horatio?"

Horatio almost disappeared inside his coat like a turtle retreating into its shell. "Madame Verona is The Dollmaker."

"And The Dollmaker is..."

Madame Verona tenderly laid the cinnamon-brown scalp on the counter and lifted the lid of the box Thane had set there. She crooned in a voice scratchier than an old 45 record as she smoothed a ribbon and closed the doll's eyes.

Thane listened carefully. There were words lost in the scrikety murmuring, little words, old words, a skein of sense running through the nonsense: *Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.*

That made two of them. Thane lifted a brow. "Horatio."

"She makes accurate dolls."

"Anatomically correct, I can see that. Now *what else?*"

Thane found himself on the receiving end of a fever-bright black gaze and recoiled, fighting the drag of the carpet gripping the soles of his boots.

"My babies are more than accurate. They are true soul representations." Madame zapped herself into the back room and reappeared with another doll cradled in her arms.

Hellfire and damnation. Thane had hoped someone was attempting to re-enact Rapunzel's escape, or that the voodoo angle was an exaggeration, but he'd seen that face...

Seen it in a photo... in a file...

Not a doll.

It was a waxwork mannequin, an eerily miniature version of Mlle Renee with the victim's own bitter chocolate hair attached.

Thane bit his lip and scrubbed his hands on his trousers before accepting the mannequin Madame Verona thrust at him. Every eyelash was in place, even the faint lines around the eyes and lips were there. The skin tones and the tracery of veins was superb.

This was more than a representation, more than art.

Every touch Madame Verona had made had called up a power into the doll until it fizzed with a force that was just one degree removed from actual life.

"Madame Verona." Thane cleared his throat gently and with extreme care set the mannequin on the dust-furred counter. The doll's left hand fell palm up, fingers gently curved to display rose-tinted nails... and the fate and life lines scoring the palm. "What do you intend to do with your babies?"

Madame rocked back and blinked as though someone had returned the moon to the sky after a year's absence. "Do... with my... babies?" Her hands jerked away from the skein of cinnamon hair to hang empty by her side.

Thane had seen it before; that powerful urge to create. He lived with an artist, he knew what artistic imperative looked like up close and personal.

It turned the artist from a fairly standard human into someone who looked straight through you, who'd forget such basic necessities as food and sleep and soap, all in pursuit of a burning image that was just out of range. Someone who'd chase that

image night and day until they either got it right or they collapsed. Making that vision a reality in paint, in clay, whatever medium would work, was the *raison d'être*.

In Thane's opinion, artists of any calibre were very dangerous people, because when the artist was in thrall to inspiration, nothing else mattered. Until the muse departed.

Madame Verona clutched at the counter. Her black clothes no longer looked chic and cat-burglarish but more like wrappings round a bundle of odd bones.

Thane's simple question had dragged her back to the light side. He'd broken the spell, the curse, and now he had to deal with the wreckage. Madame Verona was the least of it.

The Renee mannequin on the counter sagged on the counter, limbs splayed. Its smile radiated glittering malice under the fragile ceiling light.

What was he going to do with those dolls? Destroying them didn't sound like a particularly safe idea; if they were as closely linked to their models as Thane suspected the results could be fatal. Leaving them to Madame's guard would also be risky, as a curse once broken did not mean always broken. Hand them over to The Barber's victims along with a warning to be very very careful with them?

Argh.

That would go down well.

Thane pulled the battered fedora off his head and ran his right hand through his hair, shaking the pins loose. He'd figure something out; he always did. Right now, the

most important thing was to rescue Madame from an environment that brought out her inner black magic woman.

Thane wrapped a hand around her elbow. "Madame Verona, I think we need to talk."

Horatio opened the door and Thane steered a docile Madame Verona out into the mellow afternoon sunshine where leaves from the chestnut trees skipped over the cracks in the pavement.



DUNEDIN TEA ABUSE REACHES BOILING POINT

AN EXCLUSIVE REPORT BY INTREPID REPORTER RORY POLLOCK

Details are beginning to emerge concerning last night's dramatic Police raid on a suspected South Dunedin Tearoom. Police have issued a brief statement confirming earlier reports that five men have been taken into custody on suspicion of processing three varieties of Class A Tea (Earl Grey, Darjeeling and English Breakfast) with intent to serve. This is the first such raid to be carried out in Otago, a region where Tea penetration had been previously believed to be low.

While Police refuse to comment on the exact amount of Tea confiscated, witnesses report seeing Police remove a large amount of Tea-related paraphernalia. This includes: three large paper bags, presumably containing Tea bricks; several metal tins, used to keep smaller amounts of Tea after a Tea brick has been broken down;



Above: A Tea brick confiscated from an Auckland Tearoom in June 2006. Photograph courtesy of Jason Fasi

seven thermoses, evidence that tea was being delivered to other areas in the region; six teapots and twelve electric kettles, both of which are items used in the steeping or

“brewing” process; and a Tea Cozy, a device used when it is especially cold for keeping Tea hot while still in the Tea Pot. This last item may be of particular concern, owing to the fact that no such item is needed at this time of year. This indicates that the Tearoom may have been in operation for some time. If these reports are confirmed the amount of brewing equipment confiscated would seem to indicate that this was massive Tearoom; possibly the largest ever to be exposed anywhere in the country.

The significance of this Tearoom is further increased owing to of the type of Tea confiscated. All three Tea varieties reported by Police are Class A or “black” Teas. Class A or “black” Tea is derived from the same plant, *Camellia Sinensis*, as class B or “green” Tea. However, it varies from the latter in many ways. Visually, green Tea is yellow or yellow-green in colour, whereas black Tea is a reddish brown. This is because black Tea has undergone a process of oxidation. This process creates a darker leaf containing a much higher amount of the active ingredients caffeine and tannin. Black Tea is also often left to brew for a longer period of time, leading to an even more potent Tea. This often renders the brew bitter and unpalatable and necessitates the addition of milk and sugar in order to mask the unpleasant taste.

This raid undoubtedly eliminated a major local supplier of the most harmful Teas. However, the elimination of this supply is unlikely to end Tea related crime in Dunedin. In order for a Tearoom of this size to operate there must be a much larger number of Tea drinkers in Otago than has been estimated. This is unlikely to have been the only operating Tearoom in Dunedin. But in any case, the Police have won a major victory in the war on Tea, and anyone involved in the Tea industry must now feel like they have got themselves into hot water.

The Bath

By Rebecca Lloyd

His washing hanging on the line was visible to most of us over the low fences that separate the houses in Cotton Street, and the women told us that the orderly way it was hung out with socks at one end and shirts and so forth at the other proved Gavin Bauble was all right. "If he missed his wife that much," they said, "it'd be obvious in his pegging out."

Margaret had been doleful and slow-moving, and I'd rather liked her, but her unresponsiveness had irritated our women. "We tried to talk to her, but you couldn't get her to tell you anything."

"What did you want her to tell you?"

"She wouldn't join in, that's all. No one's better than anybody else in Cotton Street, and they're wrong if they think they are."

Someone had spotted Margaret Bauble heading for the train station one August morning, switching her suitcase from hand to hand as she went, and after that, Gavin, who at one time seemed to be everywhere in the neighbourhood at once, was rarely seen outside again.

I saw him occasionally in the corner shop where he bought three copies of all the newspapers, "to stay on top of things," he told me. I knew he liked me, and I thought with a little prodding I might be able to find something out about Margaret, but he

always moved away before I could think of how to approach him. Margaret had been gone for around seven years when he asked if I'd feed his fish while he went on holiday. "Key's under the stone trout next to the porch. Place's a bit of a mess, you know how it is. Busy all the time. Thank you, John."

*

I used the wall for balance as I made my way to the living room; the stacks of newspaper covering the narrow hall in the Bauble's house were three feet high in some places. I stumbled on the hilly terrain and wondered if I'd have been better off crawling. The staircase to my right was piled with junk, and although there was a clear space about the width of a human foot in the centre of each step, the old carpet had split and formed lethal gaping pockets at the edge of every one of them.

Gavin had always struck me as methodical, and as I gazed into the living room from my heightened position in the hall at all the room contained, I searched for some inherent order in the chaos. In one corner I noticed a jumble of metal walking frames thrown together so they'd come to resemble a mindless sculpture in a municipal park. Close by was a row of grey and battered filing cabinets, the cast-offs from an office somewhere, many of the drawers were open and filled with electrical wiring and extension cords yellowed with age and grease. I saw rolls of wallpaper, sheets of plywood, boxes of telephone sanitizer spray, and dented tins of paint stacked on top of each other. There were a couple of flashy pinball machines, some old radios, a CD rack

the height of a man, and a wheelbarrow full of coils of rope, and beside that a great tangle of broken fishing nets.

I supposed that the black glass swans artfully arranged on the shelves of a tilting bookcase must have belonged to Margaret once. Perhaps the bead curtain, an abandoned tangle of broken plastic ovals and stars lying on some dusty cushions, had been hers. I thought of going home, the room had an air of aggression and despair and smelt strongly of garbage. I noticed the fish tank glinting on the windowsill but could see no obvious way to get to it, except through a passageway between stacks of rubbish bags; I moved slowly through them causing a railway sleeper to thump heavily to the floor.

*

I reached the fish. There were no dead ones, although some were so top-heavy with frilly fins that their efforts to swim in the green water looked painful.

While I was making my way back, I glanced up, and there was Margaret standing at the door in a grey swimming suit. I could hear water dripping onto the newspaper around her feet.

"I'm glad it's you," she said, "I thought it was a burglar or Gavin back early. Are you coming everyday?"

She turned to go, using the doorframe to keep her balance, and I had no time to think of pleasantries. "Margaret, I had no idea you were still here."

"Of course I am, but he didn't want me to feed his fish."

"I mean here at all, living with Gavin still."

"Whatever made you think that?" She sounded wounded.

"I've only been inside this house once and you could still walk around then. I wouldn't have blamed you for going, nobody in Cotton Street would."

"I don't have to bother with it all, I live in the bathroom, there's nothing in there."

"Don't go yet, Margaret, let's talk a bit."

"Where, talk where?"

It was only then it occurred to me that she had no hair. She'd turned her back to me and her head was a shiny dome, I wondered if she was ill. "Have you eaten anything today, can I make you something?"

"That would be a bit tricky. Although to be fair to Gavin, he's left a decent alleyway in the kitchen. There are seats by the stove."

"Could we go there?"

"I'd like that. Tomorrow maybe."

*

I thought about Margaret and Gavin Bauble all night. I pictured Margaret squatting in their tiny bathroom guarding the last empty space left in the house, and Gavin wandering happily in a long-forgotten seaside town where the waves that once embraced the shoreline had receded so far they were visible only as a glimmer on the horizon. I felt uneasily honoured by his trust in me despite my revulsion, and finally decided against calling Reverend Coons, or the police, or the fire brigade.

I was deliberately noisy the following day in my journey to the fish tank, and again, as I turned to navigate my way back between the rubbish bags, Margaret was at the door, wrapped in towels. "Fish all right, John?" she asked.

"I want to talk to you, Margaret, I've been thinking about you all night."

"I suppose we could go in the kitchen."

She remained tense as we talked, and I was blunt. "None of your clothes were ever on the line, so we assumed you'd gone years ago."

She thought that funny, and laughed a little. "I don't need clothes anymore, you see?"

"No, I don't see, Margaret." I stared at the old cigarette butts scattered across the floor between us.

"Well, it's the way Gavin likes it and that's fine by me."

"Did he take your clothes away?"

"Yes. He took them to a charity shop about six years ago."

"Why on earth didn't you tell someone?"

She smiled. "Can you imagine me running out onto Cotton Street in my swimming suit? It doesn't fit me properly."

We were sitting opposite each other on old car seats close to the stove, and I became aware of her skin; it was spongy and discoloured, and hung from her arms and legs heavily. "Come off it, Margaret, this is not a joke. Look, there are ways to help people like Gavin these days."

"Maybe, but he wouldn't have liked me discussing our life with strange men."

"You could've said something to the women on Cotton Street, surely?"

She looked down at her toes, and I did likewise; they were rubbery-looking and I felt queasy at the sight of them. I noticed how grey her swollen legs were. "I didn't feel right with those women. They asked hollow questions as if every single one of them was training to be a hairdresser. Anyhow, why are you questioning me?"

"Has Gavin ever hit you?"

"Now you're just being silly, John."

"But what do you do here all day?" I eased a pile of sticky magazines off the seat beside me and let them fall.

"Well, I just dream."

"Dream of what?"

"You know how it is; this and that." She ran her fingers over her scalp.

"What happened to your hair, Margaret? I remember it as long and auburn, and quite beautiful."

She laughed again and flushed slightly. "There was no point to it anymore, like clothes." She stared at me, still smiling. "I like talking to you, John. Gavin's back soon and then I won't see you again."

"It would've been nice don't you think, if you'd gone with him?"

"You're very charming, that's what Gavin likes about you, John. He always said you didn't jump to conclusions."

"You know what I think? Gavin wanted me to find you, wants something to change."

"Oh, you might think that, but he loves me the way I am."

"And how about you, do you love him?"

"More than life itself." She looked upwards and her face shone, and I believed her. "Be careful on your way out," she said, "don't touch anything, because he'll know, and think I've done it."

"What would he do then?"

"Oh, he'd think of something."

She lowered her head as I looked back at her, so I could read nothing in her face. I left her there amongst the trash, and in my fury and pity for her I had Gavin Bauble

walking the long distance across the muddy sand and into the sea until he was no more. I felt ashamed that none of us in Cotton Street had known what he'd done to her.

*

I didn't bother with the fish the next day; I climbed the stairs at number four and walked into the bathroom without knocking. She was lying in the bath with her hands crossed over her chest, the water looked greasy. The curtains were drawn together and the air was chilly, yet foetid. "You might've knocked," she whispered.

"I came to ask if you'd like to go on holiday too, Margaret."

She raised her head above the rim of the bath and gazed at me. "I went to the coast by myself on the train once, but I came back the same day because I missed Gavin."

"I'll take you to the coast today, straight away if you like."

"I haven't got anything to wear, John. I know all women say that, but I haven't."

"I've brought you a pair of jeans and a shirt." I put the plastic bag on the floor and pointed at it. "You get dressed, and I'll go and feed the fish and wait for you downstairs." I had no precise plan, but felt that if I could get Margaret Bauble out of the house, something would occur to me.

She rose slowly from the water until she was standing, and even in my agitation I saw the fluid grace of it. "I can't go without discussing it with Gavin. I suspect you're not married, otherwise you'd know about these things."

"But, Margaret, how can you bear to live in all this rubbish?"

"I don't see it anymore; I'm in here all the time."

"In the bath itself all the time?"

"Of course in the bath."

"You two can't be sharing much together as a married couple." I heard my voice rising.

"Oh, we do. He thinks I'm a dolphin, and I go along with it because it pleases him. What's wrong with that? He comes in here a lot and spends time with me. He likes to throw things into the water for me to eat."

"Raw fish I suppose you're going to tell me."

"That's what dolphins eat. You might think it sickening, but the Japanese eat them that way I'm told." I'd upset her. She slid down again into the water, keeping her eyes on me. "You used to like my husband years ago when we first came here. He thinks you're his friend, and men like him don't have a lot of friends. I'll only go if Gavin agrees."

I couldn't persuade her to change her mind and I left her there, submerged once more in the slimy water, blinking up at me.

*

On the day Gavin was due home, I could think of nothing else but the violence I wanted to do to him. He appeared on Cotton Street in the late afternoon. He looked vigorous and strong. "How was the holiday?" I asked, and I could hear my voice trembling.

"Highly recommended. McClaren's Dolphinarium, down on the south coast. Fish OK?"

"All except one," I answered sharply.

He took my meaning instantly, and moved back a step. "She came down? Wouldn't have thought she'd show herself."

"Why are you making her live like that, Gavin?"

"It's what she wants, John. She'll have told you already she's a dolphin. I can scarcely get her to come out of the water, and when she does, she drips all over my property and it drives me mad. You're not married, so you wouldn't understand."

"And where would she sit, what would she do amongst all the trash in your house?" I took a step towards him, and thought of punching him hard.

"Look, I'd do anything to change things, but I can't force her. Collecting objects of interest takes the pressure off; makes me feel I'm still involved in the world. I do love Margaret, you know."

He looked at me candidly, and I could see no flicker of deceit in his face. He stood on the road with me in a creased beige suit, clutching a straw hat in his hands and waiting for me to speak again; for a while I could not, until suddenly the sad reality of his situation dawned on me. "I could help you with this business, Gavin. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Ashamed?"

"Lunacy is not such a taboo thing these days."

"Are you suggesting my wife is mad?"

"I am, yes. She thinks she's a dolphin when clearly she is not."

"And you think you're a good neighbour when clearly you are not." He flicked something off the sleeve of his jacket. His face had turned chalky.

"She needs help, Gavin."

"It's my job to help her, that's why I went to the Dolphinarium."

"To see real dolphins, you mean?" I prompted gently.

"To understand them better. They're so unearthly, John, so graceful and forgiving somehow."

I stared at him hard and felt my pity fade suddenly. "You love dolphins then, Gavin?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

"But you love them more than people."

He raised his hand as if to touch me, and I moved back. "You're very perceptive John. They're so intelligent. We could learn a lot from them. You know when I made eye-contact with my first one I desperately wanted her to like me. It's hard to explain, there wasn't anything supernatural about it really, but when I came out of the water my body felt different, lighter somehow, yes, as if I was full of light and peace."

"And the world would be a better place if we were all like them?" I led him.

"What a question. Of course. Although the human girls at the Dolphinarium were quite lovely too."

He grinned at me and I felt instantly nauseous. "Why didn't you take Margaret with you?"

"I couldn't leave the house empty in case we were burgled. I've got some precious things in there." A mayfly landed on the sleeve of his jacket and he pinched it hard between his fingers and flicked the remains away. "Besides, she doesn't have to study dolphins; she is one."

I felt something shift in my gut; I had him now. "Well I'm taking Margaret on holiday myself. She said she'd discuss it with you, and I strongly suggest you agree to it."

"It's hopeless; she won't come out of the bathroom."

"You'd better persuade her then, otherwise Cotton Street will know everything."

"Know what, what's to know?"

"Know the condition she's in. Know what you've done to her."

"Look John, we're modern people. She wants to live like that. You wouldn't understand such matters."

"You said she was a dolphin."

"Well I don't deny I said it, but she thinks so herself, and I go along with it." He looked quickly up and down the road as if suddenly conscious again of where we stood, and suddenly sure that the conversation had ended.

"You've made her think it. She does it to please you. It's cruel."

"Now you're just being silly, John. You should get married yourself and then you'd know what you were talking about." I thumped him hard in the chest and his hat fell to the ground between us. "She'd like Scotland, in the mountains, perhaps," he whispered.

"She wants to go to the coast."

He made an odd whimpering noise, and I could see he was on the brink of tears. "No, she wouldn't like that at all, John."

"And you go and buy her some proper clothes." I turned away from him abruptly and didn't look back.

*

Margaret was waiting outside the house when I went to collect her. Gavin was very upset, she told me; he didn't want to wave her goodbye. "Do you think this skirt is all right?"

"It's lovely Margaret; yellow suits you. And that's a clever thing you've done with the scarf, it looks very exotic."

"It took ages, Gavin helped me. It's a turban." I could see she was very excited, and I felt emboldened by it. I put the mountaineering magazine Gavin had left on my doorstep the night before next to the stone trout, and took her arm. "Gavin thinks we should head inland, but if you don't mind, I'd like to go to the coast. I've got my swimming suit. Did you bring one?" she asked.

"Of course," I lied, and led her to the car. I had no real idea of what to do still; I was hoping that getting her away from number four would startle her out of the mesmeric state Gavin had carefully nurtured in her over the years.

She seemed nervous in the car and I drove slowly, aware of her beside me all the time. Sometimes she put the palm of her hand on the windscreen as if to draw the countryside into her. We passed fields of rapeseed all in bloom and acid yellow, and the sky was the kind of blue that brought hope with it. "Gavin's a bit obsessed by dolphins, isn't he, Margaret?"

"Everybody's got an obsession, haven't they?"

"What's yours, is it dolphins too?"

"No, I'm not that indulgent. I suppose it would be Gavin."

It had started to rain, and I had a dull headache. The car smelt thick and sweet. "Don't wind the window up, Margaret. The air's fresh and good, don't you think? You said you met him at the seaside."

"Yes. It all seems so long ago now. I can barely remember it."

I glanced at her; her thumbs were clasped tightly inside her fists. "Forgive me for saying this, Margaret, but it seems to me your life has imploded."

"I don't disagree, John. Gavin's a possessive man. He's childishly protective of me. He thinks I'm not coming back. He was still in the bathroom when I woke up this morning. He kept shuddering and sighing like people do when they've been crying far too long and far too deeply."

We reached White Hole Cove in the late afternoon and drove straight to the Harlequin Tea Rooms. We couldn't see the beach from there and Margaret wouldn't eat anything. I could feel her agitation. "Could we go to the sea before the sun sets, John?" She fingered her blouse and I noticed that she had the old grey swimming suit on underneath it, like a child might. I was touched by her strange and gentle innocence. "Margaret, this obsession Gavin has with dolphins isn't healthy. It seems to me you've sacrificed yourself to it. Have you ever thought of leaving him?"

She made a noise that sounded like a gunshot, and I was taken aback for a moment. "Every single day of my life. But people usually leave each other because of hatred, not because of love."

"So you can't leave him?"

"It's terribly difficult if you love someone."

I was beginning to think that the whole venture was fool-hardy; that I'd interfered in something so queer that a couple of days by the sea would be meaningless. "Look, which of you thinks you're a dolphin, tell me that."

She shrugged. "Things get all blurred in a marriage, you start acting like one person I suppose, and then it doesn't matter who thinks what." She looked at me steadily for the first time that day. "You think one of us is mad, don't you?"

"Yes. And I think the other one is nurturing the madness."

"Well, perhaps insanity always involves more than one person." She tried to laugh but the sound was feeble. "Gavin and I should never have got together. It's unnatural, I know." She turned away and covered the side of her face with her hand. I'd pushed her too far, too soon.

"Where shall we go, the cliffs or the beach?"

She thought for a while, looking at the palms of her big hands. "If we go to the cliffs we could watch the sun slip into the ocean, but if we go to the beach we could paddle. The beach."

I could feel the warm salty breeze on my neck and arms as we crossed the glistening pebbles to the shoreline. Margaret led the way, she'd taken her shoes off and as she reached the water's edge she wrenched the turban off her head as if she hated it and unbuttoned and dropped her skirt. I looked behind me, but could see no one in sight. "You're not going in right now are you? We could swim tomorrow all day if you like."

She stood in her baggy swimming suit, fleshy and pale. "I can't wait John. Come in too. The water's delicious."

She turned to beckon me and her face looked keen and beautiful in the dying light, and there was about her a gracefulness that both captivated and shocked me. I went fully clothed into the water behind her, half-afraid to lose her and thrilled by her suddenly. For a while, she dived, surfaced, and then stretched herself on the briny water, moving further out and turning frequently to wave me on. I was entranced and excited; I wanted to reach her and touch her. I swam strongly, keeping her in my sight the while. She was beautiful. The last vision I had of her has never left me; I saw her rise high out of the water, saw the elegant twist and flip of her sleek arched body as she disappeared beneath a wave, as if she'd never been.

*

I drove the car recklessly on the way back to Cotton Street, my hands trembling and slipping on the steering wheel. I tried repeatedly to rehearse what I would say to

Gavin, and each time the words came to me they had no power to describe anything at all. I'd crouched for most of the night on the beach staring at the horizon, sometimes the dark hump of a wave gave me hope, and I got to my feet quickly and called her, yet I knew all the while that Margaret had finally gone home, and we would not see her again.

When I arrived at Gavin's door, it was open, and I knew he'd been waiting for me. I found him sitting in the kitchen. "You don't need to say anything, John," he whispered. His face was blotchy and swollen. "Don't speak now."

"It was all too fast," I blurted out, "I stayed until it was pointless to wait anymore."

"Don't tell me about it, John. Don't." He sighed deeply, and I can still remember it; soft and yielding, and very drawn out like the sound a small wave makes on a beach in fine and windless weather.



The Worlds

By Marina Manoukian

I open the window

And I see a world.

The pale blue sun sends

Streams of light to my window.

The green atmosphere may surprise

But it is the life that I live.

The tall red tree

Grows along my window.

I smile as the little yellow creatures

Inhabit the wood and play their games.

I stroke the tree with a hand

While I use the other to shed my skin.

I shake myself as the skin falls

To my feet.

To many, I may seem odd and different.

But on my planet, I am a beauty

My long flaxen hair of lizards is

Admired far and wide.

I am often compared to the

Purple clouds than rain flowers onto

Our faces.

My long legs are the envy of the planet

And many wish that they were as

Flexible as I

I am able to twist my body up

As the great spider on the sun of

Blaze.

My planet

My life is different from yours

We are neither better nor worse.

Just different.

When we meet

Do not look at me with a look of disgust

My planet and I are beautiful.

Your planet and you are beautiful.

We are what we are.



Others Must Fail

Fraser Sherman

"It's not like I'm George Soros, I only made \$700,000 yesterday." Holding court by the wet bar, Richard smiled modestly and accepted a glass of Glen Fidditch from his chesty new girlfriend. "Pure luck."

"Thousands of people lost their shirts," Eric said, waving Rick's explanations away. "Selling out twelve hours after the IPO, genius!"

"A hunch." Richard scrutinized the amethyst on his finger as if embarrassed by the fuss. "Honestly, all the credit goes to my lucky ring here."

Everyone laughed and continued lauding his brilliance, except me. I stepped out onto Richard's balcony and stared out over the Gulf of Mexico, sipping my third martini of the evening. I could put up with Richard's false modesty normally, but not after my day.

"Brooding won't help, Hal." Andrea caught the door before it slid shut and joined me outside, Guinness clutched in one hand. "I know you feel shitty about losing the contract—"

"My freelance career is dead. Tomorrow morning I'll have to crawl to Jerry and ask for my job back. Why wouldn't I feel shitty, if I'd just backed up the finished designs—but never mind that, I heard about the profile [Emerald Coast Magazine](#) is doing on you, I think it's fantastic. Those new paintings—"

"Oh, baby." She stretched onto her toes and kissed me. It soothed me more than any amount of gin. "You always back your work up, your father's fall just made you—"

"Stupid. I had time to back it up, but I panicked. My own dumb fault."

"Not yours." She tensed, but I was too tipsy to realize why. "A couple of bad breaks combined, the fall, the hard drive crashing, it's—"

"Luck is an excuse for losers. It's like missing the deadline with Norm, if I'd given myself more leeway, the flu wouldn't—"

"Nobody wins every time, Hal." She caught my hand and squeezed. "The race isn't always to the swift, nor battle to the strong—"

"Richard hasn't lost money on an investment since he came back from Greece fired up with his 'success outlook.'"

"And that ugly 'lucky ring.' Yeah, if he says success is all luck—"

"Bragging about how smart he is would piss everyone off." I hugged Andy close, rubbed my chin on top of her head. She gave the usual grunt of disapproval. "The phony modesty gets him more compliments. But look in my success library, every book I've ever bought says luck is for rabbits—success and failure are never random. Good or bad, things happen for a reason."

"But you don't control all the reasons." She tensed again, twisting around in my arms so she could face the sunset. "Catching the flu isn't—"

"If I'd taken flu shots, that wouldn't have happened. I take credit for my success, I gotta accept responsibility for being a failure."

"You're not a failure." She broke away, stiff as a board now. "And it's not your responsibility, any more than—"

"Than your mother, is that what you're going to say?" Shit. I should have seen it coming. "For the last time, you're not a jinx, and there's no such thing as a 'karma vampire.'"

"People who don't have half your talent and professionalism are doing fine, Hal." I hugged her, but she stayed rigid. "You're right there's a reason, but—"

"My problems are not your fault, Andy. I don't care how many people in your family are bankrupt, depressed or sick—I mean, I care, but they're not your fault either."

"Right. Dad's injuries, Mom's bankruptcy, Carol's illness, all coinciding with my big commissions, just coincidence."

"Coupled with survivor guilt, yeah."

"And it's complete coincidence you were doing fine until you met—"

Which is when I kissed her, because no matter how stupid this idea was, I knew how much it hurt her.

We didn't stop kissing. By the time she drove us home, I didn't care about anything but being naked with my wonderful, crazy, superstitious lover.

Bad karma? Meeting her was the closest thing to pure luck that ever happened to me. Ever.

*

"Jogging accident?" Andrea's face paled as she set the groceries on the counter. "How bad?"

"Sue's lucky to be alive, that's all I know." The word was she wouldn't walk again, but I knew that would freak Andy out worse. "Truck driver fell asleep, veered off the road—honey, you've only met her a couple of times at Richard's, you can't imagine—"

"She was at that marketing conference with me last week." She began slamming cans into the pantry. "Just—last—week!"

"Andy, stop it!" I put my arms around her, refusing to let her wriggle free. "Even if you were a jinx, you couldn't zap someone by one meeting in a conference room."

"You say luck's an excuse for screwing up. I don't see any way Sue screwed up."

"Jogging along the bypass? I know there's a trail, but it's too damn close to the road." Smelling Andy's frizzy hair, I wished I could kiss this nonsense away once and for all. "The guy had been driving 21 hours straight, he crashed, Sue put herself in a position where she was vulnerable. No karmic vampire needed, just cause and effect, like knocking over a row of dominoes."

"Haven't you noticed how many dominoes have hit your friends since you met me?" She gave me the look that said I was blind not to see it. "Eric's on antidepressants, Sylvia and Rebecca broke up, Chip came down with septi—that bacterial thing, you're back to the nine-to-five grind, while my art career's really taking off. Same as back home."

"And you really think you're a success because you steal luck?" That the part I didn't get at all. "Andy, you're talented, you're professional, you work like hell, you network—why do you think your success needs some other explanation?"

"Mom worked hard at investments, didn't help her, did it? Or my sister Carol, she's an expert in her field and where is she now? Downsized, divorced, depressed, cancer."

"You said yourself that her getting canned gutted their marriage. Put divorce and joblessness together, you have depression, mental state affects your health—"

"So everything's under our control?" Another can slammed down. "No luck, nothing random?" A louder slam.

"Our planning beforehand and our responses afterwards are completely under our control. My failure as a freelancer is entirely my fault, and you're not to blame because your mother invested in those dotcoms."

"But, Hal, I have two friends from art school who are three times as good as me and not doing one-tenth as well. And my bumping into you when I moved here while Stephanie hasn't found anyone since—"

"Just because you can't see the dominoes doesn't mean they didn't fall. Besides—" I caught her hands, pulled them away from the pantry. "Even if your success was all luck, how does that prove you stole it from someone else? Luck's just an accumulated series of coin tosses, you can't steal it, any more than you get extra by carrying around a four-leafed clover."

"Look at Richard. Everything was going wrong before Greece—Helen dead, his father's heart attack, his business going under—but once he got control of his attitude, he was able to turn the dominoes, send them falling the right way."

Without a word, Andy turned around and resumed putting away the groceries. But at least she didn't slam them.

*

"Can you pick up Michelle for the poker game tonight, Hal?"

"Richard—" I glanced around the office, hoping Jerry didn't spot me answering my cell on sacred company time. "Why isn't Owen—"

"He's at Sacred Heart. Ripped a tendon running."

"Shit."

"No, surprise, I've run with him and he doesn't stretch out half the time. But if—"

I saw Jerry's office door open, agreed to pick up Michelle, and ended the call. Dammit, Andrea and Owen were movie buddies, this would be further grist for her obsession.

My cellphone started to vibrate, but Jerry was heading my way. Even though it was from Andy, I let it go to voicemail.

When I listened to the message thirty minutes later, my heart stopped.

*

"Don't speak." I held up my hand to forestall her. "Girls on respirators need to rest their lungs, you know that, baby."

I babbled meaningless encouragement until she grew tired—it didn't take long—then I went out to talk to her nurse, whom, fortunately, I knew. "Toni, I know you've got medical confidentiality—"

"It's pneumonia. The new strain." I stared at her blankly. "It's resistant to pretty much every antibiotic—"

"How bad?" Silence stretched out long and hard.

Stupidly, the first thing to flit through my head was that Andy would finally have to admit she wasn't stealing other people's good fortune.

*

"No, it's still cause and effect," I said as Rebecca joined me on the hospital couch, setting my coffee and takeout on the table. "I know that, but ... it doesn't feel like it. It doesn't feel like this is anything but stupid dumb luck."

"Shit happens." Rebecca opened a styrofoam container of something vegetarian. "Why do you think your life should be different?"

"I know shit happens, dammit! But winners learn to overcome the setbacks. Luck's an excuse—" I glanced toward Andy's room. The clichés died on my tongue.

"Other way around." She scratched absently at the nicotine patch on her arm. "Success is the way we excuse luck."

"Huh?"

"Everyone thinks my sister in Jacksonville's a genius because she pulled out of the real estate market there right before the condo bubble burst. Truth is, she sold out because she needed cash, but she made so much money even she believes she's brilliant."

"Well—if she isn't, she'll lose the money next time. Luck doesn't last, talent and hard work does. There was an example in one book I read—"

"Henry Kissinger once said being famous meant that when people found him boring, they blamed themselves." Rebecca popped the tab on her Dr. Pepper, then waited for it to go flat. "Maybe being richer than other people means people think you must be smarter. Or maybe we want to believe the books are right, that all the bad shit is under our control, that life isn't a big crapshoot. I'm sure that's why Andy wants to believe she's a karma vampire, so that everything her family's been through makes some sort of sense."

Craps rather than dominoes? I didn't believe that.

But I prayed that if it were true, Andy would make a winning roll. Two sixes. Or whatever it was. I don't play craps.

*

"Thanks, buddy." I found myself hugging Richard, who'd just arrived at Andy's viewing. "The flowers are beautiful. Her mother cried when she saw them."

So had I, but I didn't say it.

"It's the least I could do for her, Hal." He twisted his ring nervously as I let go. "I had no idea anything like this could happen to her."

"You know she felt guilty because her life was so good." I glanced at her family, gathered around the coffin. Even heavily medicated, I felt like screaming. "Actually thought she stole other people's luck. Funny, huh?"

I laughed. It sounded creepy, so I stopped.

"She had a lot of luck, I could feel it." He twisted the ring again; Andy was right, it was ugly. Three women's heads in a weave of lines, no pattern to the design. "Meeting that gallery owner, getting that magazine profile—but, I swear to you I never imagined she'd do this badly if her luck ran out."

"Richard, I don't want more luck talk, okay?"

"They told me that Fate had to be disinterested, impersonal. Someone told me, I mean. It might seem unfair Andy randomly got more luck than her family, but if Fate played favorites, rigged the game—I never realized how bad that might be, how much—"

"Richard, shut the hell up!" The anger in my voice was nothing to compared to what I felt building up behind it. "I know the karmic vampire thing is bullshit, everyone but Andy knew that, but now that she's gone, I won't—I can't—dammit, she—"

I started to cry. And couldn't stop for a long time.

*

The ironic thing was, my luck turned right after Andy died.

Okay, not really luck: Richard knew some people in Atlanta, did some networking and found a graphics firm that needed someone with exactly my mix of skills. The salary was almost double and I could finally tell Jerry to kiss my ass.

I've even had some freelance successes since I moved up here. But again, no luck, just a matter of knowing people in the business and not screwing up like I used to.

So it's nothing to do with Andy, I know that. But I keep thinking that I'd have taken being jinxed, taken working for Jerry, if I could have kept her with me. Kept her from damn, damn, damn!

See why I haven't started dating again?

Despite my career taking off, nobody else's 'luck' improved after Andy died. Richard made another killing of course—foreign currency—but Eric had to be committed after a suicide attempt and Sylvia died when a drunk ran a red light.

Her death shook Richard up so much, he left town. In his last e-mail to me, he said he was switching to stable investments, the kind that aren't much of a gamble. That way he could travel the world without thinking about money, and traveling meant he wouldn't be "too great a burden" for any one person.

Which I still think was a funny thing to say. False modesty or not, he's a great guy.
And a complete rock when Andy died.

I can't see how he'd be a burden to anyone.



Six Chapters of Swerve

By Charles C Brooks III

(1)

My long eyelashes in an old Cadillac stretch out
on an infinity of untouched country roads.
Windows down, Janis Joplin shaking the gears, my transgressions
flitter away like discarded cigarette butts.

Take a little piece of my heart now baby!

I am receptive to these manufactured macabre spirits,
and whistle with my heart to flights of the imagination.

Then the night comes and I am sleepless.
My medication, my contemplation hasn't taken enough out.
Vivaldi and his seasons hum around me
like a blanket.

From my daily trials to nightly vigils,
I take the discomfort with a grain of salt.

I silently scream to tomorrow, "Wake up! Wake up!"

in a futile effort to rouse the morning's sunlight chariot.

I am unmoved by the tides and nocturnally confused.

Starry-eyed, I make-believe

everyone else is unconscious to recuperate in my stead.

It is a misgiving, this trial by fire and hailstones.

Reacting in a calm obsession, unable to

softly swerve from one blue hue

to another, I rationalize this as a cerebral fury.

Does the night hear me?

{Yes.}

Quite simply

I am here at the same time as you, connected

by loose associations

and a want to get all this on paper.

Look into the phrase, the words, *the need*,

and pluck out my intentions between the best metaphors!

The poetry of silent reverie and soft violins

keep me company until

the bed overcomes me.

I surrender, tired after making good

on my talent. Hollow after my harrowing stab,

I can still keep this up forever.

(2)

I write a line, maybe two,

turning this verse to my travelling muse's attention.

She takes all that wasted passion

once squandered

and sparks a pulse, supple features,

my reflection in this candid art.

I was a roller once. A lifetime ago I spent

obscene wads of 20's in the wrong places,

worshiped by the Bleak of Heart,

savaged by selfish, self-righteous Sirens.

Yet I was not absorbed and forgotten like a sad excuse.

I was a Melancholy Star, bright but shined for no one.

That was life,

but that existence has expired for these butterfly afternoons.

I don't make excuses, no time to soothe

egos now that I am up and jamming

like a possessed Jimmy Hendrix.

The girl, my private Psyche, I awake with now

is better than honey on hot toast!

I don't need nothin' but her.

This new blues is iron clad and slick like

the best closing argument. But it is a serene kind of blue,

jazz in the background of my mind.

Like Muddy Waters before Tony Bennett,

Bennett played best after Billie Holliday.

John Coltrane and Miles Davis swoon me through heartbreak.

(3)

It's all symphonic with my ear to God's jukebox,
the winter fists softening into spring kisses.
I am unplugged and a live wire with
no end in sight. Passionate to the quick,
in no hurry to face Death,
unafraid of Charon's shadow.
It is buckshot to the back, the bleakest boat ride.
Luckily my soul has a map to coattails of Paradise.

(4)

I am untouchable and at ease.
I am all over this everlasting ladybug creation!
Nina Simone is rocking on her front porch
purring for those in the smoking section.
Inspiration and I admire how Nina's emotion
is catered raw, preserving her war against bad men.

My heart beats in a boast on Friday,
where I am unloaded, heart unburdened, looking
at another weekend wrapped in verse.
I am never so brow-beaten during the week that
I would complain. There is no rain, my emotional investments
gaining speed.

(5)

I get all full of Kerouac once a year. I lose
a great interest in the man soon there-after
as his weakness is shared by me.

It killed him,
so you can see why I keep us distant cousins.

So I read Kerouac until the air sours in my mind's
whiskey glass.

I always allow eleven months between drafts.

In that time I take good care of my sober intent
and lawns of lilac with honeysuckles.

Locked on this sprouting, spreading beauty

I think of lunch. Tomato soup and sharp cheddar,
cared for and caring. I am in a devout high stock,
currently repaying God. I love this life, these days,
the sound of Etta James when she whispers, "At Last".

(6)

I got up this morning, youthful comets of words on the wallpaper,
then blazed over to mom's and cut the lawn.

I was listening to Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata"
when I decided to mow down the vacant neighbour's
travesty of a landscaping attempt.

I respectfully knocked down the everglades they were growing.

All the peaceful faiths would have approved.

Mom was happy that I did well for simply the satisfaction.

She smiled the smile we share

and then fed me almonds and a Diet Coke.

We talked for a good half hour before I excused myself

and bound for the coffee shop. These hours are an intoxicating silk.

Soon I'll woo an espresso into my Jamaican Blue Mountain

and wax thoughtful over a blueberry muffin.

The breeze today is inspired

and pregnant with sheer possibility.

This rambling prayer

is a church for kindness and spring dancing.

It is natural.

A lifetime etched for you,

my Cadillac doors open for your company.

We can talk while you choose

our pilgrimage soundtrack,

or fall silent and lose ourselves in Georgia pines.



Woman is Cipher is Woman

by M. Lawrence Key

It is after.

He sits on the edge of the rumpled bed, facing away from her, his back rigid. His hands fumble with his shirt buttons, twitching with every lilting syllable she speaks.

"Darling, haven't you been listening to me?" comes her pleasant purr.

He shivers, and speaks without turning.

"Of course I've been listening."

She laughs softly. He hears the sheets rustle and feels them tug underneath him as she sits up.

"So what did I say?" she asks in a playful tone.

His shoulders slump. He still doesn't turn around to look at her.

"Don't be stupid," he says. "You were asking when we'd meet again. You always ask afterwards. That's what you're supposed to ask. You're supposed to try to get me to come back."

He turns and looks her in the eye. "Do you want me to come back, Desirée?" he asks. In response, her perfect eyebrows knit themselves into a questioning look.

Here it comes. Not: what's wrong? Or: are you mad at me? There's no argument or tears ahead of them. Just this:

"Of course I want you to come back, darling," she says. "Set a date, and don't be late!"

She giggles, and there are silver chimes in her voice.

He fixes his eyes upon her, drinking her in. She is beautiful, no doubt. Raven-black

hair flows over her bare milky white shoulders. Her eyes are wide and green, somehow innocent and seductive all at once. Her lips are red, redder than a woman's should be. She holds the bed sheet tucked up under her chin as she sits there, waiting for his answer. His eyes travel back to her hair again. A lump rises in his throat as he suddenly chokes out unbidden words.

"You know, I'd really prefer you to be blonde next time."

Her hair briefly shimmers as its colour shifts.

"And a little shorter. With blue eyes."

The sheets fall a little as her height changes. The emerald in her eyes is replaced by bright sapphire. Those eyes, different, and yet somehow the same, still look at him, waiting.

He stands up, his back to her again, and says, "Next Wednesday. After I get my pay check."

He reaches out for the handle of the large yellow door with the blinking "Exit" sign above and pulls. The door opens--

And then he was on the street. Released from the clutches of the Pleasure Booth, minus expenses, of course. He was himself again. His name came back to him with only a small gasp of effort: Gerrold Dunn. He looked around, disoriented for a moment. The alley he was in seemed unfamiliar. He shook his head to bring his own dreary reality back into focus. At the same moment, he realized that the beeping sound he was hearing wasn't a leftover auditory ghostwave from the Pleasure Booth implant under his scalp. It was his corporate aug, reminding him that he was late for work. He tapped the electronics laced under his flesh next to his right eye, then swore softly under his breath.

His boss was trying to reach him, leaving a text to the effect that he could kiss his job goodbye if he wasn't in the office in 10 minutes. Beyond the alleyway, he heard the low whine of a transport pulling up to a stop. He began to run.

*

"It worked out okay," Gerrold said. "He chewed me out for awhile, but I told him my transport broke down, and he bought it."

Burr shook his head, chuckling softly with amusement. "I don't know how you do it. If it'd been me, Brande would've had my head on a platter." The men found two empty seats on the rapidly filling afternoon rush hour transport and settled down across from each other. "What was up with you today, anyway? And don't give me any of that 'my transport was late' crap. I'm not Brande."

Gerrold swallowed. "It was, well, it's kind of hard to explain..."

Burr stared at him, easily picking up the guilty look on Gerrold's face. "Oh man, not again," he said. "What's with you? Haven't you had enough of that plastic hooker?"

"Her name is Desirée," Gerrold said. "And no, I haven't 'had enough'. She's perfect. I've never been with anyone like her. Sometimes I think she's almost alive. If I could just find a way to make her all mine, to get her away from that company that controls her like a stupid puppet--"

"Forget about it, man. You're obsessed. There's no way."

"Maybe."

On one knee, Gerrold held a neon orange business card lightly flexed between thumb and forefinger. Some guy at the office New Year's party this year had slipped it

to him, saying it might come in handy someday. He gently tapped it with his ring finger and felt the barely perceptible vibrations as the little animation started up. He didn't have to look down into his lap to see the words marching across the card's violent orange field, to read what it promised. He knew it by heart.

"What about Priss?" The question dropped like a stone into a dark pond.

Gerrold turned his head from the transport window.

"Ever been married?" he said. "No? Then shut up."

How could he explain the cloying suffocation, lying year after year next to a woman who didn't know him? A woman who remained in the same stiflingly familiar shape every night, who never changed at all? To him, Priss was the known, the solved equation. When they made love, it was always the same routine.

But Desirée--she was the cipher, different every time, always learning, adapting herself to Gerrold. She was exciting, intoxicating. He had to have her all for himself, no matter what.

A brassy, sensuous music started up over the transport's sound system, and with a certainty born of familiarity, Gerrold looked up at the vidscreen. There she was, wantonly displaying her glories for everyone on the transport to taste. Like Burr, Gerrold tried to look at her impassively and glance back at the news feed flowing over the transport windows, but his face betrayed an inner struggle. If only there was a way to take her away from her slavery. If she was with him all the time, she could become far more than just the town bicycle. Gerrold grimaced with disgust at the old joke his mind had just dredged up, and its accompanying image. His eyelids slid down and his mind drifted to a place where the two of them were alone, at their ease, no timer ticking down, and she was his forever.

Loud raucous laughter erupted from a section of the transport several meters towards the front, jarring him from Desirée's soft arms. It was a group of youth, all of them decked out in ripped vinyl and extreme body mods. The other passengers on the transport had given them a wide berth, and they'd made several rows of empty seats their temporary perch.

One of them was regaling his comrades with a bawdy rendition of some sexual escapade of his. Engrossed in the infofeed tablet on his knees, Burr appeared to not have noticed them. Gerrold moved his briefcase a little closer to his body, but out of prurient curiosity found himself listening in.

Nearly half a minute passed before he realized who the youth were talking about, and then his chest contracted painfully. They were swapping stories about Desirée. Gerrold's cheeks began to burn as he heard them recounting in explicit detail what each of them had done to her, whenever they'd gotten enough credits to afford her. A shrill indignation rose up in him, and the impulse to rise and pummel them broken and bloody filled his veins. He clenched his fists, and his stomach roiled. He put the orange business card in his pocket and stood.

Burr looked up from his infofeed as Gerrold gripped his briefcase and a loop hanging from the transport ceiling.

"What are you doing?" he said. "This isn't your stop, is it?"

Clutching his briefcase with both arms, Gerrold barely heard his colleague or the automated announcement of the stop. Some remaining motive power got him to the transport's doors and down the steps. Still dizzy from his anger, he stood at the transport stop and looked around unsteadily as the transport pulled away. He was in an older section of the city. On every side were weather-stained buildings, some with their

windows boarded up. The metroplex of Daustin had made some meagre efforts in recent years to renovate this area. New loft apartments rose behind him and the sidewalk cafés and used bookstores lined the street to his right, but the whole place still teetered on the precipice of skid row, its reprieve uncertain.

Gerrold glanced around, not anxious to linger here. Across the street, he saw the building he'd come here to find. He hurried over.

*

Beside the door, a battered sign read in white on black:

"Jan Devries, Technical Services." Glancing at the card in his hand for confirmation, Gerrold raised his hand to knock on the plain metal door.

"Door's open," came a female voice from inside.

She was sitting behind the room's sole desk. Her chair was the large, black leather type favoured by business execs, and her denim jacket and worn jeans made a strange contrast against its sumptuous surface. As she leaned back, her hair fanned dramatically around her head like a frizzy red flame. Behind her and along both side walls hung half a dozen large viewscreens showing everything from market prices to pages of gibberish that Gerrold assumed to be code. Her feet--shod in expensive ostrich-skin boots--were propped on the desk, one on top of the other. Her hands cradled a tablet computer. She held the stylus suspended above the computer's screen, waiting.

"Close the door behind you," she said. "You're letting the air out."

Obediently, Gerrold shut the door as he came forward.

"Have a seat." She crooked a grin at him and her soft Georgia twang changed to a mock Freudian accent: "Tell me your trouble."

Gerrold shivered as he sat in the single black leather chair in front of her desk. The room was unnaturally cold--it couldn't be more than a few degrees above freezing in here. It was all he could do to keep his teeth from chattering.

"It's about a woman," Gerrold said.

Devries' grin widened. "Ain't it always? Now what do you need me for? I'm not a shrink or a priest, so if you got anything to confess, you'd best go someplace else."

"It's not like that."

Gerrold wrung his hands in his lap, twisting them around and around.

"It's just that, well, I want her all to myself. I don't want anyone else to have her anymore."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Desirée."

"Oh." Devries let the tablet computer fall to her lap, and her face revealed her sudden understanding. A guarded look came into her eyes.

"Desirée, huh? The VR whore? What do you want me to do about it?"

Gerrold's jaw tightened, but he chose to ignore Devries' comment for the moment. "I don't know how, but I want you to figure out a way to transfer her to me and me alone."

Devries' hands went up and her face became a cautious mask.

"Hey, you got me wrong, bud," she said. "I don't do that kind of stuff. 'case you hadn't heard, it's illegal."

Without a word, Gerrold drew the orange card from his shirt pocket with two

fingers and flicked it onto the table. It rotated slowly and skittered to a stop next to the heel of one of Devries' boots. For a moment, the hacker eyed it with an arched eyebrow, and then her gaze snapped back to Gerrold's face. She visibly relaxed.

"You didn't say you had my ref card," she said. "That's different. One of my guys must've thought you were a good risk."

She put her fingertips together. "Now, I'll level with you. What you want can't be done."

"Why not?"

"Let alone getting her out, do you have any idea what kind of storage space you'd need for her? Or the processing power you'd need to run her? Or how much the hook-ups alone would cost?"

He shook his head mutely.

"I didn't think so. Believe me, there's no way you can afford on your salary what it'd cost you." She smirked suddenly and tossed the orange card back at him. It landed on his shirt, where he scrambled to catch it. "And don't think I can't find out what you make, so don't try lying to me."

A vast disappointment settled over Gerrold like a lead cloak. "But I have to have her," he said. "I can't stand it anymore, all those men using her--" He choked himself to silence. Turning in his chair, he began to rise to his feet.

"I'd better go," he said. "Thanks for nothing."

"Wait."

Gerrold turned back and looked her. Jan had a gleam of interest in her eyes that belied her earlier nonchalance.

"I have an idea," she said. "It's gonna piss a lot of people off, but it'll guarantee no

other man ever touches Desirée again."

Without hesitation, Gerrold sat and scooted his chair up to the front of the desk. Inwardly, he trembled, for he could sense he was about to cross a line, a point of no return. But in the back of his mind, he could still hear the satyr-like laughter of the men on the transport.

"Tell me," he said.

*

Ajay Patel had his earbuds in, eyes closed as he grooved to the Edge's solo on the third track of "Rattle and Hum." It took him a few moments to realize someone was speaking to him from the other side of his desk.

"Detective Patel?"

His eyelids flew open then slowly settled to half-mast, their usual position. He plucked out the earbuds, letting them dangle from one hand.

"Yes?"

"Sorry to disturb you on your lunch hour," the young tech officer standing in the doorway said. "But something came in that you should see."

He tossed a bright red file card on Patel's desk. "Central Processing flagged it and sent it over to you."

Patel picked up the card with a puzzled look on his dark brown face. He raised one eyebrow and looked up at the filetech.

"This is red. Homicide. Not my division."

"Yeah, I know," the filetech said quickly. "Take a look anyway."

Sighing audibly, Patel inserted the card into the slot in the top of his desk. The viewscreen finished its overview in less than a minute. When it was done, Patel's eyes flicked up from the screen to the face of the filetech, and his sangfroid was gone.

"Fifteen dead?" he said.

"So far. There are several more in critical condition right now. The rest are affected with varying degrees of brain damage."

"What happened?"

"Homicide is hoping you can shed some light on the whole thing. Visuals show the perp entering Desirée's chamber with a gun and shooting her, but--

"That's supposed to be impossible," Patel said. He closed his eyes, massaging the bridge of his nose. "Did anyone get a login ID of any kind? I didn't see one in the report."

"The data construct was completely scrambled at the source when the incident occurred," the filetech said. "The only way we even know what happened is that we got a few frame grabs before the whole thing went south. Somebody really knew what they were doing."

Before the officer had completed his sentence, Patel was already opening the images on his desk viewer. They flashed up under his hands, grainy and distorted nightmares.

Desirée waiting in bed for her encounter with her john. The perp entering. Something in his hand. The perp's arm ramrod straight in front of him, the room lit with harsh shadows now, as if from a lightning flash. The final shot: a rumpled bed with the nude body of a woman lying on it white sheets, a contrasting dark stain spreading underneath her.

Patel slowly exhaled, unaware until that point that he'd been holding his breath

while the images had flashed past.

"Her body," he whispered.

In death, Desiree was no longer the Caucasian blonde beauty she'd started out as during her final encounter. Her skin was mottled with several shades of brown. Her hair was a piebald mix of blonde, brunette and fiery red. At the sight of the next image, Patel's heart jumped against his ribcage. A monstrosity lay upon the bed now. Half of the skin on Desiree's head was gone, exposing an impossibly white skull. From one thigh, another hand had sprouted, jutting out at a grotesque angle. The remaining side of her face rippled and flowed like melting plastic. Patel flinched in disgust, but the cool, rational part of his mind kept working.

"He scrambled her," he said. "Those virtual bullets contained some sort of fast-acting virus."

"Can't they just reboot her, bring her back up, maybe ask her what happened?"

"No, this is permanent, as near as I can tell from the report. Whatever code that VR gun object had in it permeated her entire system, blowing through every block and firewall. It even reverse tracked its way to the servers where the backups were kept and destroyed them too. The whole thing's toast. Desirée is finished. Dead."

Patel drummed his fingers rapidly on the desk, speaking in a quick, confident tone that contrasted with his usual languorous style. "To crack and scramble a sophisticated construct like Desiree would take some genius programming, way beyond the usual level." He stabbed his long, delicately jointed finger at the grainy figure on the viewer. "Fortunately, there's a short list of people I know of who could have done this."

"You think you know who the triggerman was?"

Patel looked up and blinked slowly at the tech officer.

"Possibly. Without a login record, we could try flashing his visual around, see if anyone recog's him, but that's slow. There's no way to know what this guy's motives are, and there are six other pleasure constructs out there besides Desirée run by rival corporations. He might be about to do them all."

"Frying anyone else connected at the time."

"Right. So we don't have time to track him down. But I think I can finger the person who created that gun. Classic means and motive. Means narrows it down to half a dozen with that kind of programming skill. But motive narrows it to one."

"So then we start with him."

"Her."

*

The SWAT team assigned to bust in on Jan Devries' warehouse and take her in for interrogation was efficient and stealthy. They were all consummate professionals, and worked together like an oiled machine. Nevertheless, they set off three silent alarms even before they knocked down her door. Not that it mattered. Jan had cleared everything out hours before. The important stuff was safely hidden in a modified van nearby. She herself sat quietly across the street from her warehouse watching the raid in progress on her PDA's screen and sipping a double espresso. She knew no one could visually ID her--she'd been record clean all of her career. Still, she was riding a pleasant buzz of anxiety, being so near the action. It made her feel like a voyeur to watch her own place being broken into by a bunch of heavily-armed cops. She smiled to herself and lifted the demitasse to her darkly stencilled lips.

"This seat taken?"

Jan raised her eyes to look at the owner of the delicious Caribbean accent. She slowly inhaled the steam from the espresso into her nostrils, considered, then said:

"Sit down, Detective Patel."

"Good, you recognize me," he said. "No need for tedious introductions, then."

"You won't need that, either." Jan cocked her head towards the half-glimpsed gun Patel had let her see as he pulled his chair out. "I won't run."

"Even better." Patel sat, put his elbows on the table and folded his hands. "I know you mostly as Calamity. I assume then your real name's probably Jane or one of its variations."

"I'm impressed," she said. "You know your American history. Pretty good for a Trinidad fishing guide's son." She put the cup down. "How'd you find me?"

Patel let a small smile touch his lips, refusing to allow her obviously calculated info reveal to bait him into divulging more than absolutely necessary. With someone like Calamity, loose lips could sink more than just ships. "Trade secret. Let's just say I followed your footprints."

Jan glanced into her lap. "My PDA. My narrowcast sig."

Patel's smile became enigmatic, and he said nothing.

"What do you want, Patel?"

"Just the answer to a couple of questions."

"You know the drill. I want a deal first."

Without hesitation, Patel produced a pad from inside his coat. "Read it and then make your mark. It's binding in every domain."

She glanced over the doc. Standard immunity for evidence turned. She read it

through quickly then hovered her thumb over the square at the bottom without touching the surface. A moment later, the hacked RFID under her thumbnail flashed her avatar ID—just as acceptable as her "real" identity in most domains, considering her ironclad rep. After all this was over, she'd have to pack up and reinvent herself someplace else though, now that she'd been made. Inwardly, she winced at the thought of having to build up her net status all over again, but she had little choice. She handed the completed tablet over.

"I guess you want to know about the guy I wrote the program for, the one who killed that whore Desirée." There was a note of smugness in her voice as she said it.

"Fifteen real people died as a result of what you did, and there are more with critical brain damage," Patel said. "This isn't just about destroying an expensive pleasure construct anymore, no matter how much you hate it and what it stands for."

Jan's jaw tightened, making her already slim, freckled face look gaunt in the early evening light.

"I didn't mean for anyone to die," she said finally.

Patel studied her face for a moment. "I believe you," he said. "Now help me find this guy before he kills anyone else. Anything will help. Name, address, whatever you've got."

Jan exhaled her mild exasperation. "I can give you a description of him, but that's it. I always insist on strict anonymity with my clients. You know that."

"I've already got some good frame grabs of the guy, but it's not enough. He's off record, and I need to track him down fast, before he does this again. Do you have anything else? Think, Calamity."

No one had ever used her avatar name with her in real life before. She liked the

sound of it. Half-lowering her eyelids, Jan stared off into the middle distance, concentrating. While she thought, Patel ordered another espresso like the one that was getting cold in front of her. It wasn't until after Patel's espresso had arrived, and the waiter had left, that Jan's head snapped up and her eyes grew bright.

"Listen," she said. "I can't promise anything, but I think

I know of a way to contact your guy. If I can get him to show up at my place at a certain time--"

"We'll do the rest."

"Then expect to hear from me very soon. Ciao."

And then she was gone. For a few moments, Patel watched her effortlessly worm her way into the crowd. Only after she was gone did he realize: she'd stuck him with the bill.

*

A gun was in his hand, and his wife's body was at his feet, twisted where it had fallen on the linoleum floor of their kitchen. She had tried to run from him at the last. The acrid odour of cordite hung in the air like an accusation, and beneath it, the iron smell of blood. Gerrold swallowed once, deliberately, and shuffled closer to Priss's corpse.

He stood over her still form, waiting with a dreadful sureness for something unnamed to happen. And then it did. Her face rolled up to meet his, half of it dripping blood from the growing puddle that had formed underneath her. Her eyes were blanks, staring at him, holding him with a horrible power. "You killed me," she said, simply,

without expression.

Gerrold gasped, flailed for something steady, and woke. The low drone of an electric engine and shifting movement underneath him quickly dissipated his disorientation. He was on a transport. His head ached where it had just struck the window, and he could still feel the fear in his body from the dream. He shuddered and looked to see if the gun was in his hands. They were empty. He clutched his jacket pocket, felt the weight concealed there, and blew out his sudden anxiety through pursed lips.

Blinking his sleep out, he looked around to see if anyone had noticed his sudden paroxysm of motion. The passengers, clustered in groups of twos and threes throughout the half-empty transport, were all staring ahead or talking quietly to each other. If any had noticed him, they gave no indication. His hand slipped inside his jacket pocket and encountered the cold metal there, the death-dealer nestled in the hidden darkness of his nylon Mavericks jacket. He slid his hand around it, caressed the smooth grip, inserted his index finger in the metal loop. Somehow, it slowed the hammering of his heart. It was like an anchor, but he didn't know yet if it was dragging him down or holding him fast. He closed his eyes.

"What do you have there? Is that a gun?"

Gerrold's eyes flew open, and his head jerked up towards the source of the voice, *her* voice. The vidscreen above him, which had been showing a beer commercial, flickered out and filled with static. As he stared, the static slowly resolved itself into a single grainy photograph of a naked woman lying spread-eagled on a bed, blood bubbling thickly out of a gaping wound in her sternum. Gerrold shrank back into his seat, glancing around him wildly. No one else on the bus appeared to have noticed

the macabre image. He looked up again at the vidscreen. Desirée was now gone, replaced by an contraceptives ad that showed a couple making love on a beach. He suddenly felt nauseated and turned away.

"Renaissance Place, next stop," the automated voice above announced, and Gerrold rose to his to his feet, his knees shaking.

Through the windows of the transport, he could see the row of little cafés and antique stores and across the street, the unremarkable warehouse where he'd first met the woman who'd ruined his life. The transport jerked as it hissed to a stop and he let the momentum carry him forward to the exit.

*

The police barrier field in front of Jan's former office door flashed yellow and orange, alternating with a message in scrolling red letters clearly stating the penalties for unauthorized personnel who broke the barrier. By the time he saw the barrier, though, Gerrold was past comprehending what police regs he was breaking. He went through it without hesitation, staggering a little from the small electric shock it sent through his body. Throwing himself against the door, he pounded the cold metal with his fists. "Jan! Let me in! Help me!"

Without warning, the door came unstuck, and Gerrold staggered, half-fell, into the cavernous room on the other side.

Slowly, Gerrold got to this feet and looked around him. The place was silent and dark, the air stuffy and warm. The computers that had hummed and blinked along the walls were silent. Wires trailed out of gaping black maws in their faces where someone

had ripped components out of them. The huge screens that hung around him on the walls were also darkened now, though here and there he could see small lights that showed they were still connected to power.

"Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in."

Gerrold whirled, his body swaying slightly, and his right hand slipped into his jacket pocket.

"You."

Jan sat in her usual place behind her desk, ostrich-skin boots propped up on the desk surface, hands behind her head, her relaxed pose out of place in the darkened room of gutted equipment. She smiled and there was an amused look in her eyes.

"Looks like you got my message," she said. "How's it going, Gerrold?"

"I want my life back." The gun was out, and pointed at her.

The barrel shook, but at this range, it hardly mattered. He couldn't miss. Unlike the pawnshop weapon, though, Jan's stare did not waver.

"Your life? I didn't take your life away. I just unplugged you, let you out for some fresh air. You don't like it?"

"You bitch," Gerrold said. "You made me kill Desirée. Now I see her everywhere. At my house, at the office, on the transport. My wife left me, I lost my job. What did you do to me?"

With a sudden savage motion, he cocked the weapon. His voice shook with rage or fear--she couldn't tell.

"You made me kill her. She was all I had that mattered. I want her back. Now."

Jan swallowed once, forced her body to remain absolutely still. Slowly, slowly, her hands appeared from behind her head. She held them to the sides, empty. He was

teetering at the edge, she could see that. What she said next would make all of the difference.

"Look, maybe we can work something out. Just please--"

"--don't kill me."

They both looked up at the same instant as one by one the huge screens mounted on the walls flickered on and the voice repeated itself.

"Don't kill me."

The screens resolved themselves into a black and white image of a nude woman dying from multiple gunshot wounds. As they watched, she turned glassy eyes towards the viewer, and her blood-flecked lips parted.

"You killed me, Gerrold," she breathed out. "Why? Didn't you love me?"

Gerrold screwed his eyes shut, and bright tears reflected back the light from the screens. His body sagged, seeming to cave in on itself. And then before Jan realized what was happening, the gun was no longer pointing at her.

A shot echoed from the walls of the warehouse and Jan felt the sound reverberate against her ribs. Reflexively, she shoved herself away from the desk, unable to control her brief scream as she witnessed the last act of a desperate man.

Multiple blue-white lights stabbed into the darkness, throwing Gerrold into silhouette as he crumpled to the floor, the side of his head a bloody ruin.

A strident voice rang out. "Freeze! Police!"

Patel strode out of the middle of the lights, his sidearm out in front. In an instant, he crossed to Gerrold's side and knelt there.

"Get me a medevac team here now!" he called out. He looked up from Gerrold's prone form as Jan approached. She was pale and clutched her own arms tight against

herself.

"That was a pretty stupid thing to do," Patel said. "He could've killed you."

"No kidding," she said. "It was the only way to keep him here till you guys showed up, though." She bent and before Patel could stop her, swiftly fished a bright orange business card out of Gerrold's shirt pocket. She flashed it in the detective's face as he gripped her wrist.

"Interactive messaging," she said. The little letters marched across the card, promising something new that both Jan and Detective Patel knew she couldn't deliver. "I dangled in front of him the one thing he wanted: Desirée alive and whole again," she said. "I knew he'd go for the bait. Now let go of me."

"That card is evidence," Patel said.

Jan grimaced and twisted her wrist, jerking it out of Patel's grasp. "I've got immunity, remember?" She straightened and the card disappeared into her jean pocket. "I'm walking, and no one's stopping me." She announced it, but for a moment, it sounded like a question. She looked directly into Patel's brown eyes, and he nodded imperceptibly. Her boot heels clicked rapidly away, and behind him, Patel could hear the shuffle of the strike force cops as they moved aside like the Red Sea before Moses.

Her voice floated back to him as she walked out the door:

"I'll be in touch, Detective."

*

Patel waited at the little table at the downtown café for over an hour before Calamity finally showed.

She was seated across from him and talking almost before he realized she was there. She picked up the orange card he'd left prominently displayed on the table's glass surface and put it away in her shirt pocket.

"I see Torino contacted you," she said. "Sorry for the wait. Had to make sure I wasn't being set up."

"Nice city you picked to relocate to," Patel said. He sipped at his espresso while she signalled the waiter for her own. She turned back to him and her grin was impish.

"Nice try. I never said I live here now. Just that I'd meet you here."

"Right. So you heard about the outcome of the Dunn case?"

"Who hasn't? Heard you got a nice promotion for cracking it. I noticed you didn't give me any credit, though."

"Not when you're the one who wrote the murder weapon," Patel said. "So, I have to know: did you write the firmware virus, too?"

Her eyebrows rose. "Virus?"

"The one that flashed his implant and then sent out vid and audio grabs of Desirée's last gasps to anything within receiving distance."

"So that's what it was, why all my screens went nuts. Pretty sensational. Like Macbeth or something." She held up the demitasse dramatically. "'Is this a dagger I see before me?'"

Setting the cup back down, Jan sat back in the metal chair and fluffed her wiry red hair. "Wish I had done it, Patel. I really do. But it wasn't me. Nice piece of work, though. If you ask me, my money's on the construct."

"Desirée?"

"Her last gasp, as you said. She told him she didn't want to die."

Patel set down his demitasse, and a small amount of black fragrant liquid dribbled over the side of the white porcelain.

"A construct writing its own firmware virus," he said slowly. "Spontaneous self-preservation by replication attempts. That's a little hard to swallow."

One of Jan's eyelids fluttered down in a slow wink.

"Hey, you know what they say: 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'" She pushed her chair back and stood. "Quite a leap for a pleasure construct, but I ain't too surprised. They're getting more sophisticated all the time, especially the adaptive networked ones. My bet? You're gonna start seeing this 'ghost in the machine' kind of thing more often from here on out." She tossed the business card back onto the metal table in front of him. "Methinks your department's about to expand way past software piracy and server break-ins. If you need me again--and I think you will--you know how to reach me."

He nodded, a thoughtful look in his eyes. "See you around, Calamity."

After she was gone, he sat by himself in the gloaming, staring at the small orange card with its elegant embedded animation, until the disappearing sun turned the skyscrapers' sides from copper to dark iron.



The Love of Fireflies and Lightning Bolts

By Charles C. Brooks III

In a purple sunset fireflies and lightning bolts
kissed the same sky; the two wooed like panting youth.

I stood as a sovereign duenna, witness
on a damp back porch, careful eye on the commotion.

That capricious waltz of angels and insects
sprung from an afternoon shower.

When heavy, wet taps began the day sighed,
luminous fairies yawned upward from pine needles.

A fragile liaison, sparkling dancers, the storm,
hovering between heaven and earth.

Darkness framed small novas, crackling static
descended quickly, August's lazy heat a heart's conduit.

Those lampyrid, company of Peaseblossom and Pan,

twinkled in answer to the blinding flares.

Then early evening, the horizon lost rain's name,

but candle flames continued, fickle, flickering, forgetting.

Calm breathing, stars began to shine on.

It was humid as wet wool when fireflies noticed the cosmos.



Out of the South

By Euan Harvey

Moments after Elephant Wu dragged the body away, the door to the House of Red Tears opened again. A slight breeze blew in and the thick smoke in the main room eddied and swirled. Black Heng looked up. A man stepped very carefully over the threshold and into the room, not allowing his feet to touch the protective mandala carved into the high sill of the door. The light from the red paper lanterns outside splashed his skin the colour of blood, and gleamed from the handles of twin swords, thrust though a sash on his waist. Dragon tattoos writhed across his bare chest. The man's hair hung over his shoulder in a single thick braid.

A southern barbarian, Heng thought. This might be profitable. The door behind Heng *shushed* open. Heng felt the air stir as Elephant Wu stepped through. The door closed, then Elephant Wu stood silent. Heng hoped Wu had managed to clean all the blood off his hands.

The door closed behind the barbarian. He saw Heng, then strode across the room. The way he walked – silent and somehow powerful-looking – reminded Heng of a tiger he'd seen once. Unease gathered in Heng's belly.

As he crossed the room, the barbarian stepped around the mats stretched out on the floor. He cast looks filled with barely-veiled contempt at the drugged men who sprawled on them. It was doubtful any of them noticed him passing. Unlike others in

Hangjao, Heng did not dilute the Tears of the Poppy that he sold, and the drug had smothered the minds of these men.

Heng sat behind a low table near the back of the room under the only lantern, which cast a sullen red glow through its stiff paper sides. Tea cooled slowly in a pot in front of him. Wisps of steam curled up from the spout.

The barbarian stopped in front of the table. He nodded to Heng, ignoring Elephant Wu completely. Now he was closer, Heng could see the man's eyes. They were dark gold, like the eyes of a jungle cat. Heng shifted position slightly. He felt uncomfortable.

"Black Heng?" the man said.

"I have that small honour, yes." Heng gestured to the other side of the table.

"Please. Seat yourself."

The man folded his legs under him and sat. Heng couldn't help but notice that the man's sword handles were only inches from his hands. Well worn, those handles were. Sweat-stained. Well-used.

"I've been told you buy things," the barbarian said.

"That depends."

"On what?"

Back Heng smiled. "On a number of things. Chief among them--who wishes to sell, how they found me, and what they have to offer."

The barbarian grinned. His teeth were very white. Heng thought of the tiger again.

"My name's Suriya," the barbarian said. "The man who told me of you is dead, and as for what I want to sell you. . ." The barbarian reached into a pouch and placed an object on the table. It sparkled as the light caught it.

Heng tried not to let his surprise show on his face. When he looked at the barbarian's smile, he knew he hadn't succeeded. No matter, he thought, and looked back at the gem.

It glinted with light, catching the dim illumination of the lanterns and concentrating it, so that the jewel blazed with an inner fire. Heng leaned forward. Without touching the jewel, he peered into its heart. Clear, as far as he could see. Flawless.

Heng straightened up. He looked from the barbarian to the jewel, then back again. If this was what he thought it was, how much could he get? And what if the barbarian had managed to get the amulet?

"Is this all?" Heng said, trying hard to keep his voice steady.

"Is it not enough?" the barbarian replied.

No amulet, thought Heng. But even so, the gem alone was worth . . . a lot. Why share? Heng glanced over the barbarian's shoulder. None of the Tears of the Poppy smokers were awake. No one to see. And a barbarian like this would have no clan, no Tong. Behind him, Heng heard Elephant Wu shift position with a very faint rustle of cloth. It could be done, Heng thought. It could be mine.

The barbarian smiled, showing his teeth. The man's hands were very close to the handles of his swords. Those *well-worn* sword handles.

Heng licked his lips. He had not lived so long by being foolish. He made a tiny motion with one hand. Elephant Wang shifted position again as he relaxed.

"It will be difficult to find a buyer for a jewel of this size," Heng said.

The barbarian snorted. "Hard?"

"People will wonder," Heng said.

"About?"

"About what the jewel's previous owner is doing."

"They don't need to worry."

Heng said nothing.

"See, he's the man who told me about you," the barbarian said. "I wasn't with him when he took it. I found him afterward. He owed me money, but wouldn't pay. Then he tried to kill me. He thought he was faster than me." The barbarian grinned. "He was wrong. I took the jewel as payment for the debt."

"He is not the one I am concerned about," Heng said.

"You mean the Yellow-sign monk, Wu-Han, don't you?"

Heng flinched, and forked his fingers to avert evil. "Do not say that name!"

"Wu-Han? Why not? He's dead."

"You killed that . . . man?" Heng stared at the barbarian.

"Took some doing, but after I shortened him by a head, he just lost all interest." The barbarian stared at Heng, then his lip curled. "You Jin! Yellow-sign monks are men like any other. Feed them three feet of steel and they die."

Heng shook his head. "You are wrong. The Yellow-sign monks are . . ." His voice trailed off. He licked his lips, then looked back down at the gem. "No matter. So you know what this is?"

"A diamond."

"Yes, and yet more than a diamond." Heng paused. "It is part of an amulet. The other half is the necklace and setting. Separately, they are worth a fortune. Together, for the right people, they would make the dowry of an Empress."

The barbarian smiled slowly. "And you know where the necklace is."

"I might."

"Might?"

"You will need me to contact the right people."

"How much?"

"One third." Heng smiled. "Believe me, if you have the pair, you will still make three times as much as you would for this one alone."

"Where?"

"Do we have an agreement?" Heng asked.

The barbarian stared at him for a moment, then grinned. "Done. Where?"

Heng smiled. "The merchant Long has it. It arrived in his strong room four days ago. He is hoping to bargain with the Yellow-sign monks for the other one."

"How do you know this?" the barbarian asked.

"A little bird comes to me from Long's house," Heng said. "It sings to me, and I feed it crumbs."

"This merchant Long, his house is on the Street of Celestial Harmony?"

Heng nodded.

"I have heard things about that house," the barbarian said.

"It is true that it has an unfortunate reputation," Heng said. "But is a man like you to be swayed by mere reputation?"

The barbarian leaned forward. "Don't try and play me for the fool. I'll go, but I'll go because of the money. Listen to me now, Heng. I'll say this once only. Don't try to cheat me." The barbarian grinned, but there was no humour in it. None at all. "If you try, I'll come and find you. And when I do, you'll take a long time dying."

Heng stared at the barbarian's eyes. He couldn't break the man's gaze. It held his own like a steel trap. Heng's mouth went dry.

The door to the room banged open. A fresh gust of air blew through the door. Smoke swirled and eddied.

With a practiced flick of his hands, Heng threw a square of silk over the gem on the table. The red fabric settled over the jewel, draping it and hiding it from view.

Four men stepped through the doorway. As they came into the light from the red lantern outside, Heng got a good look at them. His belly contracted in fear. He struggled to keep it from his face. These men could smell fear. They'd pounce on any trace of weakness.

The men had hard, grim faces. Swords gleamed in their hands. They wore loose clothes of black silk, and each man wore a white headband with the character for mountain repeated three times.

A death squad, Heng thought. Four Red Poles of the Three Mountains Tong.

Behind Heng, Elephant Wu stood utterly still. He was no fool, Heng thought. The barbarian was one thing, but Red Poles were something else.

The four Red Poles stalked across the room. As they neared the barbarian, they spread out in a semi-circle. Heng looked from the Red Poles to the barbarian. The man sat very still, apparently just waiting.

"You have the brains of a turtle, foreign devil," one of the Red Poles hissed. "Did you think we would not watch you?"

The barbarian shrugged. "I knew you'd be watching. I just didn't much care."

"Mountain Master Fu--"

"Old man Fu should stick to trying to frighten old women and children," the barbarian interrupted. He sounded bored. "Now, if you turn round and leave, I'll not kill you. If you stay, I'm going to gut you from balls to throat."

The Red Pole hesitated for a moment. Heng saw indecision flicker over the man's face, then he took a step forward.

Moving with tigerish speed, the barbarian sprang to his feet. His swords appeared in his hands, long blades that glinted red with the light from the lantern above.

The Red Poles flinched. The barbarian laughed, then spun in place. In a single fluid movement, his foot hooked up around and behind him, smashed into the lantern, and slammed it onto the floor. For a moment, it remained lit. Its red light illuminated the faces of the Red Poles from below, making them look like they were already dead. Then the barbarian stamped on the wick and the room was plunged into stygian darkness.

Heng could see nothing in the room save the dull red glows from the Tears of the Poppy pipes, spots of red against the utter blackness of the room. Green and yellow shapes swam across Heng's vision. He thought of the jewel on the table in front of him, covered only by a cloth. It was worth a fortune, that gem.

But no one could call Black Heng a fool. Greedy, yes. But foolish? No. He thought of the barbarian's eyes. Like the eyes of a cat, dark yellow. Heng did not reach forward and take the gem. He stayed very still.

Feet stamped on the floor. Cloth rustled. There was a swish of metal, then a chopping sound. A man coughed wetly, then a body fell heavily to the floor. Men shifted position in the darkness--Heng heard the shuffle of feet and heavy breathing.

One of the Red Poles cursed softly. Feet scuffed on the floorboards. Then Heng heard a sound like steel whispering over silk. A man gurgled. Liquid splashed on the floor. There was a thunk of a blade striking home in flesh, a ripping sound, then another body crashed to the floor.

Men shouted and rushed to and fro. Heng felt a wind on his face. Someone moved very close to him, then pulled back. A moment later, the door opened, spilling the light from the lantern outside into the room. Heng saw the silhouettes of two men in the middle of the room, with another man ducking out of the door. Then the man was gone, the door closed, and the room was in darkness once more. Moments later, the door banged open again and two more men rushed out.

Some time later, when Heng finally got a lantern lit, he saw two things. The first was the leader of the Red Poles. The man lay face-up on his back in the middle of the room. He'd been gutted, opened from groin to neck, and he lay in a spreading pool of his own blood, black in the lantern's light. Close to him lay another Red Pole, his throat cut from ear to ear.

The second--and this Heng saw with no real surprise--the jewel had gone from his table. The barbarian had killed two men, then slipped through the darkness and taken what was his.

Heng was suddenly very glad he had not tried to cheat the man. He wondered if the barbarian might even be able to survive whatever it was that slew thieves in the House of the Merchant Long.

*

Suriya ducked into an alley, pressed his back against the wall and waited. He forced himself to breathe through his nose. He listened carefully.

No running footsteps. From the middle distance, a watchman struck his gong three times. The hollow notes rang out over the darkened streets of Hangjao, breaking the silence. The echoes died quickly and the thick, watchful silence crept back again. Suriya felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

Someone was following him. He could feel it. They were good, whoever they were. But Suriya was better. The thick jungles and rocky hills of Suriya's homeland--the hills of the Ten Thousand Rice Fields--made ideal terrain for ambushes. Any rock might conceal a bandit. Any tree might hide a feuding clansman. Men of the Ten Thousand Rice Fields either developed sharp senses and quick wits, or they died young.

Suriya waited. Still nothing. But he could feel the gaze of his pursuer on him, dark and malignant.

The Red Poles? Suriya wondered. Must be. He'd gutted the leader, and cut another man's throat, but that left two. They had more spirit than he thought they had.

Suriya would've laid money the two of them would go running back to the old bastard Fu, whimpering like beaten dogs. But instead, they'd trailed him.

Suriya risked a glance round the edge of the alley wall. Nothing met his gaze. The street ran away from him into gloom, lit by occasional splashes of light from paper lanterns hanging outside the buildings. The darkness at the other end of the street was thick. That was where the Red Poles were, Suriya knew. He could feel their eyes on him.

He ducked back, then ran silently along the alley, away from the street. So they wanted to follow him, did they? Suriya grinned savagely to himself. Thick-witted bastards. They'd not catch him easily. But even so, Suriya thought, that old goat Fu had enough men to make Hangjao too hot. But before Suriya left, he'd get the necklace. Heng had said the merchant Long had it. With the amulet fenced, Suriya'd leave Hangjao behind him, and with it that belly-crawler Fu.

Running silent and quick as a hunting tiger, Suriya slipped through the shadowed streets of Hangjao, heading for the Street of Celestial Harmony.

*

Suriya squatted on his heels in the darkness. He stared at the walls in front of him. The house of the merchant Long dominated one end of the street of Celestial Harmony. Its walls ran for hundreds of feet along the side of the street. They rose blank-faced and forbidding for fifteen feet, before terminating in steel spikes, which gleamed in the

moonlight. Suriya could see nothing of what lay beyond the walls. It seemed no more than a dozen other houses Suriya had passed already this night.

Suriya fingered the end of his braid. Given what he'd heard about this house, this looked too easy. Things were said about the house of the merchant Long. Men went in, but did not leave. Many thieves had boasted of their intentions to plunder the house, but none had returned, not to speak of success, nor failure. The house of the merchant Long swallowed whole those who would steal from it.

And so Suriya sat and watched and listened and thought about what people had told him of the merchant Long. The man traded with the Southern Kingdoms, Suriya knew that much. His caravans and junks brought him wealth from all over the patchwork of warring states to the south of Imperial Jin: spices from the islands of Sawi and the Bitter Fruit islands, jasmine rice from the fertile fields of the Tayao city-states and Bayon, rubies and sapphires from the Black Swan Kingdom, ivory from the isthmus and Buruwang, and even--so Suriya had heard--carvings looted from the old Tuon An temples scattered through the Ten Thousand Rice Fields.

All of this passed through the house of the merchant Long, and it made Long rich and wealthy and powerful.

But if there was so much money in the house, Suriya wondered, then why was the wall only fifteen feet? Why were there only spikes? Why no guards?

Suriya's flesh crawled. He looked around. His pursuers had found him again. He couldn't see them, but he knew they were watching him. He could feel their eyes on him. He waited, but the two Red Poles made no move to reveal themselves.

They were good, Suriya admitted to himself. He'd managed to lose them for a while, but they'd found him again. And they'd managed to hide themselves so he couldn't see them.

Suriya drew his sword. The oiled blade slid noiselessly from the scabbard. No light gleamed from the blacked blade to betray his presence. He waited. He wasn't about to risk trying to climb the wall with two Red Poles behind him. He'd get half-way up, then feel the bite of their steel as they pinned him to the wall like a butterfly. No, if these two Jin bastards wanted him, they'd have to take him now. Face to face.

Something moved further down the street, a blur of shadow in the thick gloom. Footsteps dragged, heavy. Suriya gripped his sword tighter.

Another impression of movement. The darkness seemed to shift and writhe, coiling in on itself then spilling forth down the street. One of the paper lanterns near Suriya snuffed out suddenly, as if pinched off by an invisible hand.

Suriya stepped out from the alley mouth. With his left hand, he drew his long dagger from his belt. He crouched and waited.

Shuffling footsteps broke the expectant silence that hung over the street. The hairs on the back of Suriya's neck prickled. This was not the light padding footsteps of the Red Poles. This was something else.

His pursuer stepped out of the thick darkness and into a circle of light cast by a lantern.

It was the Yellow-sign monk, Wu-Han. His yellow robes hung tattered on his frame, stained with blood from the wounds Suriya had given him. Nothing remained of the wounds themselves but livid red scars on Wu-Han's skin. Where Suriya had taken the man's head, a thick knot of scar tissue wound round Wu-Han's neck like a snake.

The monk had returned from the dead. But he had . . . changed. Long claws now sprouted from his fingers, thick and black and sharp. His skin had thickened, growing ridges and bumps. The man's eyes were dead-black, like holes cut in his face that showed what truly lay underneath the mask of flesh. Waves of black malignancy and hatred beat out from them. The darkness around the monk seemed to cling to him, shrouding his form in wisps and tatters of blackness.

Suriya spat to one side to avert evil. So some of the tales he'd heard were true.

The monk hissed at Suriya, revealing a mouth filled with teeth like black needles and a shiny segmented tongue. He flexed his arms, then rushed at Suriya, spitting hatred and curses.

Suriya readied himself, timing the monk's charge. At the last moment, he span to one side, slashing out with his sword as the monk rushed at him. The blade bit deep into the monk's belly, slicing through muscle and flesh.

The monk screamed--a horrible high-pitched sound that scraped on Suriya's ears. His arm whipped round. Black claws hissed through the air.

Suriya jumped backward, pulling his sword up to strike. The claws traced lines of fire along the flesh of his belly. Suriya hissed in pain. He brought his sword down in a vicious arc. The razor-sharp blade chopped neatly through the monk's arm.

The monk screeched. He yanked the stump of his arm backward. Black blood spurted out from it, splashing onto the street and over Suriya. It burned like quicklime where it touched Suriya's skin.

Suriya gritted his teeth against the pain. He lunged forward, stabbing with the knife in his left hand. The blade sank deep into the monk's chest, slipping between two of the ribs and embedding itself there. The monk coughed. Blood ran out from the corners of his mouth. Suriya let go of the knife handle, gripped his sword with both hands, then brought the sword round in a flat arc with all his strength behind it.

The blade sheared through the monk's neck with a butcher's shop *shunk* of steel cleaving flesh and bone. The monk's head toppled backward, landing with a thud behind the torso. Blood fountained up from the wound. Suriya jumped back to avoid being splashed. The body staggered forward two steps, then crashed onto the stone of the street.

Suriya wiped the blood from his face. He could feel burns where the liquid had eaten at him. They were going to leave scars. He looked down at the monk, then spat on the man's corpse. Filthy, belly-crawling Jin he-lizard. The monk'd brought himself back from the dead, but Suriya had laid him low again. Bastard. Maybe this time he'd stay--

Suriya froze, staring down at the monk's body.

The monk's severed arm was pulling itself along the ground. The fingers flexed, the nails scraping on the stone. Like some horrific spider, the hand pulled itself toward the

monk's headless corpse, trailing the arm behind it. A sticky trail of black blood smeared over the stone of the street.

The arm was bigger, too. Even as Suriya watched, the claws at the ends of the fingers thickened and lengthened, changing into vicious black hooks, a good six inches long. Muscles writhed under the skin, knotting and swelling with unnatural life. The monk's corpse jerked and twitched. Thick muscles banded themselves over the monk's shoulder and torso. The yellow robes split as the flesh underneath them burgeoned. Suriya heard a chattering sound from beyond the corpse. The monk's head stared at him, its teeth--now daggers of black shiny chitin--gnashing together as the monk glared at Suriya. The man's eyes held nothing but absolute blackness.

Come to Hangjao, Suriya thought sourly to himself. Richest city in the world. Filled with gold. Streets are paved with it. A good man with a sharp sword could make himself richer than all the kings in the Ten Thousand Rice Fields. Only you'll have to get past the stinking Tongs, and if you do, then you'll just have the monks who won't die.

Suriya's lip curled. He was starting to thoroughly dislike this city. Time to get that necklace, then leave. But first, he was going to make sure that this monk wasn't going to get up again. This time, he'd do a proper job.

He wiped his hands on his trousers, gripped his sword tightly, then stepped forward.

*

Ten minutes of hard work later, Suriya straightened up. He wiped the sweat from his face and the blood and shreds of flesh from his sword, then sheathed his blade. He looked down at the pulped and shredded thing that had been the monk Wu-han. He grinned in satisfaction. He'd like to see the monk get up now. Bastard.

Suriya spat at one of the chunks of flesh, forked the sign of the evil eye at it, then turned and walked toward the wall. He pulled a rope from around his waist, quickly tied a looping knot, then tossed the rope up so the loop caught over one of the spikes. He looked up and down the street, then hauled himself up the rope hand over hand. When he reached the top, he stepped carefully onto the wall, then pulled the rope up after him.

On the far side of the wall was an ornate garden, crammed with thick-leaved trees and bamboo--all trimmed and shaped in the Jin style. Smooth stones surrounded little ponds. Wooden paths and bridges criss-crossed the gardens. Elegant statues of long-bearded Jin immortals dotted the grounds. Stone lanterns spilled pools of soft light. To the left of the garden rose the house of the merchant Long. It was dark, the windows tightly shuttered.

Suriya saw no one. No guards, no servants. The gardens and house were silent, as if the gloom that lay over them was a blanket muffling all noise. Suriya felt indecision gnawing at him. This wasn't right. The house of the merchant Long had swallowed many thieves, and some of them might almost have been as good as him. So where were the guards?

The hollow clang of a watchman's gong echoed through the still night air. Suriya glanced over his shoulder. The street was still empty. But Suriya couldn't sit here on the

wall until someone saw him. Making up his mind, he slipped silently over the edge of the wall, landing lightly on the balls of his feet.

He listened hard. But there was nothing. The house of the merchant Long was as silent as the tombs outside the city.

The necklace, Suriya thought. Time to get that necklace. He ran forward toward the house, weaving his way between the clipped trees and neat stands of bamboo. The silence hung heavy over the garden. It was oppressive, like the crackling air that comes just before a thunderstorm. It preyed on Suriya's nerves, making him twitchy.

About half-way through the garden, Suriya stopped. The walls of the house rose in front of him, a dark mass blotting out the sky behind. The lower part of the house was hidden behind the trees and rocks of the garden, but Suriya could see the upper half clearly. The windows were shuttered, but it would be the work of moments to pry them open and slip inside. And there was still no sign of any guards.

So why had no thieves returned from this house?

His skin crawled as he looked around, but he saw nothing. The small pools of light cast by the lanterns did little to illuminate the garden; rather, they simply gave edges to the shadows that lurked under the trees and between the stems of bamboo.

Moving silently through the shadows, he slipped toward the house. Large double doors faced the garden. Their red paint looked like blood in the dim light. On either side of the doors crouched stone lions, their mouths frozen in silent snarls.

Suriya took one more step, then froze motionless. He could feel . . . something. A vague, indefinable nervousness crept through him. He stared hard at the lions.

Nothing. They did not move. They were stone, nothing more.

And yet. . .

Suriya could feel something there. Years of hard living, of ceaseless watching for hidden enemies, had given him razor-sharp senses, and good reasons to trust them. The lions did not move, but they watched. The air near the doors was thick and heavy with their gaze. Suriya would not get in this way.

Very slowly, Suriya took a step backward. Nothing. Another step, then another, and then Suriya rounded a stand of bamboo and moved out of the stone lions' gaze. Quietly and carefully, he worked his way around the house, looking for another way in. He found it two hundred feet further on.

Suriya crouched by the wall and looked at what was obviously the main entrance to the house. Stone lanterns in the form of many-tiered pagodas lined the sides of a small square. Their yellow light cast flickering shadows on the paved stone of the square. A large gate pierced the wall to Suriya's left. The gate faced a huge pair of double doors in the house. The doors stood firmly shut.

Though he examined every inch of the doors and walls from his hiding place, Suriya could see no sign of guards--human or otherwise. He crept silently forward to the doors. Kneeling beside them, he pulled a lock pick from the leather pouch that hung at his waist. He leaned forward and started working the pick around in the lock.

Something made a scratching sound from behind him. Suriya's head whipped round as he glared behind him. Nothing. The sound came again, something sharp dragging down stone. Still Suriya could see nothing, just the plain stone of the courtyard. The lanterns flickered and the spikes on top of the outer wall glinted with their light. Shadows danced and wavered.

Suriya heard the sound a third time. Then a sniffing, soft but somehow powerful-sounding. This was followed by a stealthy padding of heavy feet.

It was coming from the far side of the wall. Outside the gate.

Suriya thought of the yellow-sign monk, Wu-han. He bent back to the lock. A few more minutes' scratching, and a click told of the lock opening. Suriya straightened up and pulled the door open.

The interior of the house was dark, darker even than the gloom of the garden outside. Suriya could see nothing. The dim light from the lanterns allowed him to see the polished wood immediately in front of the door. Threads of gold ran through it, weaving between one another in a complex pattern. Beyond that, impenetrable darkness shrouded the inside of the building.

So where was everyone? Even if they were asleep, there should have been lights of some kind. Maybe the merchant Long had already left? Gone back to the south to search for something else to steal?

Behind him, something brushed against the gate. Suriya froze, straining to hear. Wood creaked. Suriya looked over his shoulder at the gate. Fine golden threads

glimmered in the light from the lanterns. They traced out a complicated pattern over the old wood.

The wood groaned. A hinge creaked as something huge and ponderous strained against the wood from the other side. Dust sifted down the wall from the hinge.

Suriya held his breath, waiting.

Another long, drawn-out creak. Snuffling. Then silence.

Suriya looked again at the golden threads on the gate. He thought of the high door-sill back at Black Heng's. He had a good idea what was out there. And why it couldn't get in. He considered for a moment, then gave a mental shrug. He'd deal with what lay outside when he had to, and no sooner.

He turned and stepped through the doorway. The darkness didn't bother him. He'd been born with keen eyes. He'd just have to wait until they adjusted.

After three steps, light blazed around him, sudden and blinding.

Suriya threw an arm up to shield his eyes. But even as he leaped backward, the door slammed shut behind him, and Suriya knew he was trapped.

"Thief!" a metal voice boomed. "Stay where you are, or I shall destroy you!" Heavy footsteps thudded toward Suriya. Their weight sent tremors through the boards under Suriya's feet.

Suriya thought of running, but the light blazed too bright for him to see. So he stood where he was, trusting that his wits would be quick enough to get him out. Moments later, a cold metal hand clamped round his upper arm. The thick metal

fingers pressed into the muscle of his upper arm--not painfully, but with enough force behind them for Suriya to realize their true strength.

A door slid open with a scrape of wood against the runner. Soft footsteps padded along the floor. There was a moment of silence, then a harsh voice said: "Drop your arm, thief. I would see your face."

Suriya dropped his arm to his side. He blinked rapidly. The light was still glaring, but his eyes were rapidly adjusting. He stood in a long corridor that ran away to the left and right. Gold threads made an intricate pattern on the floor of the corridor, weaving though one another and tracing out complex symbols.

On the other side of the corridor, through an open door, he could see an interior courtyard, open to the night sky above. Balconies and a long veranda ran around the inside wall of the house. In the doorway stood a man dressed in a blue silk robe. Yellow dragons curled over it, their scales shimmering with every slight movement of the silk. The man's face was pinched, with deep-set eyes that stared unblinkingly at Suriya. An intricate golden necklace hung over the man's robe, the colour of the gold standing out against the deep blue silk.

The merchant Long, Suriya thought, then looked up at the thing next to him. It was a statue of bronze, clad in the spired and ornate armour of the Sawi islands. Under the flared cheek pieces of the helmet, the statue's face scowled at him, moustaches bristling, fierce eyes glaring, the whole face cast in immobile ferocity. A fine brass grille filled the open mouth.

Long stepped through the doorway. He folded his hands in his sleeves. "Do you have any words before your death, thief?" He nodded at the statue, which yanked Suriya's arm up. Suriya gasped in pain at the sudden shock. The statue lifted him up until Suriya's feet dangled two feet above the floor. Suriya glanced downward.

The gold threads wove under his feet. The merchant Long was rich. He could afford gold, where Black Heng had only carved wood. But were there two--one for the house and one for the gate? Or only one huge mandala for both?

"Nothing?" Long asked, raising one eyebrow. "Then make your peace with your barbarian gods, for now is the time of your death."

The statue's other metal hand gripped Suriya's head. Metal fingers dug into his cheeks and the back of his neck. They began to squeeze.

"Wait!" Suriya shouted. "I have something you want!"

Long made no movement, but the statue stopped squeezing. It did not slacken its grip though, and the ends of the metal fingers pressed painfully into Suriya's head. He'd have to think quick, and hope that his wits were sharper than Long's.

"What, southern barbarian? What could you have that I would be interested in?" Long asked.

"That necklace you're wearing," Suriya said quickly. "I know where the gem is. I can get it for you."

Long stood very still. He stared at Suriya in silence for a long moment, then licked his lips. "Where is it, thief?"

Suriya grinned. He had Long now. "Let me down, and I'll tell you."

"Tell me now."

"I don't think so."

"I warn you, thief." Long pulled his arms free of his sleeves and pointed one finger at Suriya. "Tell me where it is, or I'll--"

"You'll what?" Suriya asked. "Kill me? So how'll you find it then, merchant?"

Long glared at Suriya.

Suriya's grin sharpened. "You're a merchant, so you'll understand this. Let me down, and I'll make you a trade."

Long's fists clenched. A moment later, the statue's huge fingers unlocked. Suriya fell to the floor. He massaged his wrist where the statue's fingers had left livid red marks.

"Well, barbarian?" Long demanded. "Where is it?"

Suriya cocked his head to one side and listened hard. There it was again--almost below the limit of hearing. Almost, but not quite. Not if you knew what to listen for. A scratching sound outside the door, and the kind of heavy silence made by something large and dangerous trying to be silent.

"I won't ask again, barbarian," Long said.

Suriya reached into his pouch. He pulled out the diamond. In the bright light of the corridor, it sparkled brilliantly. Long stared at it, his mouth open.

"So here's the deal," Suriya said. "I give you this, you let me go. Agreed?"

"Of course," Long said, not taking his eyes from the gem.

Suriya cocked his arm and threw the gem toward Long.

Long caught it in both hands. Not looking up from the sparkling jewel, he said:

"You are a fool, southern barbarian, and now you will die."

The statue wheeled round, then charged at Suriya. Its hands came up over its head, ready to smash and pound.

But Suriya had been expecting this. His sword was already in his hand, and as the statue rushed at him, he smashed it down on the nearest of the gold threads. The blade bit deep into the wooden planks of the floor, biting clean through the gold, which parted with a *spang* of stressed metal.

From behind Suriya came a muffled crunch, followed moments later by a splintering crash. Fragments of wood pinwheeled over Suriya's shoulder as something smashed straight through the door from outside. The statue thundered towards Suriya, only to stop in its tracks as Long shouted in fear and pointed to something behind Suriya.

Suriya threw himself to one side, rolled, and came up cat-like on his feet. A harsh clicking sound came from his right, mingling with the crack of snapping wood as Wu-han shouldered his way through the door-frame.

Just as he had before, the monk had returned from death. And as before, he had changed.

Corpse-white skin, thick and rough like the hide of some immense cave-dwelling beast, covered the monk's body. Under the skin, huge muscles flexed, tendons like ship's cables standing out from the flesh. Claws a foot long curved out from the ends of his fingers, razor-edged and hooked like sickles. Black shiny teeth--serrated and triangular, shark's teeth--crowded the monk's jaw, bursting through the man's cheeks and lips. Coal-black eyes glared spider-like from the face, evil and malice beating from them like heat from a fire.

And Wu-han had grown. The once-monk had to bend to fit his head under the ten-foot frame of the doorway. His shoulders cracked and shattered the frame to either side as he pushed through.

Long shrieked something incomprehensible and gestured wildly at Wu-han. The statue rushed at the monk, drawing one fist back to strike. Its feet hammered on the wooden floor.

With insect-like speed, Wu-han ducked under the statue's blow. The bronze fist smashed into the wall above Wu-han's head. Fragments of stone *spanged* out. Wu-han slipped round the side of the statue, hissed, then bounded for Long.

Long took two steps backward, then turned to flee. He managed to take one more step before Wu-han pounced on him. The monk's claws slashed out, and the merchant's scream cut off in an abrupt gurgle. Blood sheeted out and splattered over the wall on the far side of the corridor.

An instant later, before the monk could straighten up, the statue hammered into him. The bronze fists rose and fell like battering rams. With each blow that landed, bone

cracked and flesh split. Wu-han shrieked--a sharp sound that set Suriya's teeth on edge--then turned and lashed out at the statue. But his claws simply skittered over the bronze, leaving nothing but bright scratches in the metal.

The statue punched Wu-han in the chest. Ribs snapped. Blood burst from Wu-han's mouth. Then the statue's hands closed around Wu-han's head. The monk had time for a single shriek before the bronze hands clamped shut. Wu-han's skull shattered with a loud crack. Then the statue's fingers closed into a fist. Blood and tissue leaked between the closed fingers.

Suriya grimaced. Nasty. Still, better the monk than him. He waited a moment, tensed to flee. But the statue remained frozen in place, Wu-han's black blood dripping from its fingers. The blood smoked where it hit the floor, but left no mark on the statue.

Very slowly, very cautiously, Suriya padded forward. The statue did not move. When Suriya got within sword-reach of it, he reached forward and tapped the bronze skin with the tip of his sword. There was a clear bell-like *bing*. The statue remained motionless.

Suriya grinned. Long's last order to the statue had been to kill Wu-han. It must be waiting for new orders now--orders which would never come. At least, not from Long.

Suriya walked round the statue, avoiding the spreading pool of black blood from Wu-han. Beyond the smeared corpse of the once-monk, Suriya saw the merchant Long. Wu-han's claws had dismembered the merchant quickly and mercilessly, and the merchant Long's corpse now decorated a considerable length of the corridor. Suriya

found what he was looking for clutched in the merchant's right hand, sheared off at the wrist.

After he had wiped the blood from the jewel, Suriya held it up. Fires still played in its depths, but the gem held no attractions for Suriya now. At least, not in the way it had before. He grinned to himself. But that wasn't to say it couldn't be useful.

As he walked past Wu-han's corpse, a tremor of movement ran through the body. Suriya looked down. Already the pounded flesh was reknitting itself. Shattered bones were straightening out. New muscle was burgeoning onto the monk's already-huge frame.

Time to go, Suriya thought.

He walked round the silent and motionless statue, across the polished floor of the corridor, and out into the street beyond.

As soon as he left the doorway, he knew he was being watched. He smiled to himself. Well, this would save him some time. From the pools of shadow on the far side of the street, men straightened up and drifted toward him. All the men wore loose clothes of black; all wore white headbands which glimmered pale in the gloom.

Suriya waited. The Red Poles stopped about ten feet from him, standing in a loose semi-circle. Suriya glanced to his left without moving his head. Yes, he thought. Enough room. He'd be able to make it, but he'd have to move quick.

In front of Suriya, the Red Poles stepped aside. A thin-faced man in white silk stepped forward. Long gray moustaches drooped down from either side of his mouth.

He leaned heavily on a staff that he carried in his right hand. But Suriya wasn't fooled by the old man. He'd seen Mountain Master Fu kill four men in as many seconds with that staff.

"You killed Two-hand Chen, southern barbarian," Fu said, and his voice was like the wind sighing through pine branches.

"Two-hand Chen?" Suriya chuckled. "Should've been called half-wit Chen, if you ask me."

Fu just nodded, his eyes half-closed. "I told you to leave, southern ghost. You defied me. That alone would earn you death, but now you have slain one of the Red Poles of the Three Mountain Tong. Now your death will be hard."

"When I die, it'll be in bed with a whore. So you're half-right, at that." From inside the house of the merchant Long, wood creaked.

Suriya grinned. "But you'll not kill me tonight, old man Fu. See, I've got a present for you." He held up the gemstone. The light from the house behind him caught it. It flashed and sparkled.

Fu's gaze followed the gem, widening so Suriya could see the greed in them.

From the open doorway came the sound of heavy footsteps. Wood cracked and splintered, and Suriya wondered for an instant just how heavy something would have to be to cause teak to splinter under its weight.

"It's yours," Suriya said, and tossed the gem into the air. The gaze of the Red Poles followed it.

Mountain Master Fu reached out and caught the gem one-handed, just at the moment when the light from the house behind Suriya was suddenly cut off by something standing in the doorway.

Suriya whirled and ran for his life, dashing through the gap between the wall and the nearest of the Red Poles. He ducked a half-hearted slash, and then was off and away.

The screams didn't stop until he was most of the way down the street. But even then, he didn't stop running until he was a good five miles outside the walls of Hangjao. When he finally stopped, he turned round and forked the sign of the evil eye at the city. Filled with gold it was, but Hangjao was filled with other things too, and Suriya had had a bellyful of them.

He spat in the direction of the city, roundly cursed all who lived within its walls, speculated on what their mothers did with dogs, then turned and jogged away, heading he knew not where. He was alive, and for men with sharp blades and sharper wits, the world was always ripe and open.



Glory

By Kate Smith

The brass mermaid doorknocker confronts the world with a knowing smile. Milady Web eyes it with grim intent. Her hand curls round the tail and beats the brass against the timber until tenuous cracks appear in both.

Silence seethes.

Web presses her bruised hand to her lips and glances over her shoulder at the pearl-grey fog wandering in off the bay. It thickens like porridge along the street known as The Last Dance.

The lady growls softly. Her attention returns to the mermaid knocker, whose smile has slipped from sly to panicky. Before her hand lifts more than an inch, the door opens, slowly, grudgingly, on hinges in desperate need of oil, and Web stares directly into Glory's remote and striking eyes.

Beautiful eyes he has indeed, but when the rest of him is factored in... oh, my. It is easy to see why he's known as Glory.

"Damn it," Web mutters. "I have to find myself another town to run, one that isn't filled with gorgeous, brooding cranky guys who do nothing for me other than aesthetically. There is definitely something wrong with this picture." She pushes past him and step-by-step, arms extended before her, makes her way down the shadow-shrouded hall. "But first I'm going to find the light switches or the curtains, or something that will get a bit of light in here."

Glory's weary exhalation barely stirs the air. Under guidance from one palely elegant hand the heavy door swings shut. "I thought you could see in the dark."

"Do I look like a bat to you?" Web asks, venom coating her black magic voice.

"Bats use sonar," Glory points out.

Web snaps her fingers and summons a ball of witchlight. Its eerie amethyst glow highlights her frown. "That was a rhetorical question."

"Apologies." Glory drifts past her, soft as dust falling, and fades through a doorway into perpetual twilight.

Web whips after him, her highwayman coat trailing after her and the witchlight bobbing along like a helium balloon. Its clear radiance flares across... not very much.

The room is huge and bare apart from one low wide chair and a round clawfooted table for two set beside. From the beam-exposed vaulted ceiling fraying banners hang in the best medieval style, battling for space with curtains of gunsmoke-grey cobwebs, brittle and soft as Persian fairy floss. The lacy hems melt into the dust that coats the flagstone floors, the panelled walls, and now Milady Web's blood-plum over-the-knee boots.

Web sets her hands on her hips and her coat opens, revealing the delicate line of her collarbone and her low-cut bodice of foxglove purple. She burns brightly in this static pastel realm.

"My compliments to your decorator, darling. I do so love what you've done with this space. Very tomb-like, very Gothic. And complete with a cursed and doomed master."

Glory inclines his head and eases down into the embrace of the chair draped in pale sheets. His head rests on the high back. Every movement of his long lean body is slow, infused with weariness.

"This is not good. Not good at all." Web's boots tap as she paces, stirring up the dust. She sneezes, three tiny cat sneezes, and shuts her eyes, breathing shallowly until the fit passes.

"I may have to import that witch doctor after all." Web taps a finger against her lower lip. "Or perhaps a psychiatrist would do."

A hint of amusement flits across Glory's face. "As if you'd let a psych within a ten kilometre radius of you."

"It might be worth the risk."

Severity is an unusual mode for the light-hearted and mischievous Milady Web but she can fake it when she has to. Only... she's not pretending anything now. She spears long fingers into the damp and tangling mass of her witchy hair.

"Call me greedy, call me selfish, but I'm not in the mood to lose anyone else I love. Especially through their own folly."

"Ha." Glory's hands rest limp, one on the arm of the chair, one by his hip. "Go meddle in someone else's life. I don't need you to pick me up and dust me off."

"Newsflash, honey. You don't have a life; you have an existence and barely that. You're shut down, closed off. So emotionally detached you don't feel anything. Look at you."

The sharp edges scorn lends to her velvet voice provoke a minute flinch. Web notes it with satisfaction. "It's so cold in here I can see my own breath and you're sitting there in a t-shirt. I'll admit that it's very nice, top quality, but short sleeves are short sleeves. Furthermore, bare feet in these conditions is simply begging for trouble."

Glory summons enough energy to shut his eyes. "Go away."

"What? Leave you to rest in peace?" Web laughs mockingly. "I don't think so. We owe each other more than that and I don't intend to let you go so easily." She pounces. Hands on the chair arms and one knee braced on the seat, Web leans in until their noses almost touch. "Are you even listening to me?"

This close Web can feel the bone deep cold that holds him fast. Her winged eyebrows touch and she listens. Just on the edge of hearing, wrapping round Glory like a cloak of ice crystals are whispers, spectral scribbles in the air, weaving a spell to pull him down with them forever. It's the flip side of possessing the ability to talk to the dead and ill-fated.

Web's mouth draws straight and her frown deepens. "You must have a resting pulse of twenty beats per minute. Or less." She pokes his chest with a silver-frosted fingernail. Her finger bounces off bone and she taps again. "Is there anyone in there?"

Glory looks down at her piquant face framed by red and black curls tinged with mauve. "Is that another rhetorical question?" he asks gravely.

She spins away, hisses of pure frustration escaping her. The tattered ivory banners trailing from the ceiling writhe, caught up in her mad waltzing wake which stirs the heavy air, mingling her raspberry whimsy scent with those of dryness and decay that haunt the room. Sparks of silver from her rings and the stars in her hair burn though the shadows.

Glory watches and makes no move. All too soon her bittersweet brilliance is back before him.

Web seizes his face between her palms. Her hands are warm and capture his attention long enough for him to become lost in the summer-sky blue of her eyes. She's looking for a spark of something, of interest, irritation... even anger would be welcome. But there's nothing, nothing except the terrible flatness of terminal ennui.

That's unacceptable.

Fear collides with grief and explodes. Milady Web is spitting-ember angry and makes no attempt to hide it. The witchlight responds to her mood, pulsing silver at the core and streaking violet along the snaky tendrils.

"All right. Let's try the fairy tale method." She rubs the pads of her thumbs over his cheekbones and rocks her mouth over his in a kiss that is wickedly wildly passionately reckless.

Oh.

The potent kiss sends a jolt straight to his heart to rival a defibrillator. Glory's eyes flare wide. It's like being struck by lightning, holding the moon in his hand, and standing in the middle of a rainbow all at once.

Web releases him, one hand to his chest to hold him upright as his lungs struggle to drag in enough oxygen. His heart thumps beneath her palm.

Instinctively Glory reaches out to draw her back, but her footsteps already echo down the hall only to be cut off by the hinges of the front door squealing to rival the tortured damned.

Then there's only the flittering noise of the fraying banners twisting in the chill air. The last traces of witchlight wink out and everlasting dusk seeps out of the cracks.

Glory wraps his arms round himself, rubbing his hands over his sleeves, noticing the drag of cotton against his palms. He's cold. So cold. He slides from the chair, his knees landing on the flagstones. The jarring impact spins through his body and Glory sucks in his breath. His head falls forward.

Cat soft, Milady Web settles cross-legged on the floor behind him. Her arms gather him in.

"I thought you left."

"You think a lot of things, many of them wrong." Web rubs her cheek against his, rocks a little, and holds him closer. "I thought I'd wait around a while, see you smile again."



ARTISTIC CREDITS

Cover Art

The cover art for this issue of Semaphore Magazine was created by V. N. Benedicto. More of this artist's work can be seen at <http://zahntelmo.deviantart.com>.

Guest Writer

This issue's guest writer was Jason R. Wallace. Jason has previously released one (no longer available) volume of work; more of his prose and poetry can be found at <http://kampfverein.deviantart.com>. He is also involved with CRAM Magazine, which can be found at www.cram-mag.com.

Tea Brick Image

The image of the Tea Brick used in Rory Pollock's article was sourced from Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea_brick).