

The Lion and The Aardvark



Aesop's Modern Fables

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edited by
Robin D. Laws



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The Story of the Moral

An Introduction by Robin D. Laws

For a figure who may or may not have existed, the fabulist remembered as Aesop has exerted a powerful cultural influence over a period of two and a half thousand years and counting. Within a body of ancient history, which then passed into myth, appear fleeting glimpses of a real spinner of allegorical tales.

However they came into being, the instructive tales attributed to Aesop, featuring mostly animals with human-like qualities, but also gods, heroes and ordinary people, so cemented him in the popular imagination that he himself transformed into a literary character. Aesop became the hero of an oft-changing folk narrative, in which he is rescued from childhood muteness by the blessing of the goddess Isis.

Maybe the original man was as spectacularly ugly as tradition demands. Perhaps he really rose from slavery, as Aristotle and later writers had it, lofted from lowly beginnings by his own cleverness. He might have been one of the legendary Seven Sages of Greece, or merely had dinner with them once, but

probably neither. Depending on the chronology you prefer, he could indeed have met his end while conducting a diplomatic mission for the equally proverbial King Croesus. As this story goes, he insulted the Delphians, who in response falsely convicted him of stealing from their temple and heaved him off a cliff. Since the classic Greeks thought it unseemly to assign prosaic deaths to the great and worthy, that too may have been punched up in rewrite.

Other elements of the legendary biography can be conclusively ruled out. It's highly unlikely, for example, that he was Ethiopian: that detail only surfaces in the Middle Ages.

That promiscuous mingling of truth, memory and mythic history leave Aesop's story in messy draft form, far from the forbidding rigor of the fable form he is synonymous with. You could dig for a moral in there, about not taking one's gift of gab for granted, or remaining diplomatic while engaged in diplomacy, or simply about keeping your trap shut around touchy Delphians. As a cautionary tale it still lacks a certain precision.

We remember Aesop not for anything we're sure he did. He may or may not have personally written down any of his fables. We can't say with certainty that any of the stories attributed to Aesop were actually his. The fables we have now were collected by much later compilers of the classic era, some rendering them into verse, others translating them from Greek to Latin, and many of whose texts have vanished. A loose corpus of fables continued its transmission through the ages, awaiting final codification by those great codifiers, German scholars of the 19th century.

Keeping the name Aesop in the public consciousness is the emotional pull inherent in the fable structure. Like any apparently rigid literary form, the simple rules become a vessel for potent, distilled human experience.

The fable activates a mirrored pair of deep-rooted desires: to be warned of dangers and to see the foolhardy punished. That

we share these impulses with the first hearers of Aesopian tales in (probably) the 5th century BCE in Samos (or Sardis, or Lydia) testifies to a continuity of literary interests across a yawning span of time and culture.

What better way, then, to take the pulse of our immediate instant, as the information age tears off its mask to reveal itself as the disruption age, than to seek out writers from diverse scenes and traditions and ask them to address the flinty classicism of the fable structure? Together their contributions convey a sense of the hazards we fear today, and the odious figures we yearn to see consigned to rightfully awful fates.

Their approaches range from the traditional, in bang-on Aesopian voice, to the deconstructive. Some embrace the inherent moralism of the premise, while others bring it into disturbing question. Pieces present their morals explicitly, deflected into dialogue, or as ambiguous absences. Fables that, in classical mode, create an expectation and then fulfill it, sit next to contributions appealing to the modern taste for the surprise right hook. Among them you'll find fables that only reveal themselves as such by the company they keep.

A cast of variously anthropomorphic characters cackles, hisses and growls along a continuum from time-honored dogs, foxes and birds to expansionist opossums and idly aspiring axolotls. They troll the internet, fret over mobile phones, and leave wet, fishy puddles on the gym equipment. Though all expose human foibles, some of these animals prove more or less animalistic than others, inhabiting tropes laid down by Chuck Jones or applying a dusting of toxin to the clotted cosiness of Kenneth Grahame.

As in the originals, ordinary humans populate other of these moral tales, in modes ranging from the naturalistic to the magically realistic. Excursions into memoir find allegorical resonance in actual events—some of them at least as true as the legendary life and demise of Aesop himself.

Characteristic of our present moment, with the triumph of geek culture and its preference for the lens of genre, are stories stretching robots, zombies, and cyber-assassins across an Aesopian framework.

As ever, we celebrate the downfalls of the prideful, the attention-seeking, and the reckless. We fear artistic eclipse, deadly assumptions, the servitude of desire, and the enemies we create within ourselves.

In perhaps the greater departure from the form, writers use the fable to affirm, to find beauty in death, wisdom in smallness, and joy in parenthood.

Two and a half millennia from now, when all of us are deemed to have perhaps been imaginary, let's hope that both these fears and aspirations remain recognizable. If so, we have touched what it means to be human, albeit in a cloak of feathers or fur.

Can't Learn New Tricks from an Old Dog

Greg Stafford

“Can’t teach me a thing,” said Old Dog to New Dog. They got together for some mutual butt sniffing and other catch-up. Smells tell a dog everything that he needs to know about a fellow—what he ate, when, what the fields were that he’s run through for the last two weeks, and how constipated he is. “Ever’ body says so.”

But these animals with names have more than just sniffing and shitting to find their ways around. It doesn’t matter if he’s called B’rer something or maybe Animal with a capital so you know he’s an archetype, or maybe it’s just some label like Quick Red Fox or Lazy Brown Dog that recognizes the critter’s ability to communicate more than just fox-sneaking and dog-sleeping.

“I learn all kinds of new tricks,” said New Dog. “Thumbs & Hairless loves me for that. Says I’m clever and smart.” And that’s what he was being: clever and smart. “But say what, maybe if you can’t be taught, maybe you can teach me what it means to be Old Dog?”

“Pff, you can’t learn old tricks either pipsqueak.”

“Try me out, I can do anything.”

“Yea, well tell you what. You go to that house over there and bring me back a pig or a lamb or something, and then we’ll see if you can learn something old.”

“Good as done,” and off he went to prove himself. Sure ’nuf, he got himself a fat little lamb in his teeth and bounded out to prove he could learn old secrets.

“Good, bring that, come with me,” said Old Dog, and they ran off together onto the woods until they were a good way away. Then Old Dog howled and the rest of his pack showed up. They ripped the lamb to shreds and ate it while New Dog watched. They all ran away, and as Old Dog started to leave he shouted out.

“Wait Old Dog! What will you teach me?”

“An old trick, like you asked. Just wait here.” Then he too joined the rest of the pack slipping into the woods.

New Dog waited, thinking of ways that he could use this trick to help Thumbs & Hairless. He was eager and happy, wagging his doggy tail to greet his master. He didn’t understand English, but was always happy to greet his master who pulled out a gun and shot him dead. He didn’t understand the last thing he heard when his master spoke.

“Flocks suffer when dogs and wolves mingle.”

The Amok

Sandy Petersen

Once, so long ago that to doubt anything from that time would be impious, Mr. Mandarin ruled an island. His great enemies were the mer-men. They murdered his fishers, spread disease among coast-dwellers, and whistled up storms to plague his ships. All these problems were known to Mr. Mandarin of old, and his folk were able to survive despite the plots of the mer-men.

One day, his fishers captured an enormous and loathly mer-man. They brought it before Mr. Mandarin and he questioned it. The mer-man laughed and said at last the island was doomed. “What do you mean?” asked Mr. Mandarin. The mer-man laughed and said that his underwater folk had at last placed upon the island the Amok which, interpreted, is “the thing that destroys”. Mr. Mandarin destroyed the monster, but its words remained.

Now Mr. Mandarin sought to find and eliminate the Amok. Fearing lest the Amok lurked in the woods, he ordered the hunters, charcoal-burners, and woodcutters to search carefully all the forests. Fearing lest the Amok took refuge among the high

peaks, he ordered his army to force the mountaineers away from their homes and slay them if need be. Fearing lest the Amok dwelt in houses built by hands, he ordered the townspeople to watch over one another carefully and report. Fearing lest the Amok drifted in the world of magic he caused his Wise Men to search the seven planes of existence.

The Amok's effects were soon felt, though it was never found. Evil beasts raided the farms. Famine swept across the island. Storms destroyed the fleets of white ships. Criminals and bandits spread throughout the population. The only success was found with the Wise Men, who reported that they had discovered that the Amok dwelt in Mr. Mandarin's own palace.

The only newcomer to Mr. Mandarin's palace was his newborn son, born just the day before the mer-man had been caught. Was his son the Amok? Mr. Mandarin did not have the courage to slay his son, but sent his son far away from the island in the last remaining boat. Then he waited hopefully for the terror to end. As he sat in his decaying palace, listening to the cries of his people in pain and poverty, a huge mer-man, even larger and more loathly than the first, flopped into his empty hall.

“What is happening?” pleaded Mr. Mandarin, at wit's end.

“The Amok has destroyed you,” said the horror.

“I did all I could,” explained Mr. Mandarin. “I sent my hunters, charcoal-burners, and woodcutters to comb the wilderness...”

“And hence they did not hunt, make fuel, or cut wood. Evil beasts multiplied, the people could not cook, make furniture, or build homes,” said the horror.

“I drove away the mountaineers,” wailed Mr. Mandarin.

“And so they could not foresee the storms which wrecked your ships and cleaned your harbor.”

“I had every man watch over his neighbor,” cried Mr. Mandarin.

“And so no man trusted another. Friendships were broken. Your judges were kept so busy dealing with accusations one against another, the criminals were left free to run riot.”

“I even sent away my own son,” mourned Mr. Mandarin, lost in sorrow.

“And so you have no heir. Soon civil strife will add to your worries.”

Mr. Mandarin stood up to his full stature, summoned the last vestiges of his glory, and glared at the monster. “I command you, thing of the deep. Tell me, where is the Amok?”

“YOU are the Amok.”

The Lion & the Aardvark

Ekaterina Sedia

There once was a lion, who was very angry. Lion often lashed out at his friends and coworkers, until he had no friends left, and it even cost him his clerical job. He was eventually hired as a night watchman for a large warehouse, but his anger continued to boil, even more so now that there was no one for him to roar at. That is, until he discovered that the computer in the main office had internet access.

Lion's life changed that day. He found many fora and discussion boards, on many subjects from consumer electronics to literary criticism, from politics to Scrabble. It didn't matter to Lion: wherever his mouse clicks took him, wherever he went, he would always find a reason to type long comments, berating other posters for their stupidity, half-baked opinions, poor spelling, or inappropriate tone.

He would spend hours entranced, typing in all caps, and his electronic roar traveled wide and far, terrifying unsuspecting members of various online communities. Many of them cried after reading his words, and others called him a bully. Not many could stand up to his anger, and most of those who tried, gave up

soon enough, telling themselves they had better things to do. But in reality, they were simply overpowered by his anger, by the fury that was not blunted by the monitor. If anything, his anger burned brighter once divorced from the images of those he abused so.

One of them, however, didn't back down. It happened soon after Lion typed a particularly devastating review of a cast iron Dutch oven. The next comment, signed "Aardvark" popped up almost immediately, and ridiculed Lion's cooking ability and his capacity to follow simple written instructions. It questioned his capacity to even turn on an electric oven, let alone have the wherewithal for remembering to properly deglaze the pot. It even suggested that Lion must have some personal animosity toward the manufacturers of Dutch ovens for reasons too personal and lurid to mention in this fable.

In his warehouse, Lion roared and banged his fist on the desk. Strangely though, despite his desire to respond, he found himself at a lack of words—or rather, he realized that Aardvark already used all of the best insults. He fumed a bit before posting a half-hearted "DIAF" and turned off the computer.

His next run-in with Aardvark happened a few weeks later, on discussion boards of a video game company. Lion complained about the latest patch that needed a patch (even though he never played any video games, he read a lot of discussion boards). Aardvark lambasted him again. This time, though, Lion was more prepared and a lengthy flame war ensued.

Aardvark was different from all other users Lion dealt with online (although if he ever encountered 4chan, he might've felt differently). Aardvark seemed immune to most biting insults and had no fear most others have—fear of inflicting real damage with one's words. In fact, he seemed to aim for that very result. He wished death on Lion's children and various indignities on his female relatives, and he especially enjoyed debasing the loving memory of Lion's mother. Aardvark was truly terrible.

As time went on, Aardvark popped up in more and more places, and his purpose to be the same as Lion's: to start flame wars and dispense insults. And Lion started to dread him. He was looking

to insult, not to be insulted, and Aardvark upset the natural online dynamics.

Now, it is worth saying that in truth Aardvark was nothing like Lion: he did not really enjoy online fights, or trolling, or flame wars—the activities that allowed Lion’s anger (although not him) to thrive so. In his regular life, Aardvark was somewhat phlegmatic and taciturn, choosing to eschew personal contact. He was, however, quick-witted, and this is why he was frequently hired by big companies to defend their products. He made a decent living by popping up on message boards and casting aspersions on sanity, motives, and reputation of those who criticized his most recent employer.

So as Lion roared and flailed and developed high blood pressure and repetitive stress injury from unnecessarily forceful typing, Aardvark built up his savings account, remodeled his condo and even bought a time share in Sardinia. Lion went bald and obsessive, and he even bought a computer so he could continue his war with Aardvark on his days off. He had to start wearing wrist braces, and became pale from spending so much time indoors. His bitterness grew, and only the hope that some day he would win an argument with Aardvark sustained him.

One day, however, he realized that Aardvark hadn’t manifested in a while. Lion logged onto all of his favorite consumer review sites, and posted a wide range of nasty reviews of cookware, music, films, and cashmere sweaters. He then bashed some candy and toy cars. (Manufacturers of children’s products often hired Aardvark. Lion of course did not know that, but he noticed Aardvark’s affinity to those things.) He even started an argument about the proper ship canon of an obscure TV show. But Aardvark would not take the bait.

Lion waited for weeks, growing angrier and yet more despondent by the day. He soon stopped shaving, developed an ulcer and died a few months later, destitute and alone. His body was not discovered until ten days after his demise.

Aardvark never learned of Lion’s death: internet’s memory is long but uneven, and what was left of Lion were only rants but

no obituaries. Aardvark retired and traveled quite a bit, logging on very rarely and never posting anything. He sometimes smiled to himself thinking of his career as a professional internet troll and flame warrior. He mostly took pride in his creative way of making a living, and rarely gave Lion any thought at all.

There is a moral to this story: if you must be awful on the internet, make sure that you are paid really well for it.

Cow & Dog

Matt Forbeck

One day, Cow decided to go pay her old friend Dog a visit to show off her new calf. She found Dog running around the yard, playing with her litter of puppies. Her calf tugged at her, wanting to go play too, but she put him in his place and refused to let him move.

“You’ll get just as dirty as them,” Cow said to Calf. They waited at the edge of the yard until Dog noticed them and trotted over to chat.

“How can you manage so many at once?” Cow asked. “It must be so exhausting.”

“It is,” said Dog. “But it’s also so much fun. I missed my old pack from when I was a puppy too. Now I have a whole pack of my own.”

They stood there and watched the puppies for a while. Any one of them had more energy than Cow and Dog combined. They ran about so fast that Cow wondered if they could start a tornado if they tried.

“Look at them playing so hard together,” Dog said. “Would Calf like to join them?”

Calf looked up at his mother with wide eyes, but Cow gave him

a quick shake of her snout. He bowed his head, disappointed but obedient, as always.

“But how can you manage to feed them all?” Cow’s calf nestled closer to her.

“It’s not easy,” Dog said. “But we get by.”

“But what will you do when they grow up?” Cow said. “How will you send them all to school?”

Dog shrugged. “How will you send Calf to school?”

“We are already putting something away to save up for that day.” Cow held up her chin, proud, and the bell around her neck clanked. “Aren’t you?”

“After we take care of the puppies, we don’t have much left over,” Dog said. “But we’re teaching them to fend for themselves when they get older.”

“Will they be able to handle that?” Cow looked down at Calf and then out at the puppies. They were fighting with each other. She shook her head in disbelief. “They’re so willful.”

Dog nodded alongside her friend. “They’re just puppies now. They’ll grow out of that.” She paused for a moment, then added, “I hope.”

Cow had to strain to hear her friend speak over the puppies’ barking and snarling. “I hope so too. They’re so loud.”

“I don’t worry about the noise,” Dog said. “It helps me know where they are. I worry when it gets quiet.”

Cow shook her head again. “I don’t know how you do it.”

Dog considered this for a moment. “I don’t always know either. But I can’t imagine my life without any one of them.”

“Really?”

Dog snorted. “Of course, not. I have an excellent imagination. I had a life before them, and I’ll have a life after they leave here too. I know exactly what it would be like without them. It would be quieter and easier and cleaner. Sometimes it’s all too much.”

She watched her children for a while. “Without them, it would be unbearably less.”

“Please, mother,” Calf said. “Can I go play with them?”

Cow sucked at her teeth and then relented. She sent Calf off with a wave of her head. “Play nice.”

Shrew & Sloth

Halli Villegas

Everyone in the neighborhood knew that Shrew was a real bitch. One of Mr. Squirrel's star turns at neighbourhood dinner parties was his devastating impression of the shrew calling to her husband.

“Sloth, Sloth have you finished cleaning the garage yet? Are you still reading those back issues of Field and Stream? I'm going to burn the damn things if you don't get off your ass and finish cleaning the garage.”

For this dialogue Mr. Squirrel put his hands on his hips and used a high pitched hectoring voice, pursing his lips the way Shrew did.

Mrs. Rabbit clutched at her stomach. “Squirrel, stop, oh my God it is so true, if you don't stop I'm going to pee my pants.”

Mr. Squirrel's tail bounced up and down as he imitated Shrew and Sloth having sex, Shrew giving him orders all along. The dinner guests laughed so hard they cried. Finally Mrs. Squirrel put her hand on his arm.

“That's enough S, let's have our coffee and cake in the living room.”

Sloth was generally well liked. He was overweight and moved with a pondering slowness that made those animals that didn't have to live with him smile. He always had time to chat about sports, the weather, to listen to neighbours' stories of their children, houses, work. Inevitably though, while he was deep in one of these chats, shifting foot to foot to foot to foot, Shrew's voice would ring out.

“Sloth we have to get these taxes finished by tomorrow!”

“Sloth I can't put in the storm windows alone!”

“Sloth I can't do everything by myself!”

Sloth would sigh and shuffle off, casting one last longing look at his glass of ice tea and Sudoku sitting next to the lounge chair on the lawn. The neighbours exchanged glances, such a nice guy, married to such a truly horrible Shrew.

Shrew would have been attractive if it wasn't for her long nose.

“But who would want her?” Mr. Rabbit said, shuddering. “That voice, that nagging.”

“I'd kill myself first,” Bluejay said. He was a confirmed bachelor and Shrews like her just made his choice that much easier to defend. If he married it would be to a little brown bird who just stayed home and sat on the eggs, he just hadn't met the right one yet. All the lady-birds seemed to have too much to say these days and he had his routines.

Mrs. Squirrel and Mrs. Rabbit talked about it after their yoga class while they were having non-fat lattes at the local coffee shop.

“Well she certainly is smart, I'll give her that.” Mrs. Squirrel said, taking a sip and coming up with a foam mustache on her lip.

Mrs. Rabbit made a gesture and Mrs. Squirrel wiped the foam away with a napkin.

“Yes, yes, I know, ten percent of her body mass in her brain, bigger than any other mammal, yadda yadda, but come on, she has like zero personality and she never has time for anything that is not 'productive'. What a Class-A bore.” Mrs. Rabbit opened a compact and smoothed her whiskers. “Anyway, Sloth made a big mistake there. Let's hope he comes to his senses.”

So the year went by. Sloth shuffled around, sleeping whenever he could, standing chatting with the neighbours while they washed

their cars or fixed their lawnmowers, slowly getting up from his lounge chair when Shrew's distinctive voice rang out, standing in the driveway with his buffalo plaid cap with flaps on, staring at the snowblower like he had never seen it before till Shrew came out and took it from him and sent him back into the house.

Then it was spring, the neighbourhood's favourite time of year. Everyone who was into that kind of thing was done hibernating and admired each other's much thinner figures, fresh food could be found rather than the stored stuff they had been eating all winter, and Mrs. Rabbit had her usual new brood of babies, which meant she'd be hitting the gym with renewed gusto. Shrew and Sloth were out too. Shrew cleaning up the yard, putting up screens on the windows, carrying out garbage bags full of winter waste. Her voice rang out as she ordered Sloth, who really just wanted to lie in the sun and read *I Don't Know How She Does It* for the third time, around.

One day Shrew had Sloth up in the tree cutting down branches that were blocking Mr. Squirrel's satellite dish. She stood on the lawn in the hot sunshine, blocking her eyes and shouting up at Sloth, "The one to the left, no, the other one. Do I have to come up there and show you what to do? You're the one who is supposed to live in trees for God's sake—the big leafy one on the left."

Perhaps it was the sound of her voice that attracted the hawk, perhaps it was her frantic waving of hands, but the long shadow fell over her and with a sinister rustle of wings she was gone. Sloth clambered slowly down from the tree and called to Shrew. He asked his neighbours for help and they looked for her, but half-heartedly. Secretly, there was much rejoicing.

Shrew meanwhile had been dropped in a forest far from her old neighbourhood after she bit the hawk hard on his talon. He had a limp for a week, but his wife told him he deserved it for being stupid enough to pick up a Shrew, everyone knew they had venom in their teeth and they tasted bad besides.

Shrew found lodging in a small house under a tree root whose last owners had left under mysterious circumstances. She cleaned, and organized, and mowed the small yard so that it did not look

like hobos lived there. She put in a supply of food and repaired the leaking roof. Sometimes she thought about making the long trek back to Sloth, but it was many miles away, and a dangerous journey. Anyway she had never liked the neighbourhood much—too cliquish. If Sloth wanted her, he could come and find her. Occasionally she missed his shambling walk, or his long-winded conversations about politics or curling, but not often. She was much too busy.

Shrew's doorbell rang. Mrs. Mouse had come over with a raspberry pie.

"I can't believe what you have done with this place, it's amazing. The last couple who lived here, well let's just say it was *Revolutionary Road* all over again."

Shrew thanked her and invited her to sit down for a cup of coffee. They chatted about the proper way to store food, and how to prepare the home for the winter, and Mrs. Mouse looked at her admiringly.

"My, you do know a lot about canning. I'll have to send Mrs. Mole over to get some tips, or maybe you would like to join us for a dinner party this Saturday?"

Shrew smiled, and Mrs. Mouse noticed she had very fine eyes, if a trifle small. She might just know the perfect mate for Shrew: she'd invite him to the dinner party.

Back in the old neighbourhood, everyone had long since given up looking for Shrew. At first they invited Sloth to dinner, and brought him food in Tupperware containers, but he began to smell a trifle ripe, since Shrew wasn't around to wash his clothes or insist he change his underwear daily. His house began to look pretty bad too. The gutters were filled with leaves, the lawn was long and unkempt, and Sloth sat in his garage most of the time reading his old magazines and drinking Coors beer. The neighbours who had once enjoyed passing the time of day with Sloth, now dreaded seeing him shamble up to their side of the fence.

"Do you notice his ears? I don't think he has washed them in months," Mrs. Rabbit said taking a big bite of her salad.

“Mr. Squirrel says if Sloth doesn’t do something about his house, the value of our property is going to go right down the tubes, it’s just a shame.” Mrs. Squirrel said.

“Well, I refuse to have him over any more. The last time he was at the house, it took me a week to get the smell out of the curtains. He needs to stop reading those magazines, drinking that cheap beer and get off his butt and do something.”

“That Sloth certainly is a waste of space. I don’t wonder Shrew left him.” Mrs. Squirrel said.

The dinner party was lovely. Mrs. Mouse had invited several neighbourhood couples who were all anxious to meet Shrew after they saw what a great job she had done with the local eyesore. When they sat down at the table, Shrew was seated next to a very handsome Mr. Shrew, whose velvety pelt shone in the candle light. He proposed a toast to their new neighbour, “To a Shrew who was smart enough to go where she was wanted.”

Shrew smiled at him and he winked at her and the party went on for hours.



The Beaver & the Trout

Richard Scarsbrook

TROUT was the proudest fish in the lake. He had survived for many seasons without once being caught by a fisherman, and Bald Eagle's talons had never even come close to snatching him from the water.

"It takes a pretty smart fish to last around here as long as I have," sleek, silvery Trout was saying to himself, when he noticed round, brown Beaver working near the shore. So, Trout swam closer and said, "Ahem! It takes a pretty smart fish to last around here as long as I have, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose I might say that," said Beaver, politely. Then he continued his work of scavenging sticks from the shoreline.

"Well, I think that you should say it!" Trout said haughtily, swimming alongside toiling Beaver. "Take this as but one example of my cleverness: When the fishermen are after me, I simply swim over here, into the shallow water near the stream, where it isn't deep enough for their boats, and where their fishing hooks get tangled in the weeds when they cast for me. Very clever, yes?"

"Very clever, yes," grunted Beaver, who continued collecting sticks.

“Surely,” said Trout, “it must be frustrating for the humans, the Rulers of the Land, to be outwitted again and again by the King of the Lake! Humiliating, wouldn’t you say?”

“No, I really can’t say,” said Beaver. “I am not a human, so I can’t really presume to know how a human feels about anything. I can only speak from my experience as a beaver.”

“Well,” Trout continued, “How about this, then: When Bald Eagle is trying to scoop me out of the water, I swim over to that steep rocky island in the middle of the lake, and I hover right at the edge of its steep rock face. Bald Eagle would surely dash his brains out on the island trying to catch me there! Very clever, yes?”

“Very clever, yes,” hard-working Beaver grunted.

“And when I’m out in the open water, and I see the shadow of Bald Eagle circling above the water’s skin, waiting to swoop down and pluck me out with his talons, I swim down deeper than he can dive. Very clever, yes?”

“Very clever, yes,” said Beaver, sighing. “You are very good at being a trout.”

“Surely,” said Trout, “it must be frustrating for the Ruler of the Sky to be outwitted again and again by the King of the Lake! Humiliating, wouldn’t you say?”

“No, I really can’t say,” said Beaver. “I am not a bald eagle, so I can’t really presume to know how a bald eagle feels about things. I can only speak from my experience as a beaver.”

“Well, speaking of your experience as a beaver,” Trout said, in patronizing tone, “Recently I’ve noticed that the level of the water in the lake has been gradually dropping. Pretty soon the water near the stream will be too shallow for me to swim in, and, as I have just made you aware, this is where I need to come to avoid the fishermen. Are there any problems with your dam that you should be looking into?”

Beaver’s dam was built at the source of a stream that fed water from their small lake into a bigger, lower-lying one. Without Beaver’s dam, the shallow end of their lake would be no more than a marshy mud-slick.

“As a matter of fact,” said Beaver, “there is a small leak in my

dam, and I am in the process of collecting materials to make the repair."

"What!" Trout yelped in horror. "You are using mere twigs to keep the water in the lake?"

"A mixture of twigs and mud, yes. When the compound dries, it is very solid."

"Are you sure about that?" ranted Trout, "How can you be sure? There are other creatures in this lake that depend on the water staying in it, you know! Are you sure that you know what you're doing?"

"I'm a beaver," Beaver sighed. "I've been building and repairing dams for a long, long time."

"I think that you should build your dam out of stones. And rocks. And logs. And..."

"A mixture of sticks and mud will do the job just fine," Beaver said.

"Stones! Rocks! Logs! I insist! Really, I insist!"

"Look, Mr. Trout, I really do know what I'm doing."

"I'm not sure that you do. I insist on a second opinion! I insist that you rebuild this dam using better materials! I insist that you..."

"Listen," said Beaver, now somewhat annoyed, "just how many dams have you built?"

"It takes a pretty smart fish to last around here as long as I have," huffed sleek, silvery Trout, "and I insist, for the good of every creature that lives in and around this lake, that you listen to my advice on this matter!"

"Are you giving a speech?" Beaver wondered. "There is nobody around but me and you."

"I am giving a speech!" Trout railed. "On behalf of all the creatures, great and small, that depend on the water in this lake, I demand that you..."

"Fix it yourself, then," Beaver rumbled, and then he stomped over to the slightly-leaky dam, and began slapping his strong, flat tail against it.

THWAP! THWAP! THWAP!

Gurgle... gurgle... WHOOOOOOSSSSSSHHHHHH!

The dam crumbled and was washed away by the rushing water, which surged downhill through the stream and into the larger lake below.

As Trout lay flapping in the mud of the now-drained shallow end of the lake, he was spotted by Bald Eagle.

"At last!" the bird of prey screeched, as he swept down from the sky and clenched Trout in his razor-sharp talons.

As he carried Trout up into the sky, Bald Eagle said to his prey, "Never criticize work that you cannot do yourself."

The Lemmings & the Sea

Graeme Davis

It was a good year for the lemmings. Spring had come early. The grass had grown tall, the weather had been kind, and the foxes had been scarce. Many healthy babies were born that spring, and by the beginning of summer they were starting to have babies of their own.

As the summer went on, the lemmings multiplied. They ate the tall, lush grass down to the roots. When the grass was gone, the lemmings ate weeds and nettles. When the weeds and nettles were gone, the lemmings ate dead leaves and fallen twigs. When the dead leaves and fallen twigs were gone, the lemmings ate bugs, grubs, and whatever else they could find. Whenever a green shoot showed itself above ground, it was nibbled off before it had a chance to grow. The fertile grassland became a desert.

“What should we do?” the hungry lemmings asked each other.

“I know,” said one old lemming. All the others turned to listen to him: not only had he survived an entire winter, he had once escaped from a fox. There was a long scar down his back from the fox’s teeth, and no lemming could look at it without admiring his courage and resilience. They all respected his wisdom.

“We need to move on,” said the old lemming. “We must walk and walk until we find a place that is full of fresh new grass. If we are strong enough, and travel far enough, we will find this place, and then we will be safe.”

The lemmings marveled at his words. Could there be somewhere else as rich as this place once was? The old lemming said there was, and he said that they would find it if they walked and walked and never gave up. They made up their minds to find this promised land.

The lemmings turned their backs on the barren land they had created. They walked and walked, past dead trees and bare rocks, until they came to a stream. It was only a small stream, but it flowed swiftly.

“We must cross the stream,” said the old lemming. “We must cross every obstacle we find, or we will never reach the new land of fresh grass.”

“But what if we drown?” asked some of the lemmings, eying the water nervously.

“Some of us may drown,” said the old lemming, “but others will get across safely. Our journey to the new land of green grass will be long and hard. Many of us will fall along the way. But we must not let that deter us: those who are strong and lucky will reach the new land, and there we will be safe.”

Encouraged by his speech, the lemmings threw themselves into the stream and swam with all their might. Some were swept away and drowned, but most reached the other side.

The lemmings traveled on until they came to a river. It did not seem to flow as swiftly as the stream, but it was so wide that the lemmings could barely see the far bank.

“Do not lose heart now!” cried the wise, old lemming. “The stream did not stop us, and neither will this river! If we stay the course, the strongest of us will surely reach the land of green grass!”

The lemmings were less afraid of the river than they had been of the stream. After all, they had crossed water before and lived, and what was this but more water? And so they threw themselves into the river and swam.

The lemmings swam and swam all day. Many of them sank beneath the water, unable to swim any further. Those who reached the far bank dragged themselves from the water and sank down exhausted. There was a little grass there, and they ate it gratefully. Some of them wanted to stay, but the wise, old lemming spoke up again.

“Yes,” he said, “it is true that there is some grass here, but how long will it last? Have we come so far and endured so much just for a few blades of grass like this? Have we lost so many of our friends and relatives so we can stay here instead of going on to the land of fine, green grass that we set out to find?” When they heard this, the lemmings were ashamed that they had lost heart. They became more determined than ever to keep on traveling until they found the land of fresh, green grass that they had been promised. Wearily, they got to their feet and started walking.

The lemmings walked and walked. They traveled through forests and across mountains. They swam across more streams and rivers, and their numbers dwindled with each crossing. They discovered lush meadows and grasslands, but they did not stop because they knew that they would find a promised land of tall, green grass that would be far better. Weeks passed, and summer was almost at a close when the lemmings came to another shore.

This was the biggest body of water they had ever seen. There was no sign of the other side. The lemmings smelled salt in the air, and they paused. But the wise, old lemming spoke out again.

“Don’t lose heart!” he cried. “Water has not stopped us before, and it will not stop us now! Take hold of your courage, and swim for your lives! The land of green grass cannot be far away now! We need only keep our strength of purpose and stay the course!” As they had many times before, the lemmings took heart at his words. Thinking of nothing but the promised land of green grass, they plunged into the endless ocean, and were never seen again.

The Little Meme That Could

Emily Care Boss

Power Parterre was born on a sunny day in Kensington. She remembered the first digital click of the shutter. The first seeds planted in the beds of the garden, once the Queen's own. Her eyes opened on the world as a newly born idea. Her maker had dug the winding paths of the garden by hand. His love for the garden turned into a video. Cameras set to capture the unfolding of the royal gardens as they grew in their parterre beds.

His devotion incubated Parterre's ferocious desire for life. It began with the green of the gardens, the dank smell of the humus, the crunch of the feet of passersby on the gravel walks. As the gardens grew, she formed. Bombastic music matching the rise and blooming of the gardens in quickened time. She was proud of herself. She was the glory of nature, her nation, life itself.

Grouseberry was her first friend. A Kensington mother, well-pleased with her child's precocious artistic talent, saw design, not dislike, in the berries the youngster slapped against the wall. Captured live-action on her phone, she shared the child's magnum opus with the world: A Statement in Grouseberry.

Their links were side by side on a page, and it was best friends forever. Grouseberry loved Power Parterre's slow build to beauty. Grouseberry Statement's mashed berries were fascinating to Parterre. Rorschach blots of color, brilliant purple clouds of hope and promise. She saw in them the face of a child looking at Parterre's blossoming beauty, bursting forth from the cold, dark ground. The delighted laughter of millions.

Grouseberry tore through the 1st grade class parents. She made it through the parent's association, to the headmaster and over to Marlborough and Fox Primary. She went all the way to Middle Row.

Parterre was elated. Her friend was known and loved. Surely she could do even better.

Others doubted her.

Sleeping Exploration had her share at 3,000 hits. She rolled over and yawned to Parterre, "You are just dreaming."

Forwarding Hair Culprit had seen her moment come and go. Peaking at 237,000 hits when her gag had a moment in the light. She pulled her hair in anger, "How dare you tangle with fame?"

Home Institute was somber. Her corporate viewers gave her a steady influx of 50 hits per day. "Stay in your place. Be content with those few who know and appreciate you."

But, inspired by Grouseberry, Parterre had stars in her eyes. Not content with the unfolding of nature's beauty, she was cut and recut, flowers bloomed, seeds quickened, plants shrank down into the ground, grew again, shrank, froze and jumped to full grown. The music changed. Horns to orchestra to bold symphonic polyphony. Sampled, mixed, intercut with hip hop rhythm, driving pulse, heavy steady beat. Over all, an old school rap. No, a rap battle. An army of rappers rapping.

She was launched on the Queen's birthday. The same day as City Elite.

City Elite was full of everything Parterre was not. A visual bacchanal of the luxury of ours and every era: future, present, past. Long-shanked women, skinny well-coiffed men, flash soaked red carpet walks to inside views of royals. Chilled grapes on marble

tables, fine gold tines, flesh-thin china. The 'royals' walking arm in arm with edited-in greats of history, and the beautiful of our day. Taking off in air cars above the reach of dirty commoners, flashing through the air to one-night-only clubs. Dancing in a shelter carved from butter, held by servants, clothed only in live Pekinese strapped to tit, yard and twat.

Untz-untz-untz. Parterre watched the count grow in horror. City Elite was taking the world by storm.

Parterre went back to the drawing board. Now between the flowers swelling, the heaving backs of groping couples. Glowing eyes. Passion overflowing. Her counts ticked upward.

City Elite's expurgated second cut was revealed. The shining beauty of the rich and powerful were cut and slashed. Tossed from their perch on the top of the world. Roving masses beat them and quenched that beauty.

From bursting green, to throbbing pink to spattering red. Parterre matched City Elite's gore stroke for stroke. Bombastic horns intermingled then gave way to striking devil's chords. Nails on black board. Deep demonic below-bass notes lingered.

The counts mounted. Each cut prompted new titillation and torment from the other. Spurring each other on. Intercuts of the two began sprouting up. Power Elite. City Parterre. Parterre began taking the recuts and putting them in her. Not knowing or caring any more where she ended, Elite continued or the horrors began. The counts kept climbing, then slowing, then falling downward...

Until quietly a gasp crossed the island. The Queen Mum had spoken for her birthday celebrations. And in the background, green and growing, the sound of horns were heard.

"What is that she's listening to?" Could the Queen be watching YouTube?

It was true, Parterre's original form had found a home. The simple glory of a British garden growing captured the monarch's fancy. And then a nation's. Then the world. Power Parterre had her day in the sun once more.

Wasp & Snake

Livia Llewellyn

Wasp is given two choices by her client, each procured by the night market merchant. From where he bought these items, he will not, or cannot, say. The biomechanical finger sleeves are beautiful: bright copper filigree, each tip sharpened to points invisible, the better with which to dispense luminous poison hiding in the hollows, poison which will be secreted from her alchemically transformed flesh. Wasp raises her thin black hands to the candlelight, admiring how the metal elongates her fingers into gleaming claws. With great reluctance, she slips them off. Beautiful, but finger sleeves will be seen—and, once welded to her flesh, never to be removed. Her life will revolve around her hands, around this irreversible decision. Hasn't life revolved enough already around things outside her own desires, the desires of others and the price they pay her to fulfill them? The merchant lifts up the other choice from its bed of wet velvet. It takes both hands, and Wasp's client, who is paying, has to help. They stand before her, the two men and their terrible cargo. Wasp lets out a slow breath, then nods. If all goes well, her life will forever change, for the better. Then someday, with another commission,

she'll return for the sleeves—if only to use them to rip her own life from her throat.



Her screams cram up all unused cracks of the night. Many hear them. No one cares. The stone labyrinth of the underground market is constantly filled with such sounds, with human shrieks and screeches floating above the constant grinding, pounding, stitching of obscene machines. Bent forward over a rough wood table, the naked Wasp shudders. Her face presses down against a shallow groove, where so many others have worn the grain fine and smooth. If she looks up, her watering eyes sees fine sprays of her blood mist through the air, speckling walls already blackened with the blood of others who came before. Behind her, the merchant presses the electric hammer against her lower spine, and pulls the trigger again. Wasp dreams of slamming through the ground, her bones melding with saurian predators trapped miles below the surface of dead dried seas. Somewhere in the real world, the merchant bolts the second choice to her flesh, using living metals that flicker as they vibrate between one dimension and the next. The pain lightning-strikes its way up her torso, and the roots of the metal object follow like rivers of mercury, burrowing into her brain. He is welding her to a darker universe. When he is finished, he says, her body will be a pipeline to hell.

He's not just opening a gate, Wasp thinks. He's widening the road.



Five weeks later, Wasp walks painlessly past colossal doors into the cathedral hall of the bank where she first met her client, eight distant weeks ago. In her gloved hand is the badge that allowed her to spend the week here, filling ledgers with rows of neat numbers, stuffing memos into pneumatic tubes and shooting them deep into the ground. Today is the day. She stops with her back to the doors, staring over her shoulder in the high noon light at the blurred reflection behind her. Under the sweep of a slim linen jacket and a

pleated silk dress, the biomechanical tail erupts from her spine and coils round her waist, a heavy belt waiting for a single thought, sharp clicks filling the air as chromium vertebrae unfurl to reveal the flickering shadow of a stinger, sharper than anger, longer than pain. Or so she imagines. You will never see the stinger, the merchant had said. It resides in another universe, only revealing itself fully when you insert it in the target—and then, of course, you will not see it at all. Of course, Wasp had replied, as she poured coins onto his table. They clattered in the shallows where her body had laid, the gold so pretty against the warm brown stains. Her client had come to her with that money, and the promise of much more if she succeeded, if she gave his unfaithful snake of a lover precisely what she deserved. You know what that means, he said. Wasp stared into smoke-stained skies as she gave her emotionless reply.

Only a killing blow will do.



The sun shifts, slips down iron and glass walls, and the hum of customers and office machines fills the space in an endless ambient drone. Wasp sees her target, a mid-level manager she only knows as Snake, near the end of the day. Snake is light-skinned, with short bobbed hair of glossy brown. She is pregnant—the product of her infidelity. She walks hand in hand with her husband as they make their way across the glossy marble to the edge of the office pen. The husband gives his wife a chaste kiss, and winds his way back across the floor, his shadow growing until it momentarily covers the room. Wasp rubs her ink-stained fingertips on a small cloth, and crouches over the ledger. She doesn't need to look. Snake steps behind the gated counter into the pen, heading to the opposite side of the floor. On her desk are neat stacks of paper that have accumulated during her absence, a two-week vacation spent with the man who approached Wasp last spring.

The day winds down. Wasp writes, and waits.

Bells chime overhead, announcing closing time. Wasp takes her purse and casually makes her way through the pen to a wood door marked EMPLOYEES. Just like the last four days, she walks down

the hall to the women's powder room, where she refreshes her face and makes small talk with the other clerks. The room empties out while she lingers in the stall, then Wasp slips into the small utility closet. In the dark space, Wasp sits, the tail warm at her waist, the stinger vibrating between her legs as she runs through the task in her mind, again, and again.

Pity about the child.



Naked, Wasp stands at the edge of the pen, holding her breath. Before her, the empty bank floor stretches into quiet dark like an abandoned church—at the far end, a single green-shaded banker's lamp glows. She moves like liquid, letting the tail unfurl and sway, navigate her body through the shadows with barely any effort of her own. Snake raises her head only at the last minute, when Wasp lets out a small sound, just enough to make her swivel the chair around. Wasp stares at Snake's face, her widening eyes. She feels the tail rise up, the stinger shiver: does the woman see it? And Wasp's tail plunges the stinger into the woman's chest. In the silent hall, there are no screams, only the crash of wood to the floor, the hard breathing of the two women, the soft gush of blood. They lie together like lovers, Wasp mounted on the woman with the chromium prosthesis burrowing deep into red.

Snake's lips move.

Wasp leans in.

Snake speaks again, words Wasp barely hears above the laughter.
My husband thanks you.

And the road widens, and Wasp feels the stinger open, and her mind grows small. She would draw back, pull out, but her flesh is nothing now, her body is not her own, there is only the tail and the stinger, sucking whatever gestates inside Snake into Wasp's swelling flesh. There won't be enough room. Even with the two of them, conjoined by the expanding tale, there won't be enough room for whatever is about to be born.

A pipeline to hell, the night market merchant had said. He just never told her which way the darkness would flow.

The Cat & the Cell Phone

Ann Ewan

A mother cat with four kittens bought herself a cell phone. Bright pink and shiny, it was a treat for the eyes and paws. She loved the novelty and convenience of it. The cell phone would make it possible for her to make better use of all her nine lives.

The day before the kittens' birthday party, Mother Cat was able to go to the grocery store without fearing that she would miss important last-minute calls. She threw a final load of laundry into the dryer, put the meat on the counter to thaw, made sure her cell phone was charged, checked the kittens' faces and whiskers, and led the way outside.

A wild autumn wind seized the kittens immediately and sent them scattering and whirling across the lawn. Mother Cat grabbed the nearest of them.

"Now, I'll hold the boys' paws, and you two girls hold onto them," she suggested, taking the paws of Stinky and little Dinky.

"We can't, the sidewalk's too narrow!" argued Hinky.

"It's too windy to walk straight!" protested Kinky, spinning in the wind.

"I'm hungry!" squeaked Dinky, trying to squirm free.

"If you're good, each of you can pick out a treat," Mother Cat promised.

The kittens began chattering about the treats they wanted, and Mother Cat led them past several lawns, where various animals were raking leaves. The park was full of animals as well. Tiny dust devils formed in the dirt and swirled leaves and debris high into the air.

"There's my friend Stripes!" Hinky waved frantically. "Over there, look, they're fishing in the river! Can I go say hi, Mama?"

Mother Cat's cell phone rang. "Just a minute, sweetie," she said. She had to release Stinky's paw to answer the phone.

The cake decorator was wondering if he could use jelly beans instead of gumdrops on the top of the birthday cake.

"Absolutely not!" said Mother Cat. "I'm going to have the kittens make cake balls, and I don't think those will work with jelly beans in them."

"I'll just run over and say hi," repeated Hinky, dancing in a scatter of leaves. "I'll just dip a paw in the river..."

"Be right with you, honey... What's that?" Mother Cat asked the cake decorator. "Oh, gourmet jelly beans? I don't know... Maybe if you cut them up..."

"I'll catch up with you in a minute!" Hinky scampered away to join her friend.

"I'll snip them into pieces with scissors," the decorator promised.

"And no black ones!" Mother Cat reminded him.

"It's too windy, Mama! It's going to rain," repeated Kinky, as soon as Mother Cat ended her call.

Worriedly, Mother Cat looked at her cell phone again to check the weather. She had to let go of little Dinky's paw to do that. To her relief, the forecast was windy but dry.

"The weather office says it's going to be a beautiful day," she assured Kinky.

A robin fluttered by, blown off course, distracting all the kittens.

"No, my darlings, come back here!" Mother Cat grasped the nearest paw just as the cell phone rang again.

“I almost had it!” Kinky continued to chase the bird, darting right and left in pursuit.

Mother Cat’s friend Mehitabel was calling, with the exciting news that she now had a cell phone as well. She and Orange Tabby were at the grocery store.

“Mama!” called Kinky from across the street. “Look at me! Did you see me pounce?”

“I see, honey. Be careful,” said Mother Cat, absently. “Sorry, Mehitabel, it’s this wind. The kittens are all over the place. Can you wait for me at the grocery store? We’re just on our way.”

Stinky pursued a leaf that danced ahead of him along the sidewalk.

Mehitabel had kittens of her own and was unable to wait at the grocery store, but she promised that Orange Tabby would be there.

“Wonderful!” said Mother Cat. “Orange Tabby has the best decorating ideas!”

Stinky chased his leaf all the way down the block. Mother Cat said goodbye to Mehitabel and noticed that she had a text message. She checked it while they waited for the traffic light at the intersection.

The clown for the party had forgotten what time he was supposed to arrive.

“3!” Mother Cat texted to him. She was glad that she had taken her cell phone to the store.

A car screeched to a stop, honking, and Mother Cat looked up just in time to see Stinky scrambling out of the road.

The driver of the car yelled at her out of the open window. “Don’t you care about your kittens?”

“Of course I do! My kittens are the most important thing in the world to me,” said Mother Cat, indignantly, but the car had roared away and the driver was out of hearing.

“Are you all right, love? Be careful with that,” she said to Stinky, who was still chasing his leaf as they crossed the street. “Some drivers are so careless!”

“I’m hungry!” squeaked Dinky again.

“I think I might have seen...” Mother Cat checked her cell phone. “Ah, yes! Catnip treats are on sale right next to the grocery store.”

“Yum!” Dinky licked his lips with his little pink tongue.

“Should I go back and get Hinky?” asked Stinky. “She’s ever so far behind.”

“Yes, love,” said Mother Cat, absently, still reading. “Catnip and biscuits... And do you think a piñata would be fun?”

She had just finished reading when the cell phone rang again. The cake decorator had found the gumdrops.

“And I know you specified orange and pink, but I was thinking some yellow ones around the edges would make the cake top really pop, you know what I mean...”

“Mama!” They had reached the shops and the wind, funneled between the buildings, found new strength. The swirling leaves flew high into the air. Dinky clutched for his mother’s hand but missed her.

“Mama, the wind!”

He was snatched up in an instant and carried away.

“Just a minute, baby,” said Mother Cat, and to the decorator, “Sounds wonderful. I really have to go now. We’re at the grocery store. I’ll see you tomorrow!”

Mother Cat could see Orange Tabby waiting outside the store. Orange Tabby had no cell phone so she was just standing there, wasting time.

Still angry about the careless driver, Mother Cat arrived in a flurry of leaves and told Orange Tabby all about him. “What a rude thing to say! My kittens are the most important thing in the world to me!” she concluded her story.

“Of course they are!” agreed Orange Tabby. “But where are they?”

There was not a kitten in sight.

When you do too many things at once, you lose track of what's important.



The Wolf & Death

Julia Bond Ellingboe

Wolf, old and alone, spent the better part of a week tracking a herd of bison, waiting for the youngest one to succumb to the heat of the unusually long summer. He followed them into a valley, where the scent of the flowers and fruit and trees—verily the very scent of Life—weighed down the breeze with a chorus of musks, spices, and amber. Birds and insects zipped about. His prey stopped at a watering hole and joined a menagerie of beasts and drank. Safe in their numbers, they no longer fretted that the wolf would claim a single member of their herd.

The lone wolf stopped at the mouth of the valley and took in the sight. He'd never been in a place like this. His solitude weighed heavy on his heart, as it often did when he came to a new place. He had tracked this herd from barren and familiar hills, and he had not slept for days. Having subsisted on grasshoppers and berries, his hunger was quieter than his fatigue. *I should hunt later*, he thought. *A meal is best enjoyed when the predator and prey are both well rested.* Wolf took a drink from the watering hole. The other animals gave him wide berth, but hardly looked up from the pool. After he drank his fill, the wolf found a massive tree atop a small hill, and

curled up, nose to the ground, beneath its jade canopy.

Just before he drifted off, he heard a tiny voice from inside the tree. The old wolf raised his head with a lazy start and perked his ears. He waited and listened. At first all he heard was the buzzing of insects' wings, but soon enough, he heard the call again.

"Does someone sit beneath this tree?" said the voice.

Wolf did not answer, but waited. The voice—rather, a chorus of voices—spoke in his own tongue. All at once it sounded like his jet-coated mother, his playful brothers, the old gray alpha of his former pack. These wolves were long dead. They fell through a thin patch of ice several winters ago, and never emerged from the lake.

"Please," the voices implored. "I am trapped in this tree. Please help me."

Wolf cocked his head to one side, curious. He asked, "What are you? How can you be trapped in the tree?"

"How I came to be trapped in this tree is unimportant, but I am the same as you, a lone traveler. Will you help me?"

Wolf leaned an ear closer to the trunk. The sound of the voice made his heart ache with longing. He could not answer.

"Please, Wolf, will you help me?" When the voice called him by name he was taken back to that instant, all those winters past, when he became a lone wolf. He skulked behind the rest of the pack. He had just put one paw on the surface of the frozen lake when it opened its icy mouth and swallowed his entire pack at once. He swallowed the memory of his loss and asked, "What do I do?"

"There's a rabbit's den on the side of this. Catch one and eat it under this tree. Let its blood spill on the roots where you lay, tear the flesh from the bones, grind the marrow between your teeth. You and I are the same, Wolf, old lonely hunters."

Wolf cocked his head to the other side. *Is this the voice of my hunger? He wondered. It's never spoken to me, but I've heard of other wolves going mad in their solitude from hunger. The thought of filling my belly with plump rabbit, the idea of a rabbit's juicy heart exploding between my teeth like a ripe plum...*

"I know you're hungry, Wolf!" The voice interrupted. "Catch a rabbit and eat your fill under the shade of this tree."

Wolf raised his nose to the wind to locate the scent of the rabbit warren, and followed the faint aroma to the bottom of the hill to a small hole. He crouched behind a nearby bush and waited for his meal.

It was a short wait. The rabbits had made their den in this valley a dozen generations ago. They had never met a wolf, so they no longer worried about being eaten by one. As the sun sank below the horizon, two young rabbits crawled lazily out of the den in search of a patch of sweet clover. Wolf, in his coat of night and silence, snatched the fatter of the two and snapped his neck between his sharp hungry teeth. The other rabbit fled in fear.

Wolf slinked back up the hill. He lay under the tree and tore skin from bone, fur from muscle. As the rabbit's blood trickled down Wolf's chin and pooled on the ground, the tree trunk cracked and split open. A young woman tumbled out and fell beside the wolf. He recoiled in fear, but the woman grabbed the scruff of his neck and held his head to the ground. Wolves fear few creatures, but of those they do, they fear men and women most of all.

"Thank you, my friend." The woman spoke in a low, sweet, singular voice now. The wolf did not dare look up, confused by her gentle voice and her harsh grip on his neck. "We should leave the valley. You and I are the same, Wolf, and we are not welcome here."

She let go of his neck and stood. Wolf did not look at her, but rose with caution and took his rabbit in his mouth. He offered her some with a respectful gesture. "It's yours, my friend. It's all I can offer you as thanks, other than my company as we leave the valley." And with that she sprinted down the hill. Wolf picked up his rabbit and followed her. He was hungrier now as rabbit's blood trickled down his throat and teased his empty belly. He wanted nothing more than to sit under the tree and dine on fat rabbit, despite the fact that the tree just spat out a strange woman who spoke like a wolf. He found it difficult to ignore his hunger, but the woman's words worried him. "We are not welcome here," she said. And twice she said, "You and I are the same." He thought it best to follow her, though his hunger disagreed.

The old, lone wolf found it difficult to keep up with the woman. Try as he might to run at her side, he stayed twenty paces behind her until they reached the mouth of the valley, where the path's fertile green gave way to barren gray. The woman walked to a scruffy patch of grass under the skeletal remains of a long-dead tree and sat. From inside the tree, she picked up a bow and a quiver of arrows. Hunter's tools. Wolf backed away and glanced about for a safe direction to run, although he knew that given the age that stiffened his legs and the likely swiftness of her bow, he could give little chase.

The woman shook her head and said, "Wolf, I have no intention of harming you. Come sit with me." She made a gesture which Wolf took as an invitation to join her in the grass. He stepped with caution to her side, dropped his rabbit, and slumped down.

"Eat, my friend. You must be hungry." She whispered as she patted the top of his head.

Wolf and his companion sat together in silence in the grass and their friendship took form. Wolf offered some of his rabbit to the woman again. She graciously refused and instead stroked the old wolf's coat. When he finished his meal of flesh, bones, and fur, Wolf rested his head in the woman's lap and slept. While he dreamed, he felt the woman curl herself around him. It was a peaceful sleep he'd not known since he had become a lone wolf.

He woke to find the woman kneeling in front of him, nose to nose. She smelled of dried blood and thin ice. Again she spoke in a chorus of voices from his past: "I'll leave you now, but only for a short time. Some distance down this path you'll find a lamb, separated from her flock. It will be an easy kill and you'll savor the succulent flesh. But you won't notice the shepherd, armed with a sling, as he creeps behind you and kills you with a single blow. I'll wait for you on the other side of your last hunt, my friend."

Wolf stretched and stood. "I look forward to our reunion, my friend," he said. "Your company is a fair trade for my lonely life."

Mother Knows Best

Steve Dempsey

“For God’s sake,” said Mum, “just get in the car.” She held the door open as I slithered into the back seat and slammed the door behind me. “You’ll be fine,” she said as she drove off up the road. “Major Carey is a good dentist, he won’t hurt you.” I didn’t want to know and huddled down in the back with my arms crossed.

“You need to have those teeth removed. They are going mouldy.” She pulled up at a red light and turned round. “You don’t want a mouldy head, do you?”

I didn’t want a mouldy head. “But it’s going to hurt,” I said.

“It will hurt a bit,” said Mum, “but there will be gas so you won’t notice a thing.”

I thought about this. “I don’t like people putting things in my mouth.”

“One day, you’ll just bloody do what I ask without all this fuss.”

We drove on in silence. It was a sunny day. At the top of the hill I could see Jumbo, the old water tower with its green copper cladding. It was Victorian, a thing of permanence, unlike my teeth. True, I hadn’t really taken care of them, but neither had my brother and he’d only ever had one visit to the dentist. It wasn’t fair.

“Here we are,” said Mum and pulled up on the steep incline outside the red brick house that was now the surgery. “We’re running a bit late, because you wouldn’t get ready. So you get out here, and I’ll go and put the car in the multi-story car-park. I won’t be long.” I slid over to the left and let myself out. There was the door and next to it the brass plaque. “Major Carey, BchD, FDSRCS.” BchD: Bully of Children, FDSRCS: Fills, Drills and Scratches Runts Called Steve.

“Going in are you dear?” said a voice from behind me. It was an old woman. She smiled, with all four of her teeth, like a vampire. “I’m having my new dentures fitted. It’ll be such a nice change, not having to eat soup all the time.” I pushed the door and tore up the stairs.

At the top was the waiting room with the receptionist’s desk against the far wall. She was talking to someone on the telephone. There was a door next to the desk and from behind it I heard the high-pitched whine of the drill. It was the worst noise in the world. It was as if the drill were already in my mouth. I could feel my fillings vibrating. I could smell the burning of drill against enamel. I could see it coming towards me.

“Are you Steven Dempsey?” asked the receptionist.

“Yes,” I said quietly, not wishing to draw attention to myself.

“Are you here on your own?”

“No, my mum will be along in a minute.”

“Well, that’s good. The procedure can be a bit disorientating. Take a seat. The dentist will see you shortly.”

I sat down between the old woman and a low table covered in last month’s glossy magazines. I picked up a dog-eared *Sunday Times* supplement and flicked through the pages trying not to hear the drill. It was no help. Then the noise stopped and I knew it would be my turn next. A man came out of the door, his face all droopy.

“And remember those salt mouthwashes, until the bleeding stops,” said the dentist, following the man out. The man tried to respond, but his jaw didn’t seem to work. Something dark ran

down from the corner of his mouth. He went to wipe it off with the back of his hand but before he could reach it, it retreated back up. What had it been? Some spittle? It looked too dark for that. His tongue? Surely not it was too thin. The leg or tail of some creature? Major Carey caught me staring. He wore a white smock, buttoned up tight at the neck and over it a blue plastic apron, flecked here and there with blood and other fluids. He turned to me, "Ah, young Master Dempsey, you're next? Give me a moment whilst I set things up and I'll be right with you." He disappeared back through the door. I stood up and looked down the stairs. Perhaps I could get away. The man was at the bottom, just going out into the street. It was now or... And in came Mum. She looked up at me and waved. I sat back down. It was never.

"Sorry I took so long," said Mum sitting down on the other side of the table from me. She took the magazine from me, squared up those on the table and placed it on top. "I thought you'd be in there by now."

"I'm next," I said. "Er, Mum..." I didn't want to go through with this.

"What's up dear," she asked with her face set as if to say, "I know what you're going to ask and the answer is no."

I sighed. "Nothing."

We waited a few minutes and the dentist came out. He had on a fresh new apron and ushered me into the surgery. There was the chair and laid out beside, it on a tray, the instruments of torture—probes, clamps, drill bits, even a tiny hammer and chisel. There was also a white plastic box. I could see the shadow of something inside it.

"And over here is Miss Cusp, our anaesthetist." Major Carey gestured to a woman sitting on a stool next to some large metal gas bottles. She wore a gown, face mask and cap so all I could see was her eyes. She was also holding some metal tongs. How would that help with the anaesthetic? I climbed onto the chair, screwed up my face and hoped it would all go away.

“Steven,” said Major Carey, “you have to open your mouth. Otherwise we can’t get on with things.” I opened one eye a crack. He loomed over me with two metal implements, a mirror and a pointy probe. I scrunched up my eyes again. There was a clanging noise. “It’s all right, I’ve put the probe down. How about we give you the gas first?” I opened my eyes, to make sure it wasn’t a trick. Carey had indeed put the tools down and was standing back from the chair with his arms raised. “See, nothing in my hands. Come on, the sooner we get started, the sooner you can be back at home watching the telly.”

“OK,” I said. Miss Cusp wheeled the gas bottles over and dragged her stool up to the side of the chair. She had the rubber mask in her hand. It smelt funny.

“Juss relass Steven,” she said, her voice muffled and buzzing. “Lean back on the chair, thass right.” She pressed the mask against my face and turned the spigot. I stopped breathing, but with her free hand, Miss Cusp gently poked me in the ribs and I gasped, taking a whole lungful of anaesthetic. I felt sick and tried to move, but she had her hand on my shoulder. The gas tasted sweet and my head started to swell up. I could hear my heart beating. I rolled to the side and squirmed away from the arm holding me down. I struggled to my feet, knocked over the tray of instruments and lunged for the door. Carey grasped my neck and the handle spun away from me. On her hands and knees, Miss Cusp picked up the instruments. The lid of the small box had come off and inside it was a creature like a large prawn, all shell, arms and pincers. It had eyes on stalks that peered up at me. I kicked at it, but Carey hauled me back. I screamed. The door opened and Mum came in. I was saved. The dentist was saying something to her, but I couldn’t understand them. They were talking in bubbles, like fish.

And then, instead of taking me home, Mum grabbed my legs. “Soon have you sorted out too,” she said. She helped the dentist manhandle me back on to the chair. Miss Cusp shoved the small box into her pocket, came back over and held the mask over my

face. My flailing hand pulled aside her face shield. Her mouth was open. She had no teeth. An insect crab creature was sitting where her tongue should be. I tried to scream, but the gas was too strong and I could struggle no more.



Now I am a good boy. I brush my teeth. I follow the rules. It's all very simple. Mother knows best.

The Very Rude Salmon

Chris Lackey

Jake was a salmon. A Chinook, or king salmon, and he weighed almost 100 pounds, which was large, even for his species. Jake hit the gym every day, after bulking-up on planktonic diatoms. He loved to pump iron and was proud to call himself a ‘muscle head’. Unfortunately, Jake never wiped the equipment down after doing a set of reps. Being underwater, this wasn’t that big of a deal, but the other patrons would really have preferred the courtesy. And that small thing really epitomized Jake. Because Jake was a jerk.

The thing most people first noticed about Jake was his voice, which could be heard over all others in the room. His sexist, racist and bigoted jokes would resonate through every square foot of the bar. If someone had the gumption to comment on his comedic stylings, or just tell him to “keep it down,” he would get into their face and tell them to “get a sense of humor.” Because of his size, this usually convinced the individual to swim back to his table in quiet shame.

Jake made it his duty to keep others in their place. A waiter, a co-worker, even his friends. An off-hand remark here, a snide comment there, anything thing that would knock someone down

a peg or two. One might think this was because Jake was trying to cover for some kind of insecurity, but no, Jake thought of himself as *the best*. He was big and very good looking. His back was a deep blue-green and his silvery sides irresistible to the ladies. His rich, purple mouth gave him enough sex appeal that females would often ignore his rude behavior. He excelled at his job as a crustacean salesman, where his good looks and aggressive personality were an asset. Jake had it all. Or so he believed.

Jake had come to the point in his life all salmon anticipate. It was time for him to make the trek up the Katmai River and spawn. Jake hadn't been back to his spawning pool since he was young, but he knew a lot of female salmon, as well as males, that were making the long-awaited journey. He'd cultivated relationships with a bunch of ladies, hoping to make things easier when he approached them at the pool. One would normally have to get a lady's permission to fertilize her eggs in the spawning bed, or redd. But Jake planned to get to eggs anyway he could. He didn't give a fuck. He was gonna fertilize everything.

On the day of the big swim upstream, Jake slept in. He wasn't in a hurry. He knew he could make up lost time. Jake was in great shape and tenacious, easily getting past all those losers to the first at the spawning pool. Then he would be able to spread his seed, right as the females laid their eggs. He was gonna nail it all.

The river was shoulder to shoulder that day. Salmon from all over the Pacific Ocean were there, all following that pull to the pool. Jake had underestimated the traffic and had to kick it into high gear. He blared some of his favorite hip-hop music and swam hard and fast, so fast as to be dangerous. The water was sometimes murky and visibility poor and if he swam at that speed into a rock, death was inevitable. But he didn't care. Jake knew he kicked ass. And running into rocks was for punks. He was way too good of a swimmer for that to ever happen.

As the river narrowed at a point, Jake found it hard to get past the other salmon. He would get up right behind a fish, 'tail-gating' they called it, trying to intimidate him into moving to the side and letting him pass. Because of all the fish that day, this salmon

couldn't really move to the side and maintain his speed. So he slowed down.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” screamed Jake. “Move faster or get out of the way!”

The much smaller fish moved over with an apologetic look. Jake swam by and flipped him the bird.

“You suck!” Jake quipped. He knew that salmon was a just a little bitch who wasn't going to fertilize shit.

Jake thought back to his time in high school. Things were so simple then. Wimpy little fish wouldn't even dream of getting into some chick's redd, not to mention fertilizing her eggs. There was an order then. It was easy to keep these sissy-boys in line and out of his way.

Jake had smooth swimming for a while, until he saw the jagged rocks and crashing water in the distance. A waterfall was a difficult thing for a salmon to get past. A few dead salmon floating in the water, crushed on the rocks, was evidence of this.

“Pussies,” thought Jake. To make it this far and die without spawning was pathetic. Jake knew he was going to die after the spawning and he didn't care. It was all about scoring and scoring big. He was gonna find the hottest salmon in the pool, as many as he could. He knew he was the kind of guy that, when all was said and done, women wanted. Sure, he'd been accused of having a total lack of character, but his confidence, his looks and his charm more than made up for it, for most girls. For Jake, character was totally over-rated. It's what losers tried to cultivate to get some tail.

Jake was quickly moving ahead. All that time in the gym was paying off. There were only a few other powerful males in the lead with him, one in particular had that look about him. The look of a winner. But Jake knew he was a bit bigger than this other fish and could probably take him in a fight. And he wanted this salmon to know it.

Jake swam up along side of the other burly fish and gave him a cool stare. A stare that said, “Who the hell do you think you are? I'm way better than you. Don't try and look confident next to me.”

“What are you looking at?” shouted the other fish.

“I’m trying to figure that out,” said Jake.

“You got a problem?”

“No. Do you?”

“Yeah. Some asshole’s giving me the stink eye. Back off or I’ll smash your face.”

Now, Jake had been in many fights over the years, winning most and always getting payback for the ones he didn’t. Jake had a lot of experience in dealing with tough guys. If someone threatens you, that means they don’t really want to fight and are trying to scare you off. If they don’t want to fight, that means that they probably can’t win. At least, that’s how Jake saw things. Seeing he was way ahead of the other fish, he figured he had some time to show this dick a thing or two.

Instead of posturing or shouting, Jake just smashed into the guy. The jolt was so surprising that the fish spun off and got caught in the current, being lost downstream. That was it. The last of his competition. Jake had proved once again that he was the best. The strongest, coolest, most-powerful salmon. He was gonna spawn like crazy!

“Eat it, bitch!” yelled Jake behind at his reeling foe.

And, just then, a grizzly bear took Jake up on his offer.

The Toymaker

Will Hindmarch

AToymaker sat at his workbench, toes poking out of holes in his socks, face lit by his computer monitor, fingers pinching a technical pencil over papers taped in place. Sketched onto the papers were complex designs for a mechanical toy castle, teeming with little figurines and banners stitched with dragons.

“That’s lovely,” said the Toymaker’s wife. “You should build that.”

The Toymaker sighed. “For this castle to be as grand and handsome as I’ve always imagined,” he said, “it would have to be built by someone with better skills than mine. I’ll wait until I’m a better craftsman. What could be worse than taking my chance at this castle and not making it as grand as I’d imagined?”

“Not making the toy at all?”

But the Toymaker did not hear her.

The Toymaker’s wife licked shut envelopes bearing checks to their landlord. The rent was due again and toys were not so popular as they were in the old days. The Toymaker needed to make toys to make rent.

The Toymaker noticed toy soldiers were popular again among aficionados online. “I’ll make some toy soldiers,” he said. “I’ll make them good-looking and fanciful,” he said. “I’ve always liked toy soldiers, so I’ll make a few to pay for the time I need to finish designing my toy castle.”

So he drew up designs for a Viking and a Samurai who teamed up to fight monsters. The Viking was a bold, jovial woman warrior. The Samurai was a wary, serious swordsman. The monsters lurked and skulked and menaced common folk until the Viking and the Samurai showed up to rescue them.

The Toymaker sat, most nights, bent over his workbench, naming his toys, revising their designs, naming them again, conjuring up their vivid and elaborate histories, and sculpting prototypes in specialty clay. He scraped at the sculptures with little wire hooks. He wore magnifying goggles and held his breath as he worked.

“The rent,” said his wife, “is coming due.”

So the Toymaker spent his days making little weapons and little hats for other crafters’ toys. He sculpted and wove and dreamt others’ dreams by day and sculpted and wove and dreamt his dreams by night. He sat beneath a bent-necked lamp. He sketched on paper and scratched at clay. He looked online at the photos other toymakers posted of their own works—works lovely and cunning and articulate, crafted quickly and made handsome with skill. And he came to doubt his Viking and his Samurai. He revised their histories, remade their weapons and hats, reconsidered their clothes and names, making them better and worse and better again.

“The rent,” said his wife, “is coming due again.”

So the Toymaker spent his days making more trinkets and baubles for others crafters’ toys. He sculpted and wove and dreamt. He looked at others toymakers’ websites and watched them speeding towards completion on designs of their own. And he kept on crafting by day and by night.

Many months’ rent came and went.

Then, one day, the Toymaker saw newly released toys online: a Centurion and a Samurai who teamed up to fight monsters. Kids loved them. Parents bought them up. The internet filled up with posts about this other, newer toymaker's brilliance. Reviews of the toys shone like gems. People filled in the outlines of stars with their clicking mice.

"You're not going to let a rival stop you from making your toys, are you?" asked the Toymaker's wife.

"That's not quite right," said the Toymaker. "We're not rivals, exactly. We don't even know each other."

"Still," said his wife, "you should put your toys on sale."

The Toymaker tinkered through another month and another month, still.

"Really," said his wife, "you should put your toys on sale."

The Toymaker cut away clay and brushed on paint. He stitched armor to felt and glued blades to hands. He put the Viking and the Samurai out into the world, up for sale.

"These are nice," wrote one reviewer.

"Good craftsmanship," wrote a second review. "Four out of five stars."

"These are okay," wrote another, "but derivative."

"Sucks," wrote another. "Vikings r stupid and the samurai armer is all wrong to."

No more reviews came. The Toymaker checked every day. Outside it rained leaves and then it snowed on the leaves.

A few of the toys found warm homes. Others languished in boxes in the Toymaker's workshop, in the kitchen, on the porch. Like a shadow on a hill, the rent loomed.

"Next time," suggested the Toymaker's wife, "make something altogether yours. People like that."

"What were these," asked the Toymaker, "if not my own? I made them, they were mine. Maybe only mine. Maybe what I want out of a toy soldier isn't what anyone else wants. Maybe I'll never find success and maybe that's why, because no one else likes what I like."

“That’s a strange kind of arrogance,” said the Toymaker’s wife. “No one’s so rare that no one else likes their likes.”

So the Toymaker went to the trunk in his workshop and dug past drawings of the Viking and the Samurai until he found the yellowed, curled sketches of his mechanical castle, teeming with little figurines and banners stitched with dragons. He taped them to his workshop wall and, as he worked the days away making weapons and hats, he looked up at his castle, saved up money for new clay, and by night sculpted clay into a castle.

The Phone & the Fifteen-Year-Old

Heather Wood

The telephone-maker showed her latest mobile prototype to her fifteen-year-old daughter. Nockie's eyes were still bleary from too late a night, but they brightened at the sight of the oval-shaped phone.

"You can try it out tomorrow. Some features still need to be tested," said the telephone-maker. "I'll be keeping it in my office until then."

Nockie nodded in agreement. But inside she was smirking.

After the telephone-maker departed for the day, Nockie tried her mother's office door and discovered it was unlocked. The phone was on the desk and its dull gray casing transformed into a deep purple as soon as Nockie touched it.

"Cool," she said and opened up its back, swapping the phone's SIM card for her own. Then she escaped to the coffee shop where the fifteen-year-olds her mother did not approve of congregated every Saturday. "They are an unkind lot, Nockie," she would say.

"Hey, I have something to show you all," Nockie declared triumphantly. "My mother's newest invention—right out of the lab." She reached into her purse and pulled out the mobile phone.

“Purple is so yesterday,” said Paula the popular one. “Other than being a weird shape, it doesn’t look like anything special,” she said.

Paula snatched the device from Nockie’s grasp. As her fingers pressed on the screen, the phone shook and its purple casing burned into a fiery red, causing her to shriek. Paula flung the phone back at Nockie, which returned to its purple state in her hands.

Nockie pressed on the phone’s screen and a strange voice emanated from inside the device. “This popular one has been gossiping about you behind your back,” it said. Paula’s face paled and then reddened before she stomped away.

“Let me see that,” said Guy, the boy whom Nockie liked so very much. In his hands, the mobile glowed a bright yellow and then turned an icy blue that so numbed his fingers that he, too, tossed it back to the telephone-maker’s daughter.

Again in Nockie’s possession, the phone transformed back into purpleness and the mysterious voice returned. “This boy has betrayed you,” the voice boomed. “He is taking another girl out tonight.”

Guy put his hands in his pockets and walked backwards towards the exit. The rest of the fifteen-year-olds burst into a gaggle of nervous laughs. But, fearing the phone’s next disclosures, one by one they slunk away.

For a moment, Nockie reveled in the power of the phone’s revelations. But her delight slipped into dread as the casing reverted to its original gray, and the mysterious voice spoke for the last time. “Be mindful,” it said. “Your mother has been monitoring my transmissions. You will be grounded if I’m not returned within the hour... She also says ‘I told you so’.”

The Microbe Who Had Perspective

Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan

Microbe grew unhappy with the narrow confines of his life, and complained to Another Microbe. “I’m tired of absorbing nutrients and excreting waste. There has to be more to life than that.”

“You could always settle down and divide a few times,” advised Another Microbe. “That’s what most of us do.”

“Exactly,” said Microbe, “the same as everyone else. No, I’m going to travel. I want to see everything.”

Microbe swam for a very, very long time, until his flagella drooped with exhaustion. He stopped to ask directions.

“You’re in a slightly different part of the stomach,” answered a passing example of intestinal flora.

“That’s not far enough! I want to go further than any microbe has ever gone before!” said Microbe.

Microbe travelled and travelled and travelled. The terrain around him changed many times, and he saw all manner of strange sights. Everyone else Microbe met was very impressed by his determination, and they all agreed that he was the most interesting individual any of them had ever heard of. They

invited him to absorb nutrients and excrete waste with them as an honoured guest, and talked at length about how Microbe's long journey impressed them.

Microbe still wasn't satisfied. He kept on swimming.

Suddenly, everything around him changed, and he found himself swimming across the surface of a vast glass slide. He looked up, and far above him, he saw an eye. Microbe raised a hesitant flagellum.

"Er, where am I? And who are you?"

"I am Scientist," said Scientist. "And you're on a microscope slide. I'm studying the exponential growth that you microbes are so good at."

"How far did I travel?" asked Microbe.

Scientist made some calculations. "About two centimetres. And you're about a micrometre long, so that's like me walking for two hundred kilometres. You went from one part of Sheep's stomach to a slightly different part of Sheep's stomach." Scientist paused for a moment. "Well done," he added.

"Is this the whole universe?" asked Microbe excitedly.

"Oh no," said Scientist. "This is just one room, which is about 250 times wider than the distance you travelled. And that's one room in a building that's thirty times longer than that, in a country that's, let me see, more than thirty thousand times longer than that."

"That's a lot to see," said Microbe. "I take it that's everything."

"Sorry," said Scientist, "but that's just one country. The planet is much bigger than that."

"Well," said Microbe, "that's a long way to go, but it's my ambition to see everything."

Scientist smiled. "If you want to see *everything*," he said, "then you've got to remember that this is just one planet in a solar system that's millions times bigger, and that's one system in a galaxy that's millions of times bigger than that, and all that's contained in a universe that's at least millions bigger than that."

"So...how much have I done?" asked Microbe.

“An infinitesimally small fraction of an incomprehensibly large amount,” said Scientist grandly, “the vast majority of which is an empty void that is utterly hostile to both You and Me.”

“Oh,” said Microbe in a very small voice, which was all he was capable of anyway. “But I wanted to see everything.”

“So do I,” said Scientist, “but that’s not how it works. We just get a tiny slice, and have to work out what’s going on based on that.”

Microbe thought for a moment, then said, “I’d like to go home now.”

Scientist kindly put Microbe back in Sheep’s stomach, and Microbe settled down and divided many times.

Sometimes, he told people his stories about his long journey, or Scientist, or what Scientist said, but no-one else saw the point of talking about such things, preferring to concentrate on absorbing nutrients and excreting waste like sensible people. In the end, Microbe stopped talking about his journey, and tried to forget how very very small he was, and how very very very big everything else was in comparison, but he never quite managed it.

A little perspective goes a long way.



The Songbird's Famous Tune

Ray Fawkes

There was a songbird, once, of moderate talent and relatively inconspicuous plumage, much like all the rest of his kind. Songbird, which is to say, this particular songbird—the one that this tale is concerned with—discovered one morning that he was a rather talented singer. He could certainly hold a tune, and it could be argued that he held it rather longer, and with clearer notes, than any of his friends and relatives could manage. He was somewhat inexperienced, and his compositions were a little rough, but he knew that he had an innate skill that set him apart from the rest of his kin.

Chirping from the treetops, Songbird considered that he ought to find recognition for his extraordinary ability. He decided that, all things considered, it would be most correct if he were famous for it, and if he received the admiration he realized he was due sooner rather than later. With that admiration would come the attendant riches and cushy life that would aid him in developing his talents further without having to worry about time consuming and ultimately useless pursuits, such as work.

Thenceforth, he made a point of hopping to the very highest branch in the whole of the forest, and singing as loud as he could all the way from morning to night. Unfortunately, nobody really seemed to notice much, aside from Owl, who kept asking him who he thought he was.

One morning, Mockingbird fluttered down to a branch nearby, and turned her head to regard Songbird with her inky black eye. Mockingbird was not much of a composer, but she was known to be a skillful mimic—and what she lacked in originality, she more than made up for in repetitive endurance. It was almost as if she never got bored of promoting others' great works, singing them over and over and over again. It was strange that Mockingbird was perfectly satisfied singing other birds' songs instead of seeking more creative expression, but Songbird just figured she was a little touched in the head.

Songbird saw his opportunity. If he could impress Mockingbird, she would relay his achievements to everyone else and help bring him the fame he deserved. "Mockingbird," he said, "I think your next performance should feature my songs."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Well, it's plain to anybody who listens that I am the greatest singer in the wood—now, and possibly for all time."

Mockingbird hopped from one foot to the other—a sign that she was deeply interested. "Surely you jest. Can you honestly say that your voice is more pleasant to the ear than Starling's?"

"Starling? Hah!" Songbird sneered. "Starling is too impressed with his overblown technical abilities. All he does is trill, trill, trill. It grates on the nerves! He has no understanding of melody, and only puts his monumentally stupid vanity on display whenever he sings. If you want pleasant, you should hear what it sounds like when I—"

"If you say so. But can you truly claim that your song outdoes the work of someone like Wood Thrush? Wood Thrush is admired throughout the whole of the forest for his melodious performances."

“Wood Thrush? Wood Thrush? Don’t make me laugh. Wood Thrush sounds like a raccoon passing a thistle. Have you ever tried to listen to Wood Thrush? It’s an embarrassment to us all. Now, when I sing a ballad, I like to—”

“I understand. But I was planning to sing the songs of Skylark this week. I do so admire Skylark’s clear tones.”

“You must be joking.” Songbird puffed himself up to the fullest. “Skylark is a sad, twisted little creature with a song that, on the scale of pleasantness, falls somewhere between effluvia and a death-rattle.”

“Well,” said Mockingbird, drawing out the word just long enough to verify rumors of her stupidity. “Well, well. You certainly do make a fascinating case. I shall change my plan. Instead of singing the Skylark’s song this week, I shall bring yours to all the woods.”

“See that you do,” shouted Songbird, as Mockingbird took to the sky. It was only after she left that he realized she hadn’t hung around long enough to listen to him sing.



The very next morning, as he stepped out on the highest branch to address the forest, Songbird was suddenly assaulted by a crowd of furious birds. Wings flailed at him. Claws raked his flesh. Beaks pecked at his wings and legs, hobbling him.

“What—why—what’s happening?” He shouted.

Mockingbird alit on a branch nearby again, watching impassively as Starling, Wood Thrush, Skylark, and all their friends kicked Songbird around.

“I’ve been singing your song everywhere,” Mockingbird said, “The one about all the other birds and how they sing, and I can tell you that nobody is very impressed. In fact, they all just seemed to get angry.”

“But—but that wasn’t—you didn’t—”

“You wanted to be famous, didn’t you?”

“Well—ouch,” Songbird squeaked, as Skylark landed a solid kick to his tail. “Yes, but—”

“And now everybody has heard of you. Every single bird in the forest has been up all night, talking about nothing but you! And, no doubt, we'll be talking about you for a very long time.”

Songbird was about to answer when Wood Thrush pecked him in the eye, causing him to lose his balance and fall over. And once he was down, the birds converged on him, venting their rage.

Mockingbird hopped one branch higher, looking down at him.

“There is fame and there is infamy,” she said. “The impatient and the prideful are often driven to reach for the one and find that, in their haste, they have grabbed the other.”

The Man Who Tried to Hide in a Crowd

Jonathan L. Howard

Once there was a man, or possibly a woman, who donned a mask and became a vigilante, enforcing whatever seemed to be more-or-less justice at any particular moment. The man—or possibly a woman, but we shall say “man” for the sake of ease—was fond of cats, dubious spellings, and laughing out loud at almost anything, for he was a devil-may-care sort of masked vigilante.

On his travels the Masked Man, whose mask was as smirky as its owner, first encountered a Captain of Industry. “Oh ho!” cried the Masked Man, slapping his thigh. “You do all sorts of evillness, Captain of Industry! I shall write the truth upon your advertising hoardings, reveal your crooked business practices, and humble you before the populace.”

“Curse you, Masked Man!” cried the Captain of Industry, who was indeed pretty rotten much of the time. “How will I be able to justify the huge bonuses I pay myself if you reveal my base wickedness? But wait! I have invested much money into the government that they will support my crooked business practises, and so the law is on my side. I shall sue you for this! What is your name?”

But the Masked Man simply pointed at his mask and said, “I am one of many who wear this mask upon our faces. You cannot hurt me!”

And, laughing out loud, the Masked Man skipped lightly away, leaving the infuriated Captain of Industry in his wake.

Then the Masked Man happened upon a Government Minister. “Oh ho!” cried the Masked Man, putting his hands on his hips and striking the heroic pose of a man of the people. “You do all sorts of evilness, Government Minister! I shall write the truth upon your proclamations, reveal your venality and corruption, your secret deals and jobs for the boys, and ridicule you before the populace.”

“A pox upon you, Masked Man!” cried the Government Minister, who was indeed a career politician and all that this implies. “How will I coast through my job, leaving the complicated stuff to my underlings while I cosy up to the Captains of Industry if you reveal my basic laziness and incompetence? But wait! I’ve passed laws to stop people like you causing people like me problems, and so the law is on my side. I shall have you arrested for this! What is your name?”

But the Masked Man simply pointed at his mask and said, “I am one of many, and we are all faceless and nameless behind our masks. You cannot hurt me!”

And laughing out loud, the Masked Man skipped joyfully away, the impotent curses of the Government Minister ringing in his ears.

Then the Masked Man happened upon an Organised Criminal. “Oh ho!” cried the Masked Man, swirling an imaginary cloak around his shoulders and stroking his mask’s pointy beard. “You do all manner of criminality, Organised Criminal! I shall write the truth about you upon the electric ether, and reveal your plots and associated shenanigans to all and sundry, including the forces of law enforcement (to whom I have been previously disrespectful, but that is my mercurial nature for you).”

“You don’t want to do that, Masked Man. You really don’t want to do that,” said the Organised Criminal, and nothing more.

“Aren’t you going to ask me my name?” said the Masked Man, who’d already worked out his spiel and did not wish it to go to waste.

“No,” said the Organised Criminal.

It was at about this point that the Masked Man realised that the Organised Criminal too wore a mask, though of a bland and unmemorable form. Slightly disquieted, he said, “I’m one of many, you see. And... anyway. Yeah, still going to expose you. You cannot hurt me.”

And laughing out loud, but the laughter sounding a little forced, the Masked Man skipped away, albeit not as lightly as previously.

The Organised Criminal watched him go and then got out his ‘phone and made some calls, concluding with one to another man who was one of the many other Masked Men, and who was tractable and greedy.

That evening the Masked Man was shot dead in his home and his family murdered. The other Masked Men gathered around the burning house. Their masks smiled, but beneath them, the human faces did not. “Holy shit,” said the Masked Men, and after that the Organised Criminal was left alone.

It’s no use hiding behind your mask when the mask itself is the target.

Or:

When “dodging a bullet” is not being used metaphorically, a lot of fun may go out of proceedings.

Or:

“The Man” didn’t get to be “The Man” by playing by your rules.

Or:

If you recall, at the end of “Spartacus,” they all get crucified.

The Ass & the Rain

Robert Jackson Bennett

There once was an ass with a cruel master, who forced the ass to carry the heaviest materials on long travels at grueling speeds. The ass carried blocks of stone to temples in far countries; it carried barrels of wine down wandering gulches to distant towns; it carried sack upon sack of grain to mills all over the hilltops; and always its master beat its haunches with a switch, crying, “Faster! Faster, you old nag!”

The ass never complained, even though it was given little water and even less hay, for to carry such weight on such small rations was part of an ass’s duty. This was its lot in life. But its master took the ass’s acceptance of these tasks as a sign that it could carry even more weight, so he heaped ever more burdens upon the ass’s back.

One day its master forced it to drag twice as much stone as it was used to, and just when they started out it began to rain, turning the roads to churning mud. The ass decided it simply could not bear it anymore.

It opened its mouth and cried to the thunderclouds: “Why is this done to me? Why have I no say in this matter? Is this what is given to me? Is there no respite?”

The Lion & the Aardvark

For a long time there was silence, and the ass lost hope. But then there was a quiet voice in its ear: a tiny fly, which said, “You have opened your mouth.”

The ass said, “So?”

The fly said, “When you opened your mouth, did a few raindrops not fall upon your tongue? And were they not sweet?”

The ass thought about this, and admitted they did taste sweet. It opened its mouth once more to taste the rain, and this heartened it enough to carry its burden just a little farther.

Two Cats on a Ledge

Chad Fifer

Two housecats gazed through an open window. “I can’t believe it,” exclaimed the young orange tabby. “There’s no screen! We could run right out!”

“That’s why the stranger is here,” noted his older, steel-gray sister. She tilted her head to study the broad-shouldered workman whose entrance had interrupted their afternoon nap. The man placed the old screen on the floor, a new one shining in the late afternoon sun next to it. “You scratched a hole in the wire, so our woman is having the whole thing replaced.”

“I didn’t scratch a hole in it,” the tabby shot back. “I was just holding on while I stretched, but then forgot myself and tried to leap away. My claw was caught. It was an accident.” He nuzzled his own shoulder, remembering the hurt.

His sister raised a hind leg and scratched at her chin, observing the workman. Instead of mounting the new screen, he wandered over to their woman’s closet.

“Oh, how I’ve longed to walk out on that ledge,” said the tabby, his eyes dilating as he watched the breeze play with the curtains. “I want to know where those birds go after they taunt us. Do you

think they live with their own woman, in another apartment like this?"

The sister watched the workman take a silk blouse from the closet, smooth it across the small kitchen table, then begin to unsnap his own checkered button-up.

"I doubt it," she said, "but there's only one way to find out."

In three quiet hops the steel-gray cat was on the windowsill.

"What are you doing?!"

"Come up here and keep watch. I'm going to scout ahead."

And then she was gone.

The tabby looked at the man, who was busy removing his undershirt, and then leapt after his sister through the window.

Outside, on the ledge, the world was very different.

"We are much higher in the sky than I thought," the tabby said, his words seeming to blow away across the sprawling cityscape. "Much higher!"

"Just keep an eye on the man," his sister called back over the airy cacophony of the traffic far below.

She disappeared around the corner of the building and a blast of wind swatted the high rise. The tabby's claws skittered against the concrete as he danced in place. His heart swelled to fill his entire body and the abyss called to him with a great throaty yawn.

"Sister!" he wanted to shout, but stopped. He didn't want to be afraid, but he was. He looked down at the distant ground and sniffed the air, then drew into himself, shivering. *The birds never seem to be afraid*, he thought.

Those rotten birds.

He could see another apartment window to his left, just like the one from which he'd emerged. He tested his balance, edging toward it a bit. *I'll bet that's where those birds live*, he thought, purring with menace. *Sister hasn't scouted here yet —I'd better check.*

Cold winds probed the delicate pink skin under his fur as he crept forward. He imagined that through the window he'd see a variety of birds lounging in leather chairs, grooming each other and making small talk as their woman served treats. He couldn't

wait to watch them scramble in fear when *a cat* appeared on the ledge outside, giving them a taste of their own taunts. First he would make sad eyes at their woman until she opened the window and let him in. Then he would murder them all.

His bloody thoughts were interrupted by a sound, a loud wooden THUNK!

“What was that?” He looked back to see his sister’s head pop out from around the corner, her eyes narrowing.

“The man shut the window!” he cried. Unable to turn around on the narrow concrete, he was forced to creep backward along the ledge until he was in front of their window again. As he sidled up against the glass and rotated to face his sister, he saw the man inside, walking away. He was wearing their woman’s blouse, and he rubbed at his exposed shoulders, cold.

“You fool!” His sister stalked toward him. “You weren’t watching!”

They both peered into the apartment. The man had removed his pants and was trying to squeeze into a long black skirt.

“What do we do!?” The tabby’s heart was beating so fast he was afraid it might race up through his throat and take a suicidal leap into the void. He and his sister were outsiders now, homeless, cursed to roam this narrow ledge until they died. *Will we become birds now? Is that how it works?* He was sorry about wanting to kill all of those ex-housecats, if that’s what they actually were.

His sister softened when she saw the panic in his eyes. She gave him a reassuring lick across the face.

“Listen closely, brother. You are young, and prone to distraction. But always remember the lesson of this mistake: if you wish to gain your heart’s desire in this life, you must *do what you are doing when you are doing it.*”

“I don’t understand.”

“When you were stretching at the screen, your mind wandered, you leapt, and were hurt. I asked you to watch the man while I scouted the ledge, but once again you were diverted. Now we are barred from our home and trapped in the sky.”

“I’m sorry.” The tabby felt ashamed at his folly.

“I was much like you once, in the orphanage. When I was playing with the other cats I thought only of eating. When I was eating I thought only of rest. But instead of sleeping, I often sat awake wondering when I would play next. Then our woman visited, and I focused on nothing but gaining her favor. I allowed no distractions, and she took me in. I learned my lesson. Now, I play when I am playing. I eat when I am eating. I sleep when I am sleeping. Instead of wasting thought on the past or future, I do what I’m doing when I’m doing it. Understand?”

“I think so. But what do we *do* now?”

“We wait for our woman. And there she is.”

The cats peered through the glass as their woman entered the apartment. She and the workman froze, staring at each other, his hands still fiddling with the skirt. He let go, and it dropped to the floor around his ankles. The woman screamed at the top of her lungs and hit the man with her purse. He scrambled to snatch his crumpled clothes from the floor.

“You see?” said the steel-gray cat. “Like you, the man was distracted and didn’t do his job. Now she is teaching him the same lesson.”

Keeping Up With Jonesy

Aaron Rosenberg

A certain billy goat named Randall had a nice little house with a nice little lawn and a nice little hedge to nibble. He had a nice little wife and a nice little kid named Ramsay. His home was not fancy, nor was his life, yet Randall was content. Then one day his neighbor, another billy goat named Jonesy, called over to him.

“Randall,” said Jonesy, “come see what I have got!” Randall looked, and saw that Jonesy now had a pretty little circular fountain on his lawn, tossing the water up in a small spray. That is very pretty, Randall thought, and now my own lawn looks shabby and bare by comparison. So he got himself a fountain as well. He now had to walk around it to cross his lawn, but it did look very fine.

A short time later, Jonesy called to him again: “Randall, come see what I have got now!”

Randall looked, and saw that his neighbor had now added a handsome brick patio. My lawn looks plain compared to his, Randall decided, and so he added a patio as well. It took up most of his lawn, leaving him very little grass, but it did look very fine.

Next Jonesy added a gazebo. And then he added a balcony to

his home. Then it was a front terrace. And so on. And with each addition, Randall felt he had to match his neighbor, for fear his own home would otherwise look small and mean.

This continued for several years. Finally Jonesy moved away, to someplace with even more space to build. Randall grew old and feeble. His nice little house had become a grand mansion, elaborate and sprawling. His nice little lawn had become an ornamental garden, impressive and stylish. His nice little hedge had died some time back, however, crowded out and crushed down by so many other improvements.

When Randall knew his end was near, he called his son Ramsay to his bedside. "Look at our home," Randall whispered. "Is it not fine? Is it not grand?"

"It is, Father," Ramsay agreed.

"But do you know what I miss?" Randall asked him. "Do you know what made me happiest of all?" He sighed. "It was nibbling on that little hedge. If only I had that hedge again, I would be content."

Ramsay said nothing, for they both knew the hedge was long gone.

"Son," Randall told him, "learn from my mistakes. Do not let what other people are doing influence your own choices. It is not important to keep up with them, or to try impressing them. Do what makes you happy, instead. That is all that matters."

After Randall died, his son cleared away the patio, the garden, the fountain, and all the rest. He tore down the balconies and terraces and flying buttresses and chimneys. Ramsay restored the house to the nice little dwelling it had once been, and he restored its surroundings to the nice little lawn. And along the side he planted again a nice little hedge, just like the one his father had owned. It was not large, it was not fancy, and it looked small and mean compared to some of the neighboring homes.

But he was content.



The Axolotl

Silvia Moreno-Garcia

The axolotl floated through Lake Chalco, dreaming of dressing in finery and visiting the emperor's court.

One day, he thought, I shall sit in an exquisite, carved wooden bowl filled with water while the emperor's servants feed me tasty worms and flower petals.

The axolotl shook its gills and smiled its wide smile.

I shall sit on the emperor's shoulder when he travels in his litter and the whole city will look at me and admire my beauty.

The axolotl blinked its dark eyes and kept on dreaming, but the emperor's palace was far away, up a narrow canal.

Next summer, the axolotl thought, I shall definitely make the journey to the palace.

Next year came and the axolotl imagined himself sitting on a bed of pearls eating the tastiest treats.

But the waters are getting cold now that winter comes, it thought. I wouldn't want to catch a chill on my way to the emperor's palace and ruin my beautiful skin.

Skiffs and barges floated through the canals, carrying goods and people. Porters walked by the water with their goods on their

backs, straps wrapped around their foreheads. Fine ladies met at a corner while craftswomen shouted their wares.

The axolotl saw and heard all of this, but the months went by and still it did not swim up the canal.

Maybe next summer or perhaps next month, it thought. Most definitely before the festivals of Atlcualo.

The dry season ended and the rains came. The people of the city tossed offerings of jade into the water and fresh reeds were brought into temples to make new mats.

Before the moon vanishes from the sky. Or perhaps after that.

But the years piled on and the axolotl never ventured near the emperor's palace. One morning, after a light rain, two little children playing by the canal saw the axolotl and captured it, holding it up by the tail.

"If an axolotl eats the feet and legs of another axolotl, they will grow back again," one boy told the other.

"Let us try," said his friend.

They cut off the legs and eventually, bored by this game, tossed the limbs into the water and ran away, leaving the axolotl by the canal.

Ah, thought the axolotl as it stared at the sky, I should have swam to the emperor's court when I had my chance.

The Loquacious Cadaver

Kyla Ward

One night in the ghastly adolescence of the world, when men and women had learned enough to be sure they knew everything but were yet to take responsibility for themselves, the Beetle found a corpse in the desert. The desert had become the barren stretch between cities, scarred with steel rails and cracked concrete, and the Beetle had not encountered such a thing in many years.

“A corpse,” she clicked, “left for my tending. I will carry it away underground, so that it may transform and rise again.”

“No,” came a croaking and the Bird descended, flapping her black wings. “From high above I saw the human fall. I will bear it into the sky, so it may become a spirit.”

“No,” came a barking, and the Dog came running over the sand, “I tracked this human in dying, and now I shall take it to my master, who will judge its eternal fate.”

The three ancient psychopomps sat and glared at each other, for as the desert had shrunk, opportunities to perform their sacred duties had become rare. But in the great cycles of existence, few problems are without precedent and such conflicts had been resolved before.

“At the very least,” said the Beetle, “I will lay my eggs in its tongue.”

“At the very least,” said the Bird, “I will take its eyes.”

“At the very least,” said the Dog, “I will remove its hands and entrails.”

At this, the corpse stirred and said, “Excuse me, but you will do no such thing. I’m waiting here for the police and would like to look my best when they arrive.”

“Eek!” shrilled the Beetle, “Lie still! Lie still!”

“You must not move,” scolded the Bird. “And corpses do not talk!”

“We talk,” replied the corpse, “to coroners and detectives. I hope you appreciate the exception I’m making for you.”

“Well, I don’t see anyone else here,” huffed the Dog, “nor smell anything but you.”

“They’ll come: the story doesn’t start until they come.”

“What story?”

“The detective story: don’t you watch television? Now get off me, you nasty vermin! Shoo!”

“We understand,” said the Beetle patiently, “you’re expecting the priests of your God to come. But it all comes down to one of three—”

“Not priests, police!”

“Well, what will these police do when they get here?” asked the Bird.

“Examine me to determine my identity and the cause of death. Then they’ll put me in a van and take me away.”

“Well, no wonder corpses are so hard to find! What happens to you then?”

“If I was murdered, then there’s the hunt for the killer and the trial: it will be in the papers and everyone will talk about it. If it was an accident then not so much: still less if natural causes. But I get an obituary, that’s the important thing.”

“What happens then?”

“I’m taken to a room and burned.”

“And?”

“And that’s it,” said the corpse.

“That’s it?” The Dog frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“You become smoke,” suggested the Bird. “You go up into the sky.”

“You become ash,” suggested the Beetle. “You go down into the earth.”

“I become nothing and go nowhere: that’s why the obituary is so important.” The corpse settled back into its original position. “Now, if you’ll kindly leave me be...”

Faced with the corpse’s instance, the psychopomps retreated.

“Load of tripe,” grumbled the Dog. “I mean, we *know* that’s not what happens!”

“Yes, but it seems they’ve forgotten,” said the Bird.

“Forgotten very rigorously,” said the Beetle. “We may have to give them a little prod. But first, we must wait.”

So the three waited as the sun rose and brightened, then dimmed and sank, and the corpse reddened and swelled, then blackened and shrank and still no one came. At last, they approached the corpse again.

“Look,” began the Beetle. “We don’t mean to be insensitive, but you’ve been here a long while now.”

“It will be harder for the detectives,” the corpse slurred, “but that will only make the story more interesting.”

“No one’s coming,” the Dog said bluntly. “No one comes here except people like you.”

This struck the corpse sombrely. “I don’t suppose one of you could take a message into the city?”

“I don’t see why you’re so set on becoming nothing,” said the Bird.

“It’s the only way I can remain what I was,” said the corpse. “You really won’t go and find them?”

“No,” replied the three in unison.

“Then I will,” said the corpse and sat bolt upright, causing the Dog and Bird to scatter and flinging the Beetle across the sand. All the parts that had once held together inside it jostled and jangled, but with a mighty effort of will, it contrived to stand.

Then across rails and over concrete, the corpse teetered and tottered but managed to keep moving towards the buildings that quickly rose around it. And all unnoticed, the Beetle rode on its shoulder, with the Dog trotting behind it and the Bird circling overhead. They accompanied the corpse down a long street where at first it drew only brief glances from such people as were too tired and poor to care. But, as they continued, the glances grew longer and the people rich enough to scream and energetic enough to run, and finally the police arrived.

When the vans pulled up, the corpse waved and attempted to explain the situation, but they answered only with bullets. These failed to harm it, of course, but did nothing to improve its disposition. It took hold of a man by the shoulders and shook him, and a woman by the throat, but neither would listen and so it raged, overturning the vans and bending the guns into pretzels.

Eventually, the corpse decided it must seek for its obituary by itself and so it sought out the streets it had known in life. But no one there recognised it, even among those who were caught in corners and could not avoid looking in its face. So it attempted to visit a dentist and, after the dentist said she could not perform an x-ray because everything had come loose inside, to engage a private detective. But the private detective said he could not take its fingerprints because its fingers were already black, and besides, the corpse had lost its wallet. Everywhere it went, there was only screaming and running, and frantic excuses. At last, it saw a newspaper containing its picture, and thought that its search was over. But when it read the article, all it described was a walking corpse terrorising the city.

It sat down on the steps of the city hall. “It’s too late!” it exclaimed. “I’m not what I was any more. I’ve changed so much that even the story is new!”

“Actually,” said the Beetle, “I’m afraid it’s very old.”

“A corpse leaving the desert and rejoining the living world is rare,” said the Bird, “but not new.”

“You’ll never be nothing now,” said the Dog.

“So I might as well go with one of you,” said the corpse. “Or all of you: I don’t care.”

“I’m afraid,” said the Beetle, “that’s no longer an option.”

“What do you mean? You were fighting over me before!”

“But you not only started talking, you got up and walked,” said the Bird. “That puts you beyond our reach.”

“But you’re right here beside me!”

“Here, the only thing we are is nasty vermin,” said the Dog. “There really isn’t anything we can do.”

“But I only got up because of you!”

“I suppose that’s true,” said the Dog.

“Oh dear,” said the Bird. “Silly us.”

“But don’t despair,” said the Beetle. “Eventually people will get used to you. They’ll grow curious and begin to follow.”

“And they’ll give me my obituary?” cried the corpse.

“Not yours, precisely,” said the Beetle, “But I’m sure it will do.”

So the corpse got up and continued walking, but slowly, avoiding the crowded places. Night came, and day came, and still it kept walking, looking for someone who would listen.

The psychopomps went their way, hungry but content. For they were ancient indeed, and had witnessed the founding of many religions. They knew that there is nothing like a walking, talking corpse to turn people’s minds towards something rather than nothing and to go back into the desert, seeking wisdom.

The Terrible Lizard

Colin Beaver

My father sat at the stern of our fishing boat, his hand on the tiller, watching the storm-damaged sail billow in the easterly breeze. I sat on the port side of the tiller board, with my elbow resting on his knee. To starboard lay a grassy island, surrounded by a glowing strip of white beach.

“Father,” I said, “can we lay anchor here, repair the sail and take on water?”

“No, son,” he replied. “The island is cursed by a basilisk. It is an awful tale, and I cannot say more. Your ears are too young.”

He looked to the island, but I knew he was grinning. I pinched his leg, and he yelled.

So, my father told me this story.



On that island lives a great and fearsome lizard. It has dull grey scales, is as sluggish as your Uncle Alkaios on market day and twice as bad-tempered. Its companion is a tiny, brightly coloured reptile, which picks the food from the great one’s mouth and sips its tears. In the morning, they feast on seaweed and jellyfish washed up

on the beach. Sometimes the great lizard will crush a crab shell between its toothless jaws and they will share the soft morsels of brown flesh. The great lizard washes it all down with gulps of sea water. When the sun is too high, they climb up a path to the centre of the island, past statues of warriors with round shields and long spears. The great one takes the shade in an ancient shrine to some long-forgotten titan. His tiny friend does not enter the shrine, but keeps watch on the shore from under a nearby rock.

Every few months a rowing boat will pull up on the sand, filled with warriors sent by the old witch of Aeaea. Their shields are shone to a mirror finish, to protect them from the basilisk's gaze, which will turn a man to stone, quite slowly, and without remedy.

The small lizard bites the great lizard's toe to let him know they have visitors, and the creature raises itself up and struggles down to the water's edge. Though the warriors are fearful, they are ready, hiding their eyes from the great lizard and readying their spears. Then, as the sluggish beast approaches, the tiny lizard chatters beside them, and the warriors turn their gaze to it, the basilisk.

And the witch of Aeaea has six more statues to decorate her palace!



I said, "The small one was the basilisk? I knew it. So, we cannot land there because of the basilisk."

My father said, "No, foolish one! I am frightened of no such creature. I would crush it under my heel before it glanced at me. Do you not remember? I said the basilisk feasts on the great lizards' tears. There is no water on that island, and I have no use for statues."

The Unicorn at the Soiree

Richard Dansky

“The problem,” the unicorn said, “is that I’m not supposed to be here.” Then he shook his mane, took a sip of his sidecar, and gave a melodramatic sigh.

“Of course you’re supposed to be here,” I told him, and gestured to the discreetly hovering waiter that my drink needed freshening. He took the glass without a word and vanished into the crowd. Melisande’s parties were events. They were always robustly attended and always impeccably staffed; to obtain an invitation for one was the surest sign that one had, to steal a phrase, arrived.

And in the meantime, they were rather enjoyable in their own right. I had no doubt that the tuxedoed little man would have my beverage back to me shortly. “It’s just not a party without you,” I said, and turned my attention back to the unicorn. He’d been brushed for the occasion, and someone had spent a great deal of time adorning his mane and beard with tiny Swarovski crystals that caught the shuddering light from the chandelier when he moved. His hooves had been shod in silver, the better to create that well-loved chiming sound of his steps to announce his initial arrival at the festivities. Only I, and a few others of his closest

friends, knew that he really preferred to go unshod, but that he withstood the indignity in order to make Melisande happy. It was her party, he'd told us earlier in the evening, and he wasn't going to do anything to spoil it.

And yet, here we were—the unicorn, myself, a clingy poet called Deever who'd attached himself to our little circle a few weeks prior, and a bodyguard named Amos Plikington who doubled as the unicorn's squash partner on alternate Thursdays. How exactly he played the game was beyond me, but Plikington assured me that, for a quadruped, the unicorn had a wicked backhand, and I wasn't inclined to call him a liar. And the music played, and Melisande moved through the crowd, surrounded by the beautiful people and the handsome boys who sought the impossible, and we four stood in the corner watching it all.

"That's not what I meant," said the unicorn, and tapped a hoof on the parquet floor a couple of times. "What I mean, is that I'm not supposed to be here. In this place. Now."

"Where are you supposed to be, then?" asked Deever, slightly tipsy. "Don't tell me you have another engagement. I mean, there's that party down in the Village that Lester's throwing, and—"

The unicorn shook his head, and the tip of his horn passed dangerously close to Deever's surgically reconfigured nose. "No, no. There is nowhere else I have to be. Nowhere else I want to be except here with Melisande, making her happy. And that is the problem."

"You know, anything you want, you just have to ask her for it. She's happy to give it to you." Plikington was drinking beer out of a brown glass bottle, and with his free hand he gave the unicorn's milk-white flank a friendly thump. "I mean, you remember that time when you wanted those thistles, and she had to have them flown in straight from Scotland for you, fresh. Cost a fortune, but she didn't blink. She loves you that much."

"I know, I know. But that's not the point. She'd die for me. I'd die for her. Fantastic, don't you think? That we'd both be happy to end up dead for one another?" He drained the sidecar and tapped his hoof impatiently to summon the waiter to bring him another. The man glided up with his tray already loaded, the unicorn's drink

(in a bucket) and mine (in a martini glass) twinned side by side. He deposited the beverages wordlessly, then slipped away before Deever could request another zinfandel spritzer.

“So if that’s not the point,” I said, and took a sip, “and if you’re not supposed to be here, but you can’t be anywhere else, then it sounds like you want to be nowhere. If I’m reading you right, that is.”

“That’s closer,” the unicorn said moodily, but his eyes were on Melisande as the party ebbed and flowed around her. There was one fellow, a tall, handsome chap I’d seen around once or twice before, drifting closer than most for a moment or two, and then she’d spin away, laughing. “Look, how long do you think we’ve been together?”

“Sixteen years, nine months, and two days,” said Plikington helpfully. “The date’s posted kind of prominently around here.”

“Uh-huh. And how long do you think unicorns usually stay with their maidens?”

“I thought they generally got captured right after they put their heads in virgin’s laps. Or is that a myth?” Deever realized what he’d said, turned bright red, and shut up immediately after Plikington smacked him on the back of the head. I ignored him. The unicorn didn’t.

“The horn trade’s been outlawed for years, Deever. You know that. No, what usually happens is that a virgin goes out into the woods and sings, a unicorn finds her, and they have a lovely interlude with his head in her lap. Sometimes it’s a one-off, sometimes it goes on for a while, but it generally doesn’t turn into a long-term relationship with real estate implications.”

I cocked my head, in unconscious imitation of what he was doing. “Why not? It seems like every father’s dream, really. No surer way to see if your little girl’s a little too grown up than if her unicorn suddenly disappears.”

He looked at me. “We’ve been friends a long time, so I’ll let you get away with that one. And besides, you’re right, even if you’re being totally obnoxious while you’re at it. We’re not supposed to be around forever.”

“You’re not?” Deever sounded surprised. Plikington smacked him again.

“We’re moments,” the unicorn said. “Affirmations. Transcendent personifications of an ideal of purity. But we’re not the goal. Not the achievement.” The last was said with uncharacteristic bitterness, so much so that I nearly dropped my drink in surprise.

“Surely you don’t think—” He interrupted me with a snort.

“I don’t think that moment is where you stop. Time passes. Life goes on. You grow, you change, you try new things—”

“Or you don’t,” I said, finally understanding. “And maybe you should.”

The unicorn nodded, nearly upsetting his drink bucket. His head came up, muzzle wet, muscles corded. “It’s not that I don’t love her,” he said. “It’s that she’s decided that this, whatever this is, is more important, is better than anything else she might ever have. And that’s not what I’m supposed to be about.”

“You want her to...” Deever’s voice trailed off, thankfully, before he could find an inappropriate verb to insert.

“I want her to live,” the unicorn said. “Even though it will break my heart.”

“Where is she, anyway?” Plikington suddenly said. “She’s not on the floor.”

We all looked; Plikington for his employer, and the unicorn for his love, and Deever in the direction that everyone else was looking in.

Me, I was looking for the handsome man who’d come too close before, and I didn’t see him, either.

And when I looked back at the unicorn, his eyes were bright with a terrible, terrible hope.

“The moment held is the moment lost,” he said, and then there was just the sound of crystal and silver, falling timelessly to the floor.

The Dowager Rabbit & the Dead Account

JT Petty

A meek father rabbit died suddenly in the jaws of a fox, leaving his widow to care for the children and tend to his unfinished affairs. The widow began to read her dead husband's email. It was a terrible, terrible mistake. Father Rabbit's password expired a fortnight after he did, but it was time enough to make plain all his unspoken secrets. The widow rabbit exclaimed, "Why have I corrupted the memory of my beloved by revealing what he would have kept hidden, his doubts, his petty cruelties, his never-attempted desires half-sated by pornography?"

She died alone some years later.

Her children, and all the generations that followed, kept no secrets because they could not, and did not care to anyway.



The Fox & the Quantum Physicist

Jesse Bullington

It happened, as these things sometimes do, that the beasts of the forest entered into a disagreement with the humans of the city as to who was the more intelligent party. A contest to settle the question was proposed and agreed upon, with representatives elected from each faction. The beasts of the forest nominated their cleverest fox, who was named Fox, and the humans nominated their wisest quantum physicist, who was named Quantum Physicist. Once these two representatives were decided upon, the matter of determining a test that would be equally fair to both parties arose—Fox objected to anything involving proofs, as he hated showing his work, and Quantum Physicist argued that while one certainly needed to be sharp of wit to successfully stalk voles through the verge, this hardly constituted a solely intellectual trial.

“What about chess?” Quantum Physicist eventually proposed. “The game is a purely mental exercise, and neither of our professions gives us an unfair advantage over the other.”

“Very well,” said Fox. “Explain the rules to me and we’ll set in at once.”

“You’ve never played?” Quantum Physicist rolled his eyes. “Then let us play through a number of practice games after I’ve taught you the basics, to make sure you’ve really got it.”

After losing three trial games in quick succession, Fox declared himself ready for the contest. This sat quite well with Quantum Physicist, for while the fox was a quick study, he still had a very long way to go before he could match the experience of the human. They set up the board for the real game, Fox playing Black, Quantum Physicist playing White.

“Now, do you remember how to move the pieces?” Quantum Physicist teased, as he opened with his queen’s pawn.

“Certainly,” said Fox, veering completely out of the book with his very first move. “This seems a simple enough game, now that I’ve got the hang of it. I suppose to the sort of creature who plays with string for a living it might seem complex, but it’s difficult to tax the mind of one so adroit at foiling hound and hunter as myself.”

It took Quantum Physicist a moment to even realize what Fox was driving at, but when he did he laughed and made his second move. “String Theory is really more the forte of my friend Particle Physicist, although I’m of course versed in its basics. I can assure you, my simple opponent, String Theory has nothing at all to do with mundane twine.”

“Really?” said Fox, studying the board for only a moment before making his next move. “What exactly is it that you do, anyway? Your people seem to think you’re rather clever, but I must confess that I don’t have the foggiest idea what it is that you get up to in your labs and conferences.”

“Well, if you’d really like to know...” said Quantum Physicist, and launched into a breakdown of quantum mechanics, pausing only to occasionally gawp at Fox’s bizarre moves before responding with his own sensible ripostes. Fox nodded from time to time, but was clearly beginning to lose interest despite how fascinating the resolution to the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox was. Quantum Physicist wasn’t about to let the conversation bounce back to his opponent’s hare-hunting strategies and den-digging techniques,

and so he weighed whether to discuss Everett's Many-Worlds Interpretation or delayed choice experiments and nonlocal hidden variables—he settled on the former, as the idea of alternate universes proved ever popular with laypersons.

"Fascinating," muttered Fox, blundering his king's bishop into an ambush. "I'm sure all of these theories have tremendous real world applications, eh?"

"Some very well may!" said Quantum Physicist. "But the thought exercise is often its own reward. Just think, my friend, there may well be an alternate universe in which you cannot play chess or walk on your hind legs or even speak, but instead simply run about on all fours, barking and yipping and stealing chickens! Take comfort that you reside in this universe!"

"The same applies to you, I assume?" said Fox, frowning at the board—Quantum Physicist supposed his opponent had finally realized his bishop's blunder, but it was too late, and the human snatched the fox's piece with his queen. Seemingly unperturbed by the loss, Fox added, "I take comfort, indeed, in the idea of a universe in which you cannot speak."

"What?" said Quantum Physicist, but he was addressing the board more than the fox. Taking that bishop might have been a bit premature...

"Just as you may take comfort in the notion that there is a parallel universe in which you are better at chess," said Fox, making his final move and sitting back, his teeth shining. "Checkmate."

A Real Princess

Daniel Perry

Lauren had a Princess Mariella infant sleeper. A Princess Mariella high chair, and baby bottle, and sippy cup, and Pull-Ups, and sneakers, and now, a knapsack. The Princess Mariella Sheet and Canopy Set adorned her four-poster bed, and Princess Mariella's Fairy Magic Play House filled a corner of her room. Before school, she watched her Princess Mariella cartoons on video as she ate her Princess Mariella Cherry Yogurt with its collector spoon, and during free play in her kindergarten class, she always chose the Princess Mariella Colouring Book, which was just like the one she had at home. She coloured Mariella the same way every time: pink dress, purple puffy shoulders, yellow hair and pretty blue eyes, like her own. When she came home from school, she turned on the TV and watched Princess Mariella, who climbed onto Prince Gulliver's white horse at the end of every episode and cooed, "I'm a real princess now, and so are you," which Lauren said along with her before sitting down to dinner, the Microwaveable Princess Mariella Chicken Fingers and Fries.

Lauren finished boarding school and grew into a woman, and after leaving the best women-only university with a failing grade

midway through first semester, took a job at a video store on the ground floor of a major bank's skyscraper, where she rented out DVD copies of *Princess Mariella: The Movie*, the new, live-action reboot advertised on every billboard in the city. At midnight, when her shift ended, she would change out of her uniform and into a dress in the store washroom and walk to Mariella, a restobar nearby that had recently paid a settlement in a copyright infringement case. The inside was decorated pink and purple and filled with women who, like Lauren, had dyed their hair so blonde that no one would mistake it for natural. Here she met her best friends, who spent the night luring lonely bean counters into buying them one martini after another. At last call, one by one, her friends got into the bankers' sports cars and rode off, leaving Lauren behind. She always declined a ride from whichever man they left her and walked instead to the metro station. Never had they left behind her Gulliver.

One morning after yet another such night, Lauren awoke around eleven, as always, and made her way to work, putting on make-up as she rode the train to cover the bags under her eyes. She shuffled into the store ten minutes late and planted herself behind the counter, opening a copy of *Princess Mariella Double Digest*, an indulgent and regressive variety store purchase. She barely moved the rest of the day, reading and looking out the window intermittently until the bustle of rush hour filled the streets. The din was softer than usual, and new sounds mingled therein—clip-clops and whinnies and neighs. Past the front window rode a man in a black business suit, astride a white horse.

“Gulliver!” Lauren cried. She ran through the front door and onto the sidewalk, where she froze in place. In both directions, as far down the street as she could see, men clustered on white horses in their suits and their shiny black shoes. Lauren breathed in and waded into the slow traffic, looking for the first man who had passed. The First One had to be The One, but which one *was* he? The horses streamed past, losing Lauren in the white sea. She edged between them, across the street to the sidewalk, and she plopped down on her seat. A tear ran down her face. One of the passing horses slowed.

“Pretty cool horse I got, huh?” said the man on top.

Lauren looked up. The man was square-jawed, his black hair neatly gelled, and his finely-tailored suit had to be designer. He flashed a slick smile and asked, “Want to take a ride?”

Lauren smiled and began to ask his name, but she stopped when she noticed, over his shoulder, a new billboard that had sprung up beside her skyscraper. It showed a new, limited-edition model of this year’s white horse. Any of the men could be Gulliver for the right price. Lauren put her head in her hands and began to sob.

The man sneered at her and nudged his horse’s side with his foot.

“Let’s go,” he muttered to the animal. “This one’s a real princess.”

The Cockroach & the Fly

Dennis Detwiller

It is unknown to the cockroaches that there are beings of a much larger size than themselves and, indeed, that they live in such beings' shadows. Instead, cockroaches keep to themselves, and focus their lives upon the path ahead of them. Still, they are pragmatic. They have recognized the preponderance of huge, crushing things which occasionally leap to action —like a vast wall suddenly moving—attempting to destroy them. As a people, they have taken this danger and placed it in a category of threat that might be compared in our vocabulary to a natural disaster. It happens, but only if certain rules are broken.

They are a cool headed and well-reasoned people.

Flies, however, are most different. They are beings of the air, and show-offs, and eager to move and flit about in the midst of those they call the giant food makers. The food makers—the ones which cockroaches understand nothing of—are slow and stupid and huge, and not much more than moving mountains who seem to drop the most marvelous bits of sustenance. No fly worth its wings would concern itself with hiding from such a thing.

Now, it came to one day when a cockroach met a fly upon a table.



It had been some time since members of these two peoples had met. The fly, of course, landed on the cake long before the cockroach, but the roach kept its pace and arrived at the cake a bit later. It was a large cake. To the cockroach, the cake was a product of provenance—like a spring rain. To the fly, it was the product of the giant food makers; the stupid, vast things which lumbered through the world dripping food like a child trailing forgotten toys.

The cavernous room which surrounded this scene—a huge and vast landscape of blurred colors backed by an expanse of blue—was dark. The place the two met, what we might call a dining room table, was so high and vast and remote, they might as well have been on some distant, windswept, peak. The room was still.

“And a good night to you fly,” the cockroach said, as it arrived. Because, as a people, the roaches were known as being extremely courteous and prone to protocol.

“Yes. Yes. Yes,” said the fly in return. With each “yes” the fly deftly tucked a fragment of cake in its mandibles and crunched it heartily.

“May I have some of the food?” the cockroach paused, a few steps from the cake.

“Yes. Yes. They leave food and more for all,” the fly said, impatiently, waving three legs in the direction of the roach. The fly considered everything. The wall, the floor, the roach, the cake, its wings. It looked everywhere at once.

The cockroach found this statement confusing. The roach began to eat the cake, slowly, and when it felt a polite interval had passed, asked:

“If you please fly, who is ‘they’?”

“What? What? Why the food makers, of course,” the fly practically choked on its crumbs as it laughed, as flies do, with a deep buzz.

“The food...makers?” the roach replied, its cake quite forgotten.

"Roach, roach. The food makers are the moving mountains, the ones who drop the cake, the big ones," the fly finally managed. The fly was confused now. How had the roaches survived—even thrived—as a people when they were so very ignorant?

The roach considered the fly's laughter for some time as it ate.

"You do not run from the moving walls?" the roach asked.

"No, no, no. It would be foolish. They are here to feed us. They are slow, slow, slow and stupid," the fly paused, and then seeing the look on the roach's face, buzzed with laughter.

"You do not hide from the...light?" the roach asked, slower.

"NO," the fly practically shouted. "In the light, my wings shine and there is more food, but you, you, would know nothing of that."

"It is true, when there is light, we hide," the roach confirmed.

"It it it is a wonder you and yours have lasted so long," the fly said sadly, and cleaned its face of crumbs, tucking the last sugar crystals in its mouth.

"Listen. Roach, roach, roach. There are food makers. They make food for us. They drop the food. We eat the food," the fly said, with some patience, feeling bad for the roach. Perhaps, it briefly thought, it could teach the roach a thing or two about life.

"The giant walls...make...the food?" the roach offered, still chewing upon a clump of sugar, sounding uncertain.

"Yes," the fly said, "yes, yes," already bored. The roach looked on at the fly, who had finished its meal, and was flitting this way and that on the cake.

"How very strange," the roach finally replied, shaking its head. The fly, it was clear, was quite mad.

When the lights snapped on, the cockroach shouted:

"Fly! We must go. Come with me to hide in a hole." The roach, feeling bad for the mad fly, did not want it to be hurt.

The fly continued its buzzing laughter.

When the cockroach felt the movement of air, it was off the table in an instant. It found a crack in the wall, scurried up and into it, and turned. It never said anything else to the fly. By not running from the light, it had already violated the oldest principle of its people.

From its view, the roach could see the fly looping over the cake in half circles, buzzing.

Something vast and terrible, a shadow bigger than the roach could understand, slid into its view, blotting out the blue behind it—a moving wall. The fly moved and flitted and jumped in front of it. The fly considered the light, the fly considered the play of light off its wings, the cake.

With a horrific swat the buzzing stopped.



Cockroaches are an ancient people. Almost as old as anything on the planet, and are hearty. Resisting disease and heat and poison and violence and all manner of dangers. They can be crushed and run away, they can be sprayed with caustics and hide and heal, they can be starved and flooded and assaulted by every method and come out the other side, eager and ready to continue.

They maintain this pace by pushing continuously forward. They refuse to over-think what is happening, they have no philosophy and no science. Any sign of danger and they flee and hide. Long ago, they learned that questioning these random and awful attacks on their people simply resulted in fewer roaches.

The cockroaches have an old saying.

“Alive and oblivious is better than clever and dead.”

The Raccoon & the Cat

Katarina Gligorijevic

Jarvis peered through the still night at her window, lit by the blue glow of the TV. He saw her, lying in the chair in languid silhouette, eyes gleaming. Minerva. Jarvis didn't know what this night would hold, but he had hopes. His campaign to get a date with her felt like it had lasted for years. He sniffed for any sign of rival gangs, but only smelled the faintest trace of her, hanging in the air like the scent of linden trees in August.

Jarvis shifted from paw to paw and dragged his tail across the grass behind him. It used to be fuller, the rings more defined. The stress of this so-called war made him scraggly. His gang of tails, the Rascals, were locked in combat against that carnivorous cluster of her friends, the Purrfects. Everyone wanted to call a truce, but like the saying goes, stubbornness is the fuel of raccoons and cats. Tails owned the train tracks. Kitties ruled the streets. Backyards, the disputed zone. They could at least agree on that, even if they all refused to back down.

Jarvis watched her jump from her chair. He stood in the shadows as one of her humans slid the screen door open. She stepped out without a sound, floating above the ground, her sugar-

white ears pricked up. Jarvis always admired the way her ears stiffened as she tracked birds in the yard. She killed with such grace it left him breathless.

Minerva spotted him right away.

“Hey, Minnie,” he said, picking at the ground in front of him.

She smiled, unsure of whether to go through with this plan.

“Hey, ring-o,” she purred. “Where you taking me?”

“I thought we could just, y’know, stroll through the neighbourhood, go to Phin Park, maybe?”

“That’s a new one,” she chuckled, licking her paw and drawing the claws in and out. “You want to walk through the streets? Through kitty turf?”

Jarvis felt stupid. Train tracks aren’t the sort of place to take a lady, but of course tails kept off the streets, so in the park they’d never be seen by his kind.

“Well, uh, we can go anywhere,” he stammered. “You choose.”

“Park’s fine,” she continued to lick.

The sound of creaking wood shifted their attention to the fence in time to see Coco slip underneath, a fat young kit with a tail of thick rings.

Jarvis froze. Coco was dumber than a compost heap, but it was still bad to be spotted like this, fraternizing with the enemy. Minerva froze, her fur rising. Coco paused.

“Uh, hey guys?” he said.

“What up, Coco,” Jarvis said oh-so-casually, and nodded a ‘scuse me, darling, to Minerva as he shoved the young kit into a bush in the corner of the yard, stepping on his tail. “You’re messing up my game, man!” Jarvis whispered, “I’m doing recon for Hector here, trying to turn some of the kitties, get some intel, you know how it is. But it won’t work if we have an audience, do you get me, brother?”

Coco nodded with a somber, conspiratorial air. Jarvis suppressed a laugh. Make the kits feel like they’re in on something big and they believe any stupid lie. Hector, the Rascals’ head tail, was busy trying to bring down Butter, the old tom who bossed the

local kitties. If he said to make friends with one, no tail would be dumb enough to argue.

“Now get out of here, and don’t say a word to anyone,” Jarvis hissed. Coco nodded and waddled back under the fence.

“I’m so sorry Min, I didn’t mean to freeze like that. I just thought, I mean, it’s hard to explain this, right?”

“I risk a lot coming out here, walking kitty turf with a tail like it’s no big deal.” She sighed. “Let’s go, ring-o.”

If another kitty called him ring-o, he’d take a claw to their tail, but he puffed his chest out when she did it. They strolled, pausing to sniff here and there, expecting danger in the air. Jarvis turned to her.

“Listen, do you think there’s a spot in this world where tails and kitties are friends?”

“You serious?”

“There might be?”

“There sure as hell ain’t.”

Jarvis looked into her eyes, greener than the trees. They turned a corner, and as he caressed her milky back with his tail, he saw it. A gang of tails on one side of Phin Park and a cluster of kitties on the other. Frozen in the tense moment before all hell breaks loose, lungs full with an unreleased hiss, bodies spring-loaded. The groups turned toward Jarvis and Minerva.

Jarvis saw Hector, nose to nose with that creamy furball, Butter. Hector’s round eyes widened in horror and defeat. “What is this, man?” he growled.

Minerva leaned back onto her hind legs, about to jump Jarvis, save his ass by making it seem like they weren’t together, but his look said *stand down, sugar*.

Jarvis stepped forward, clearing his throat with a shrill squeal.

“You know, lately I’ve been thinking. I’m turning three soon and I guess I’m getting older, re-evaluating some things in my life. I’m not worried about dying. I’m not worried about getting old, either. My fur’s not as full as it used to be, I’m getting a bit bigger around the middle, but if that’s the worst you can say about a tail, it’s not so bad. But I am worried about being alone, having no one

to lie next to in the winter, climb trees with, hunt. I'm worried that I'm going to miss my one chance for happiness, because the truth is, I'm not here for the fights with you idiots, or for the half-rotten fruit I find in the back yards. I'm here because of her," and he nodded, poignantly he thought, at Minerva. "Only her. I know we should hate each other, but we don't. And I know I'm being real bold here, but maybe there's nothing wrong with that."

Hector stared. Butter stared. Everyone stared, and no one said a word. For a moment, Jarvis thought his speech had worked. Then, with a low rumble that grew into a roar, the kitties sprang toward the tails with a collective screech that echoed three blocks at least. The raccoons pounced too, claws out, tails swinging.

Minerva smiled at Jarvis with a look that said *hey baby, you tried* and leapt out of the way.

"Better to die honest than to live a lie," Jarvis said and threw himself, with more grace than he thought he could muster, into the centre of the fray.

The Dragon & the Mouse

Ed Greenwood

Ambkyn was the boldest of mice. Of all the teeming families of his kin and kind that swarmed Homestones, the great cliff where the golden Fields of Many Seeds ended and fell away—a descent so great that a falling mouse took much of a day to plunge to his doom—to the endless emerald Fell Forest far below, Ambkyn was the only one to have been among those trees, and come back.

“They are huge, tall, and dark,” he told the younger mice (the only ones disposed to listen to the tales of a crazed far-traveler), “and there is much food on the forest floor around them. Yet there is far more danger there than food. Snakes and foxes and worse are many, and hungry, and quick to pounce.”

“Old Reirus says the worst danger in the Fell Forest is fire,” squeaked one of Ambkyn’s audience. “Bigger and hotter than the fire breathed by dragons. Did you see fire when you were in the Forest?”

“No, Nartail, there was no fire,” Ambkyn replied, and added scornfully, “And dragons can’t breathe fire. Except in fanciful tales like Old Reirus tells.”

“Old Reirus is old and wise,” one of the other mice said doubtfully.

“Old Reirus has never been to the Fell Forest,” Ambkyn snapped. “He has never left Homestones. He sits and repeats stories he heard when he was as young as you are—stories that are full of lies and exaggeration. I have been to the forest and the other way, too, beyond the Fields of Many Seeds, to the Roaring River, and I *know*. Listen to me, and learn true wisdom.”

“The River!” Nartail and some of the others squeaking excitedly. “Tell us about the Roaring River!” They loved to hear about the river, all silver in the sun, larger and noisier than a dragon, where—

A great shadow fell over the ledge where Ambkyn and his audience were gathered, and eager squeaks became shrieks of fear.

Out of the sky had come a dragon, to land heavily on the ledge upon which Ambkyn was now sitting alone, his audience having fled back into the many, many cracks in the Homestones. One of the dragon’s talons, as long as three hundred mice or more, struck a spark from the ledge right beside Ambkyn. If the dragon had landed just a little more to sunward, Ambkyn would now be no more than a purple and gray smear on the stone.

The mice who had been listening to Ambkyn cowered in their crevices, but every one of them stared in frightened fascination back out of the cliff. Dragons were *big*. There were the scales, there were the great claws, the wings that blotted out the sun, the tail that—what was Ambkyn *doing*?

The few stunted trees growing out of the rugged cliff face were the dominant scenery of the daily world of the mice of Homestones. One thorny, half-dead tree flanked the ledge, and Ambkyn had just scrambled up it.

Not to flee in fear, but to squeak at the dragon, “Have a care! You almost crushed me, and all my friends! Some of them might be under you right now!”

The dragon panted from the exertion of a long flight, and the sudden pain of a knotted wing muscle. It hadn’t intended to land on the ledge—and almost fell off it now in astonishment.

Whence came this small, angry voice? Was it being scolded by ghosts?

"Who and where are you?" the dragon rumbled, peering around. "I see a mouse on a tree, and nothing else living. Just stone above, and stone below ... for a long, long way down to the trees."

"I am that mouse," Ambkyn said boldly, lifting his nose, "and this is my home."

The dragon blinked down at him, then slowly started to rumble. A deep, rising and falling sound that grew faster and faster, and louder and louder until it was nigh-deafening. It shook the mice and the ledge so much that they were numbed and dazed. It was some time after the sound had died down again that they realized the dragon had been laughing.

"So I should heed the complaints of *mice*?" the dragon chuckled. "Because they'll nibble my scales, perhaps?"

"You," Ambkyn snapped, "know too little about mice. Dragons may be large, but they're not so strong or wise."

The dragon happened to be a young wyrm, and knew full well it was not yet wise, and it was small for its kind—but for a puny mouse to defy the strength of a dragon, the mightiest of all creatures? The ruler of all others? The shadow in the sky all lesser life—and *all* other life *was* lesser—should fear?

"Pah! What do you know of strength?" the dragon snarled. "Behold!" It smote the Homestones a mighty blow with one foreclaw, a punch so mighty that the cliff rocked. Stones fell like rain from it, followed by boulders almost as big as the dragon.

No one heard Ambkyn's scream, as he clung tightly to the tree and shrieked in wild terror, through the roar of the falling stones, the thuds as they slammed into the dragon, breaking its wings—and the ear-splitting *crack* of the ledge breaking off the cliff face and falling.

The dragon fell with it, down, down toward the endless emerald Fell Forest far below. Mice too frightened to know what they were doing moved to where they could watch it, a broken and helpless bundle, its roars fading.

It looked up once, eyes blazing yellow with rage, opened its jaws—and gave the Homestones fire.

Many mice died in that flood of flame, cooked to ashes in an instant in the mouths of their cracks and crevices. One of them was Ambkyn, no more than a black bump on a tree that crumbled to charcoal and fell after the dragon, in a drifting black rain.

The mice who could still see peered down with watering eyes, and saw the dragon crash into the treetops. Most of them splintered under it, but a few stood straight, and stabbed right through it. The dragon thrashed once or twice, its tail dashing trees aside, then convulsed, sobbed ... and fell limp and silent.

A little while later, the last small stones finished falling, and a stillness came to the Homestones.

The mice that had been listening to Ambkyn stared out of their crevices at where the ledge had been. At where the tree had been, and Ambkyn.

There was nothing at all there now except fresh, bright stone. And a gentle breeze, and the long, long fall down to the Fell Forest that had been there all their lives.

“What now, Nartail?” one of the mice squeaked. “What now?”

“I have watched and listened to Ambkyn,” Nartail replied, “and just as he said, gained true wisdom. I have learned that pride blinds almost as much as ignorance.”

The Brood, the Murder & The Tale of the Weasel Boyfriend

Epidiah Ravachol

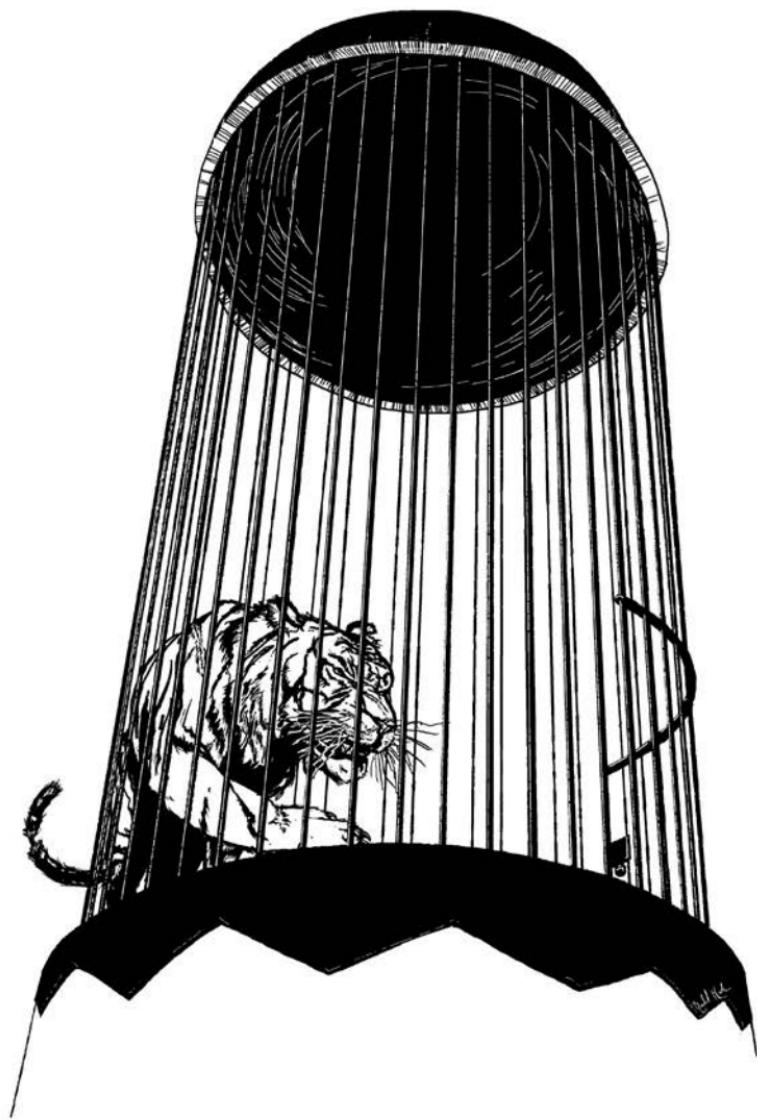
A gawky and speckled brood of not-yet-hens and no-longer-chicks pecked and scratched at their breakfast in a dew-damp field. A handsome murder of fledgling crows alit nearby and began, as crows do, chattering about another crow and her mysterious weasel boyfriend. The brood, more bored than hungry, crept closer to the murder, craning their necks to better hear the salacious details of the forbidden love.

In the same field stood a fierce cock who prided himself on driving just such dangerous suitors from the hen house. While preening his feathers and meditating on his past glories, he slowly became aware of the brood's interest in the murder's chatter. The content of the tale offended him. A weasel was the very worst boyfriend a hen could have. And to plant the seeds of such stories in the minds of young chicks was reprehensible. Not one to let the idle gossip of crows threaten his charge, he stormed in and scattered the murder before the tale could be finished.

From that day on, the brood burned with curiosity. Whenever one of these young hens came across a murder, she would implore them to finish the tale of the weasel boyfriend. But the crows,

ever fearful of the cock, would only squawk rudely and fly off to a more private locale. They took to eavesdropping and later sharing among themselves what little tidbits they were able to glean before being discovered. But it was never enough.

Eventually, one by one, each hen, drawn by their growing curiosity and the lure of forbidden fruit, would on moonless nights answer the serenade of the weasel in the hopes of discovering how the tale ended. And the cock was left patrolling his empty hen house.



The Tiger the Dove

Nadia Bulkin

A Tiger, who had been born in the Zoo before it was dissolved by the Dis-Integration (along with the Library, the School, and other public works), hated following the rules of the Circus. It was among the strongest creatures in the animal paddocks, one of the few with inborn weapons, and was frustrated by its inability to escape the Circus's control. It paced in its cage, bit the other animals as well as the Woman who fed it, and refused to jump through fiery hoops or perch on tiny stools. For this the Tiger was beaten by the Tamer until it bled. Its fur fell in tufts and the great hot lights of the arena filled it nose-to-tail with a terrible rageful pressure.

The Tiger thought of its dead mother for comfort. "Life is sacred," she had said, "and so is death—so we always lunge for the throat, to uphold the ritual of destruction."

Thoughts of ritual and sacredness and death raced through the Tiger's mind during one crowded evening show, and when the Tamer again flicked his whip, the pressure burst. It began the sacred act of killing, snapping the necks of little creatures and exsanguinating the larger ones. The exit stampede did not begin

until two—a Monkey in a tutu and the Tamer himself—were dead.

The Tiger would have taken its violence into the village if a Man with a gun had not shot it. The Tiger was in the fifth row, mauling a Dentist. It was too late for the Dentist but not the Tiger—the bullet lodged in the Tiger's shoulder, and the beast went down with a groan.

“It's a shame to kill it,” people said, so the Man had the Surgeon take away the Tiger's teeth and claws and dragged it back into its cage.

When the Tiger awoke in most exquisite pain—the bullet hole now a swollen purple mound—the Woman who fed it whispered through the bars that it had been re-classified a dangerous animal. “But we are all dangerous, always,” the Tiger said, but without teeth its words were slurred. The Woman said, “Do you know what's done to dangerous animals? They're chained up, Tiger. They're clubbed like seals. You've made a terrible mistake.”

The Tiger wanted to ask the Man why he had not done it the honor of biting its neck out, but between them only the Man could speak. “Tiger, I present to you a bargain,” he said. “If you forever forswear violence, we will let you live.” The Tiger did not know how it could kill anyway. So it said nothing, and the Man snapped, “Swear it or we will not remove the bullet.”

The Tiger took one night to decide it wanted to live. The Man returned, this time in Ringmaster clothes, and dictated the oath for the Tiger to repeat: “Aspiring sincerely to a communal peace based on justice and order, I the Tiger forever renounce violence and the use of force. To accomplish this, my claws and teeth will never be reinstated.”

First the Tiger was too depressed to dwell on this promise. It lay in its cage batting flies, barely hearing the roar of the Circus and ignoring visitors who shelled coins to see Dove the Peaceful Tiger: Incredibly Tame! Bewitched or Just a Peacenik? When they pulled its tail the Tiger wanted to swat them bloody, but could only drop its head and slip its tail under its haunches.

At last the Man, now Ringmaster, brought his Child to see the

Tiger, saying, “Don’t be scared. Even if I let it out, it wouldn’t hurt us.”

“Why not?” asked the Child. The Tiger wanted to say, “Because I can’t,” but the Man answered, keeping his lips very tight, “It chose not to. It chose to follow rules and be nice to others.”

The Child reached between the bars and tenderly stroked the Tiger’s paw, and though the Man gnawed his lips, the Tiger did not lift a joint. It barely felt the Child’s touch, only saw the little hand—a baby version of the Man’s, without his bulbous joints or red callouses or gun. Then the Child insisted the Tiger be let out of its cage, and the Tiger was so confused by this unexpected taste of freedom after years of biting back that it did not run. It sat still, like that awful Tamer always wanted, and allowed itself to be coddled.

Then came fresher food, cut up into bits that the Tiger wouldn’t need teeth to shred, a bigger cage, toys, pool access, and free reign of the Circus between shows. Some days the Tiger could not recall the feel of fangs against its tongue, or the feel of claws scratching the wood planks of its cage. Other things mattered. The Tiger had learned to speak without teeth and had a new act: Dove the Peaceful Tiger, cuddler of lambs, friend to all.

The Bear said, “I cannot smell you without your scratching. Or your terrible breath.” The Bear’s own teeth were chipped from chewing on the bars of its cage. “I would never let them take mine. They’re all I’ve got. They make a Bear a Bear.”

The Tiger, in newly lush fur and the only gilded cage, declared that it had everything it wanted.

“But everyone else has teeth! Men have guns! Tiger, you’re playing at a disadvantage.”

The Tiger did not believe it. The more it sat upon its quilted stool under the bright arena lights as white-feathered Doves landed on its shoulders in the shape of wings, the more it told a spellbound audience about the virtues of a non-violent life, the more the Tiger came to believe: in peace, in the end of killing, in a body free of weapons. When the Ringmaster-Man waved his baton and said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, take a look at that! The

most savage beast in the county has turned over a new leaf! Kitty-cat's playing nice now!" the Tiger regretted only that it ever earned a reputation for cruelty.

The Ringmaster-Man was not a natural, and only wanted to be Ringmaster because it let him speak to the whole village. He lectured the audience about vigilance against threats, and sometimes shouted at them in anger. Once he was pelted with a tomato—the Punk who threw it escaped by cutting a man-sized slit through the tent. The Tiger told the Ringmaster-Man that he was scaring them, and what was the point of such belligerence when non-violence was the proper path? The Ringmaster-Man rolled his eyes, limp whip in hand.

After an army from across the border began moving toward the village, the Tiger's Dove act was shelved. The Tiger did not understand why; it told the Woman, "Now especially we must not do each other violence." But she shook her head and said, "You can't have war without violence, Tiger." By then even she carried a gun.

The Man, no longer a Ringmaster, refused to discuss it. "This is no time for sideshows," he said. "Our village is under siege, and we need every weapon available."

"I'm disappointed," said the Tiger. "This is not what you taught me."

"Tiger, I told you there is no time for that nonsense. You're the most savage beast in the county. We need you to come to the battlefield. Go for the throat. Kill as many as you can."

"I do not carry weapons anymore."

"We will give you new claws and teeth."

The Tiger swatted the floor with its tail. "I do not want them! I renounced violence so that we might have communal peace and justice. I don't know why you changed your mind, but I have not, and will not carry weapons anymore."

But the Man truly did not have time to debate the Tiger; he had the Woman put a general anaesthetic in the Tiger's fish filet and while the Tiger slept, had the creature fitted with steel claws and teeth. "It'll be an even better mankiller than before," the Man

said. "Godwilling this time it keeps its teeth on the other side," the Surgeon muttered through her mask.

The Man allowed the Tiger two days of recovery, then stormed into the paddocks. The Bear wormed its snout through the bars and roared, "Tiger will not fight for you, but I will! Just give me those steel teeth and let me loose!" But the Man could not trust the Bear not to run as soon as it was armed and freed—or worse, not to turn on his betters. Only the Tiger, as he told his anxious soldiers with horror-memories of The Circus Massacre, was under control.

The Man found the Tiger ripping out its new claws with its new teeth. Blood covered its paws, its lips, the floor. Blood streamed without stopping.

"What have you done, you fool?" the Man shouted.

"I told you," hissed the Tiger. "I do not carry weapons anymore."

The Backwards-Bent Badger & The Forward-Facing Frog

Jim Zub

Two finely-tailored forest friends discussed the merits of the world through their eyes.

“Backwards,” began the Badger, “is a fine view indeed. I always know where I’ve been and can count on familiar sights. History is a safe place and when I look behind me I remember all that’s come before.”

“Preposterous!” croaked the Frog. “Without forward vision you’ll never know what’s yet to come. Tomorrow is all that matters. Face front and always look ahead.”

The Badger was flabbergasted and dismayed.

“Never to look back, fair Frog? No history, no self-reflection, no past at all?”

The Frog croaked his own question in reply, mimicking Badger’s tone as best an amphibian could.

“Never gaze forward, boisterous Badger? No creation, no dreaming, no future to be found?”

The only thing they could agree on, it seemed, was a test. Both would go about their lives in their particular way and see how things turned out. Ten and two years hence they would

return to the forest's edge and discuss their views anew.

Badger felt safe in his resolve—staying in familiar places, traveling only where he'd gone before, winding a constant circular path of nostalgia. Over years the forest changed and, without new knowledge and ambition, he fell too far behind to adapt. Old dirt roads became overgrown and hard to follow. Tasty grubs and insects were no longer found in accustomed spots. One thing led to another and a farmer's machine, unusual and unknown, made short work of boring Badger.

Frog felt confident in his pioneering spirit—always moving, traveling unknown places and twisting his way in a chaotic trail of the unfamiliar. Over years the lands beyond became inhospitable and, without an understanding of mistakes others before had made, he missed out on tools needed to survive. Exotic places became impossible to navigate without a map. Snails and worms were difficult to procure without an understanding of each region. One thing led to another and a small cut from a thorn bush, infected and unintended, finally finished frantic Frog.

Ten and two years passed. Neither made it to the forest's edge. A pair of present-peering porcupines took up residence there instead, never knowing of its previous peculiar residents.

Past and future must always be balanced with the potent present.

One For The Girls

Sue Train

Robin glanced across to the desk and saw Leonora Docker, Minister for Social Solidarity, observing herself in the mirror as usual, tilting her head this way and that, adjusting her pearl necklace. Golden Girl of the British Bullion party in the newly elected coalition, she really was the vainest woman he'd ever had the misfortune to work with. Next to the mirror was a collage of her posing at various receptions and events, which Robin had grudgingly put together at Leonora's request. Pin-up Golden Girl, smirking for the cameras. Robin "Sly" Reynard was her Deputy, and leader of New Albion (N/A), the party that had made up the numbers, known on the street as The Woolly Baa-Lambs, a misnomer if ever there was one, and an irony not lost on Robin.

She beckoned him over to the computer.

"Look, this is what I'm talking about!" He sidled over reluctantly. Having to be in her physical proximity still made him uneasy; she was a good bit taller than him, and her overperfumed hair-flicking habit made him feel itchy and scratchy. Even sitting, she seemed overpowering in scale, exuding some kind of animalistic tension that was quite scary. He always thought of her as a creature on the alert, unpredictable, coiled and ready to spring.

He glanced down at the screen. She was looking at a road sign, the red-bordered triangle sign of “men at work”. For a moment he wondered how she had found out, but then didn’t everyone of his generation, maybe even Leonora, have one hidden away at home somewhere? It had been a sort of rite of passage; easy to steal one of these signs in a drunken jape, less easy to return, particularly if you couldn’t remember which route you’d taken home.

“Excellent! A street furniture theft initiative! Copper cables, library roofs, and now road signs. Only you, Leonora, could get away with making this a cause célèbre. A taking pride issue.”

“No, not a crime initiative!” she snarled. Not many, or even enough, people saw her in that light, Robin reflected, turning his face away from that enormous mouth, with its tombstone-sized teeth, gold glinting towards the back. Unfortunately he could still see her mangy head in the mirror.

“It’s an equality issue obviously, dimwit!” she continued. She had calmed herself to say this, adopting her most alluring tone, making a conscious effort to revert to her public, sweet, high-pitched little girl voice.

“Right! Yes, of course. Demeaning to men, portraying them as brawn not brain. I totally agree! Leonora, you are so clever,” Robin responded, relieved.

“No, I mean, why should all the men get the jobs in construction? This will be the focus of our new campaign. Women at work!”

Robin told her he liked the strategy. It would get the women back on side, a campaign to redress workmen’s signage. No more men at work, but women at work.

“And furthermore,” he suggested, “why not a penalty for construction companies not employing at least fifty percent of women as road menders, crane operators, wind turbine erectors, hod carriers, scaffolders and miners,” he raced on, “why not grave diggers, oil rig workers, lumberjacks, streetsweepers, security guards,” he added, “and what about dockers? It’s your moniker after all.”

“Are there any dockers these days?” she asked.

“Oh yes, Tilbury, Southampton,” he continued “but, you know what? This is offering us, well you, a fantastic set of opportunities...”

“Do you mean photoshoots?” she asked, in a quivery voice. He thought he could see, and smell, the first few drops of saliva gathering at the corner of her great, gaping mouth. She was revolting.

Leonora had a problem in the popularity polls, she knew that. But Robin had developed the habit, very early in their office politics, of softening the blow by explaining that it was because she was just soooo beautiful, talented and driven. Women would just not vote for her, and this coalition was precarious.

“Oh, do you think so? I mean, I think I still have it.” Leonora loved Robin telling her this. It just confirmed her gorgeousness.

“People often compliment me, randoms on the street. Between you and me Robin, men on building sites especially,” she boasted.

Leonora began to believe Robin when he told her that she was way too lovely to have friends of her own sex, for they were just too jealous of her stunning goldy-red mane, her huge deep-brown soulful eyes, her manner of wearing her size with elegance and grace in the way of an Amazonian, her hand-made kitten heels, her ability to connect, direct, distract with a mere sashay into a room. Her fiery temper tantrums were all part of her charm, he said.

Robin, on the other hand, had been brought up to believe that merit, not hype or, God forbid, looks, bred success. Robin, in his velvet jacket and bow tie, a bit long in the tooth but grateful to get a look in at this stage of his career; dapper, but with very pointy ears, a very, very pointy nose, and unprepossessing very pointy yellowing canines, should have had a brace fitted when his mother said so. But it was far too late for all that now. His line of attack would bring that woman down, he had made her feel that her image was unshatterable. But he, perhaps alone, knew that this image was founded on artifice and flattery. He had caught her once re-attaching her hair extensions in the office following a particularly nasty physical and verbal outburst on her part.

“Well, I don’t need them, it’s just a fashion statement, helps me appear to be one of them, you know, down on the streets,” she explained, slipping back into the vernacular of the strong, clever girl made good. She began tidying away the women’s fashion magazines strewn across her desk. “Research, Robin, research!”

Leonora spent most part of the next week making sure that everyone knew she was going to be on the news. “I’m doing it for the girls,” she said, “they may not all have been endowed with my beauty, but I’m sure they have the strength.”

Robin felt almost beside himself with excitement; organising the event, booking the crane, checking the measurements over and over.

Even on the day of the shoot for the new “Women at Work” launch, Robin had still not exhausted his armoury of obsequiousness. He reassured Leonora that the yellow hard hat would accentuate the fine shape of her head whilst at the same time complementing her deep brown eyes. He persuaded her that there would be no need to wear false nails, as no one would see them under the thick rubber gloves. He ensured her that the bottle-green boiler suit would certainly not make her thighs look chunky. *Statuesque* would be the word. And as for the steel capped boots, well, lots of women wore those already after all. And the necklace, well that just proved that manual work is not necessarily without glamour.

But his killer remark, as she climbed the narrow ladder up into the crane cabin, almost overstepped the bounds of belief.

“Leonora, you would look good in a bin bag! Just don’t forget that gorgeous smile for the cameras.”

The video report was aired live on the lunchtime news. As Leonora hauled herself towards the top of the ladder she attempted to lean forward and enter the crane cabin. But, she just couldn’t squeeze in. The camera moved from her squashed body to close in on her face, revealing a curling lip, a snarling gesture and finally a loud roar as she lurched for the lever inside the cabin. In one fell swoop the demolition ball destroyed the top floor of the old dockside weighing station and her image. It took the fire crew several hours to free Leonora from the cabin where she had become wedged. And Robin, Acting Minister for Social Solidarity, just had to agree with the press that the photos were not pretty, though somehow the string of pearls remained intact.

Shotaro & Haruka

Wena Poon

Haruka lived with her grandmother on a mountaintop in Japan, where nothing ever happened.

Shotaro, a street racing celebrity, lived with his parents in a Tokyo suburb, owned a garageful of cars, and had recently become the first Japanese to graduate from a world-famous racing school in Stuttgart.

The race, in short, was over before it began.

“Why does he even bother coming to our prefecture?” said Haruka gloomily. Her grandmother, a retired botanist, was arranging flowers for the guests at their small mountain inn. “He has his own race track at home on which he trains. He’s definitely faster than me.”

“Sometimes you win when you’re slow.”

Haruka rolled her eyes.

“When is this race?” asked her grandmother.

“Next week.”

The old lady looked out the window. Autumn had come to the mountain.



“I’m here to meet Haruki Matsumoto,” said Shotaro. They had arranged to meet the day before at a fast food joint at the base of the mountain.

“I’m Haruka. There’s no Haruki.”

“I’m racing a girl?”

“Look,” said Haruka quickly. “Why did you even come? Just cross us off your list.”

“I cannot be the fastest teenage street racer in all of Japan if I haven’t beaten someone in this prefecture,” said Shotaro grimly. “I’ll bring the same model of car as yours, to be fair. Which is your car? That one? Good.”

She did not even ask which car in the parking lot outside was Shotaro’s. You could see its gleam from a mile off.



“You should have seen the size of his tires, Grandma.”

The old lady carefully peeled a twig for her ikebana arrangement. She looked out the window again.

“Are tires very important?” asked Grandma.

“Yes. He has the most expensive kind. You can’t even buy them in Japan.”

Grandma screwed her eyes up at the horizon. “The trees are bare now. Did you hear the wind last night?”

Before she left the room, Grandma handed a dried maple leaf to Haruka. “Good luck, child of spring.”

Sometimes she can be so barmy about plants, thought the girl. She looked out the window. If it rains tonight for the race, that’ll just take the cake.



It rained.

Half of the village turned up for the night race. They said they were there to cheer Haruka, but really, they came to take camera phone photos of the famous Shotaro Watanabe.

“Haruka’s our fastest racer on the mountain,” said the colorful cluster of wet umbrellas. “But this is a race that is decided by Premium Tires.”

“Three—two—one—they’re off!”

She put up a good fight uphill, but close to the top, Shotaro easily passed Haruka at a treacherous corner. Her tires were wearing out. On the downhill, instead of speeding past him, she hung back and observed. Now that she was behind his car, she noticed a lot more things about his driving. His car was great on rainy tarmac, but he avoided the piles of wet leaves by the side of the road.

She accelerated and nudged him into going over the leaves. He lost balance for a split second.

“No wonder,” she thought suddenly. “He only trains on closed circuits. Bet they’re well-swept!”

They were racing downhill now. At every opportunity she pushed him to go over leaves. Every second he lost in recovering his balance allowed her to pull ahead.



“So, the world’s best tires could not overcome gravity,” said Grandma quietly, studying her flower composition. She carefully affixed a dried lotus pod. “Gravity, and the organic, slippery mush of the wet maple leaf. Why does Man still not understand Nature?”

“Says he’ll be back in the spring for a rematch,” said Haruka, reading a text Shotaro had just sent her. “I hope I have a new set of tires by then.”

“Or you could just take up ikebana,” muttered her grandmother.

The Scientist & the Zen Master

Benj Tentt

Below a rocky promontory, beside a white-pebbled walkway, under the wafted scent of jasmine flowers, the ninth-century monk Nanquan Puyuan addressed the young men under his instruction. The novices had fallen into a dispute over possession of a tortoise-shell cat, which Nanquan now held in the crook of his arm. Tail twitching, the creature squirmed for its freedom, but the esteemed monk, without visible effort, kept it firmly in place. The young men laughed and jostled one another, eyes transfixed by the rhythmic movements of the animal's tail.

"Your desire for this beast," said Nanquan, "what does it represent?"

The boys shuffled their feet. They studied the ends of their toes. A few of them giggled.

A teacher of lesser poise would have allowed frustration to cloud his features. "Do you even want the cat, or do you want the others not to have it?" Nanquan asked them.

Again no one dared answer.

The monk breathed deep. "If any one of you can speak a word of Zen," he said, letting the pause dry and lengthen in the

air, "you may have the cat. If none of you can, I will kill it."

At this moment the boys saw that a sword, sheathed in a rosewood scabbard, hung at Nanquan's hip. It was not an ordinary part of his attire.

The boys stepped back in dismay. A few worked their mouths, but no sounds issued forth.

Furrows appeared on Nanquan's brow. "All of your time here, and not one of you can answer this simplest of questions?"

The youngest of the boys screwed up his face, as if readying himself to speak.

Nanquan counted, in his mind, to seven, then lofted the cat, yowling, into the air. With swift grace he slid the sword from its scabbard. At the first moment of the cat's descent, he struck it in two. Its forepart, including the front legs and its head, flew at the boys, thudding one of them in the chest, spattering all of them with pinpoints of blood. Its back half tumbled to a stop at the foot of a bench, where sat the twentieth-century theoretical physicist Erwin Schrödinger. He wore round glasses, a rumpled tweed suit, and a bow tie. Glancing at the tips of his worn leather shoes, he nodded, seeing that the cat's blood hadn't soiled them.

"I too have a parable about killing a cat," he told the Zen master.

"Mine isn't over yet," said Nanquan, over the horrified wails of the younger boys.

"While yours is intentionally obscure," said the physicist, "mine is, more often than not, willfully misconstrued."

The monk peered into the depths of a bamboo grove.

Schrödinger continued: "People take it for a metaphor for the ultimate subjectivity of consensus reality. Or worse, an indication that quantum physics—the field of which I am a pioneer—is merely a modern word for magic."

The novices took the man's monologue as an opportunity to slink away.

"Whereas in fact," Schrödinger said, "it merely expresses the indisputable conceptual barrier between the state of being of classically understood macro-objects, and the fundamental

indeterminacy of particles in a state of quantum entanglement.” He removed his glasses from his rectangular, Germanic face and huffed on them. “But I see I confuse you.”

“Not at all,” said Nanquan, still looking with expectation to the bamboo grove.

“I put the cart before the horse, the exegesis before the parable. The image is this: there is a cat in a steel box it cannot escape. Also in the box is a device, proofed of course against the cat’s interference. Its key components: a very small quantity of radioactive isotope, a Geiger counter, and a vial of poison. Should a single atom of the isotope decay, the counter triggers a mechanism which shatters the glass, releasing the toxin and killing the cat.” He could not help but steal a glance at the dead half-cat near his feet. “At the particle level, the atom which has or has not decayed has *both* decayed and not. Therefore one should expect, before opening the box to observe the cat’s condition, that it is both dead and alive. But, as need not be said, a cat cannot, unlike an atom, be simultaneously extant and not. Hence the intentional absurdity, which so many insist on not understanding, instead finding in the logical gap God or a universal spiritual consciousness or what-have-you.”

“It is you who does not understand,” said Nanquan.

“Here we go,” said Schrödinger.

“Everything both is and isn’t. Your story tells a truth greater than you intended. That is why people will not accept your interpretation: it is too small.”

Chuckling, the physicist leaned forward on the bench. “It is not my business to disprove mysticism. In fact, I derive great inspiration from it, in its various forms.”

Nanquan sniffed at this. “There is only one form.”

“My good fellow. I let your dead cat mean whatever you want it to. Can you not show the same courtesy for mine?” Schrödinger, uninterested in offending the monk, did not add, as he could have, that at least he never murdered real cats.

Like a curtain, the bamboo grove parted. From it slipped another young monk, who had earlier been absent. His regretful

gaze at the slain pet provoked Nanquan to recount the events leading up to its demise.

The young man nodded, took off his sandal, and placed it atop his head.

"If you had only been here," exclaimed Nanquan, "I could have saved the cat!" He turned to Schrödinger. "That is the rest of my parable."

"Non-meaning is easy, though," said the physicist. "Anything can mean nothing."

"Everything does mean nothing," said the younger monk.

"That's not quite it," said Nanquan.

Shrugging, the younger monk took the sandal off his head. "But it's all an illusion, isn't it?"

"An illusion of desire masking the truth," said Nanquan.

"An illusion of order masking chaos," said Schrödinger, simultaneously.

At that moment, atop the promontory, impersonal forces of erosion completed a process. This they did without volition, and certainly without regard to the attitudes, behavior, or beliefs of the men below. A large chunk of rock fell away from the cliff-face and plummeted down onto them. It instantly crushed Nanquan, Schrödinger, and the younger monk, pulping muscle and pulverizing bone. The novice monks ran to the scene, choking in gravel-dust, but none of the three could be revived.

High-flown talk means nothing in the face of inevitable death.

The Stray Dogs Learn Their Lesson

Nick Mamatas

Ruff was the strongest, toughest, and the smartest of the stray dogs, so of course he was the leader of the pack. Flopsy, Mopsy, and Chubsie-Ubsie followed his lead in all things—in finding food, in protecting their territory from the other animals of the city, and in evading the evil Man in White, from whose nets and steel truck no dog has ever returned. Ruff explained that the Man in White was called by the humans a “dog catcher”, and that the Man in White killed dogs for the people of the city.

One twilight, after Chubsie-Ubsie, a fat little pit mix, asked why people wanted stray dogs dead even as others got to live in homes and eat dog food and catch Frisbees. Ruff led the pack up to a hill on the edge of the city and bade them to look upon a great gray building with two tall smokestacks that puffed black soot into the sky.

“See that building?” Ruff said. “That’s the power plant. See the lights in the city, like little suns and big stars in the night? They are little fires, and those fires are fueled by the bodies of dead stray dogs.” He held his head high as he explained to the pack, “I am all that stands between you and that fate. The other

dogs have abandoned us. They like to live inside, unnaturally, under the light made from our bodies. They eat food made without hunting. We fuel the machines that make kibble as well.” The dogs shivered in fear, and then Ruff told them that it was time to scavenge for some food, and so the pack did.

Ruff, being the strongest, toughest, and smartest of the stray dogs, needed the most food. It fueled his brains and his muscles, which were all that stood between the pack and the villainy of the Man in White. So when the pack scavenged according to Ruff’s plains, they shared all the food. One pizza crust or chicken bone or dead pigeon for them, one for Ruff. Two for them, and one, two for Ruff. Three for them, and then one, two, three for Ruff. His belly full and large brain tired from all the counting, Ruff would then raise his head high and bark at the airplanes overhead—which were all spies for the Man in White—and perform a special howl that kept the Man in White away, and then the pack would be safe for another evening. Flopsy, Mopsy, and Chubsie-Ubsie were all grateful, if a little hungry.

Chubsie-Ubsie was hungry enough that sometimes when he found some food in the trash, he’d hide a bit of it and split with Ruff unfairly. Rather than three pizza crusts and half-tacos and spoiled burgers for him, and one, then two, then three for Ruff—that’s six! Chubsie-Ubsie realized—he shared his spoils exactly down the middle. Ruff called for a fair trial of the pack.

“I have been stolen from!” Ruff declared. “And worse, so have you two,” he said to Flopsy and Mopsy, who were German Shepherd mixes known for their loyalty and teamwork. “Because Chubsie, who is already fat, wants to keep more for himself, he is making you work harder, and making me suffer. You have to scavenge that much more thoroughly to keep the pack going. And I’m less able to protect you from the Man in White. It’s getting so I can barely howl.” And then Ruff tried to howl, but instead just sputtered and sighed and grumbled about his hunger pains. “We must punish Chubsie-Ubsie before the Man in White captures us and throws us in the ovens that fuel the city!”

“I want to defend myself,” Chubsie-Ubsie said. “I think that we can split the food more evenly. Ruff is stronger and smarter than all of us, but if we all got the same share of food, maybe we’d be a little less hungry, a little sharper, a little stronger—”

“Wait,” Mopsy interrupted. “Are you calling me stupid?”

“Are you calling me scrawny?” Flopsy demanded of Chubsie-Ubsie.

“What I’m saying,” Chubsie-Ubsie began, but he was interrupted again, this time by a blinding light as a van turned in to the alley where the pack was holding its moot.

“It’s the Man in White!” Ruff shouted. “Run!” And the pack forgot its quarrel for now and ran, easily outpacing the dogcatcher and his net. Ruff tore ahead of the pack, despite his weakness and hunger.

Later, when the dogs were safe and had found some water—Ruff drained a whole puddle himself—Flopsy and Mopsy cornered Chubsie-Ubsie.

“Do you see what happened?” Mopsy said. “You almost got us killed with your greed.”

“Yes,” Flopsy said. “If Ruff had been stronger, he could have...” But Flopsy couldn’t finish the thought, for he was tired and hungry.

“He would have what?” Chubsie-Ubsie said. “What does Ruff do? We do most of the scavenging. We do most of the scouting. He eats most of the food. If he could have defeated the Man in White, why didn’t he do so years ago? We made sure Ruff was smart and strong, with a full belly, and Ruff never really fought against the Man in White.”

“You think you can do better?” Mopsy asked.

“Yeah,” Flopsy said. “Do you want to be the pack leader?”

“No,” Chubsie-Ubsie said. “I think we can all work together without giving the top dog most of the food.” Chubsie-Ubsie whispered the rest of his plan, and the Shepherds nodded as he spoke.

Ruff strolled over to the rest of the pack. “What are you all talking about? You should all be scavenging for food. I’m hungry!”

“So am I,” said Mopsy.

“Me too,” said Flopsy. And then they pounced on Ruff. Ruff was big and strong—a huge bulldog, but the Shepherd twins worked together, and when Chubsie-Ubsie joined the fight too, the big dog had to retreat.

“You’ll pay for this!” Ruff said as he ran off, limping and bleeding. And Ruff howled his loudest howl ever. Lights went on all down the street, and somewhere a phone call was made.

“What now?” Flopsy said.

“Yeah,” Mopsy said. “What should we do?”

“Steady, friends,” Chubsie-Ubsie said. “Whatever we do, let’s do it together, as equals. We can all eat our fill in this alley now.” And the three dogs found that without Ruff they all had plenty to eat, and more time to rest.

Then those familiar lights flooded the alleyway again.

“It’s the Man in White!” Flopsy cried.

“He’s going to put us in the ovens!” Mopsy howled. “Chubsie-Ubsie, you’re the top dog now! Chase him away with your howl.”

As the Man in White stepped out of his van with his net, Chubsie-Ubsie stepped forward, like an alpha dog would. He was still much smaller than Ruff, and he didn’t howl. Instead he said, “I’m not a top dog, but I’ll take a chance with the Man in White. You two, remember what we did to Ruff?” And Flopsy and Mopsy did remember.

When the Man in White raised his net and brought it down over Chubsie-Ubsie, Flopsy and Mopsy sprang forth from the shadows and clamped their jaws down on the Man in White’s ankles. He fell even more easily than Ruff did. Chubsie-Ubsie squirmed out of the net and then joined the fight, chomping right on the Man in White’s nose. From the back of the van, a cacophony of howls and yelps and barking erupted.

Flopsy found a key chain on the Man in White’s belt. “Look! Little metal bones!”

Mopsy looked at Chubsie-Ubsie. “I bet those are important.”

Chubsie-Ubsie looked at them. “They are; why else would he carry them?” But Chubsie-Ubsie didn’t know what to make of them.

“Hey!” a voice called from the van. “Bring those things here.” They did, and found a poodle bitch, her snout sticking out between the bars of the window in the back of the van.

“Listen,” the poodle, whose name was Fifi, said. “I’m not a stray. I just ran away from my ‘owner’, who tried to dress me up and make me prance around for the entertainment of men, and who tried to breed me with a dog not of my choice. I know what those are. You can open the door and let us all out with them.” The other dogs yelped and thumped their tails against the steel walls of the van. Fifi talked Chubsie-Ubsie through the use of the keys, and finally found the right one. A storm of happy dogs poured out of the open doors, all asking the same thing: “Now what, now what, now what, now what?”

Now what? Was a good question. The Man in White had been defeated, but there were still plenty of dangers in the city. Even cosmopolitan Fifi said so.

“But,” Chubsie-Ubsie said, “there are plenty of stray dogs too.” And the revolution was born.



The Three Zombies & the Crypt Keeper

Peter Freeman

In the Great Cemetery dwelt three zombies—“lived” would not be the appropriate term. All three were discontented with their lot. The first had been interred in a magnificent mausoleum of polished granite which, while structurally sound, had become covered with graffiti, much of it of a lewd nature. The second had been laid in a tomb of fine Portland stone, but the impact of a falling tree had cracked the lid, subjecting him to uncomfortable draughts and the curious stares of vulgar pedestrians. The third had been buried in a plain grave, but Satanists had stolen the cross for use in their own private rituals, much to his irritation.

Presently, after a night of terrorising the district, the three of them chanced to return to the Great Cemetery at the same time. Seating themselves on a convenient tomb, belonging to somebody who was comprehensively dead, they began to converse.

“This is intolerable,” stated the first. “Will you look at my mausoleum? Even since I left a statement extolling the virtues of a football team has been added to the mess, while good taste forbids me from describing the drawing beneath it.”

“You are fortunate,” countered the second. “Somebody appears to have been using my tomb as a repository for empty cans of alcoholic drink, discarded sweet wrappers and certain articles designed to prevent the unsolicited propagation of the species.”

“My situation is no more regrettable than it was before,” said the third, “but it is plain that we must seek out the crypt keeper.”

This they did, the very next night, somewhat to the alarm of the elderly gentleman responsible for the upkeep of the Great Cemetery, who had no idea the place was infested with zombies. Nevertheless, his was a redoubtable spirit and he had quickly calmed himself with a mug of hot, sweet tea, whereupon the three zombies explained the situation.

“...and that is the long and the short of it,” finished the first zombie. “You must arrange for the graffiti to be cleaned from my mausoleum and patrol the paths with greater regularity.”

“Just so,” agreed the second zombie, “while you must also arrange for the repair of my tomb, and perhaps erect closed circuit television cameras to improve the general security of the premises.”

“I require only the return of my cross,” asked the third, “perhaps accompanied by a brief service of reconsecration.”

The crypt keeper considered their demands for a while and then replied.

“Your requests are by no means unreasonable. However, it must be pointed out that as deceased persons the responsibility for the upkeep of your resting places lies with your families. Do any of you have any living relatives?”

“No doubt,” said the first zombie, “but they are scattered across the world and do not remember me in any case.”

“My case is the same,” stated the second zombie, “for all that I died only fifty years ago and left a large number of descendants.”

“There is no respect for the dead these days,” added the third zombie.

“These are sad circumstances,” continued the crypt keeper, “but it must be that if you wish me to fulfil your requests you yourselves cover the expenditure.”

“How are we to do this?” demanded the first zombie. “We have no possessions beyond the sorry remains of our burial vestments, and as you see, these are not in optimum condition.”

“Nor can we work,” pointed out the second zombie. “People run screaming at the mere sight of us.”

“And besides,” added the third zombie, “bits tend to drop off, frequently at inconvenient moments.”

Again the crypt keeper considered for a while and then replied.

“There is no great difficulty here. You are—if you will excuse what in other circumstances would be an unpardonable personal remark—hideous monstrosities of reeking putrescence. I am therefore able to offer to cover any bills attendant on the work you require so long as you, in return, promise to terrify my son-in-law into a decline. The task will, I imagine, be well within your capabilities, the sole drawback being that he lives five hundred miles away, where he took my precious daughter and now refuses to allow me to visit, this being just one of many reasons I find him objectionable.”

So the matter was agreed. The crypt keeper made the necessary arrangements, the mausoleum of the first zombie was cleaned until the granite glowed with light, the tomb of the second zombie was given a new lid with the appropriate inscriptions replaced and the cross was returned to the grave of the third zombie, who was delighted with the brief, but solemn, service of re-consecration.

Time passed, a week, a month and a year. The three zombies terrorised the district with renewed vigour and would occasionally greet their benefactor with a polite nod if they happened to pass along the paths of the Great Cemetery. At length the crypt keeper decided it was time the three zombies kept their side of the bargain, so he waited for dusk, when they generally rose, with all three seated, he addressed them.

“Well, my friends, it is about time you set off to visit my son-in-law, is it not?”

“Ah,” said the first zombie. “We have been discussing this matter, as it happens, and are agreed that five hundred miles is an inconvenient distance to travel, especially at a mere lurch.”

“Besides,” added the second zombie, “we feel that it is not our place to intrude on what is essentially a family matter.”

“At the very least,” put in the third zombie, “your son-in-law must be allowed to put his case.”

“But what of our agreement!” retorted the crypt keeper. “How will you repay me?”

“We have decided it is easier not to,” the three zombies admitted in unison, “and that in order to avoid any resulting unpleasantness we are going to kill you and eat your brain.”

If you lend money, do not expect gratitude in return.

The Mouse & the Supermall

Dave Gross

The mouse's uncle was the cleverest mouse in the supermall. He always had a scheme, and he taught his niece all he had learned. He led her along secret paths to the piles of food spilled beside the garbage cans. He taught her how to slip into the kitchens after the cooks had sealed their metal doors for the night. Inside, he showed her how to gnaw the corner of a box until its sweet treasure poured out.

Together they taught their cousins what her uncle had learned, and the mice thrived.

As she studied her uncle's lessons, the mouse noticed that fewer and fewer people came to the mall. When she was born, the food court was full of trampling feet all day and long into the night. The crowds grew smaller with each passing month, until one day she watched as a lone family meandered through the empty tables of the food court. When they had gone, she and her uncle crept out to lick at the drops of ice cream the child dribbled on the floor.

Her uncle welcomed the change. "There will be no one to point and scream at us during the day," he said. "There will be

no one to clean up the spilled food. We will do as we like, and no one will stop us."

But in this her uncle was mistaken. Some of the closed shops were the ones that held food. There were fewer garbage cans each night, and hardly any spills. The people who ran the shops took away their stores, including the boxes of sweet treasure. Even though they could scamper across the open floor in daylight, the mouse and her uncle found less and less food.

Still, the mouse's uncle was clever, and he always had a scheme. He found ways into locked pantries and under metal compartments concealing bags of sugar, boxes of nectar, mounds of noodles, and even pickled vegetables.

Her uncle showed her how to avoid the poison and traps that the cooks left behind. Together they taught all of the other mice as well. Despite the dwindling supply, the mice thrrove.

One day men came with wire cages. Inside were the most terrible beasts the mouse had ever seen. Her uncle called them cats and said they were made to catch and devour mice. When the men released them, the cats raced down every corridor and sniffed at every cubbyhole.

What came next was a terrible slaughter.

Everywhere they went, the mouse and her uncle found the blood stains and tufts of fur where their cousins had died. Mourning the dead and fearful of their own lives, they slunk back into their nests, where the cats were too big to follow.

The mouse's uncle considered the problem all night. In the morning he said, "Follow me. I have a clever scheme."

The mouse followed him up the drapes and along a slanting beam to the ceiling. From the floor below, a fat yellow tabby hissed. It leaped up, caught the drapes in its long, curving claws, and climbed. When it reached the beam, it dashed along the incline faster than any mouse could run.

"Hurry!" The mouse's uncle jumped onto a wire supporting a shop banner. The mouse followed, and soon they were on the other side. Looking back, they saw the angry cat batting at the wire that was too narrow to hold him.

For days they traveled far above the floor. The fat yellow tabby remained nearby, watching them as they scampered across the wires and high beams near the heavy glass skylights. Traveling this high path, they could reach the shops with food without fear of the cats. Again, the mouse's uncle taught his cousins what he had learned, and the mice throve.

One day the mouse spied an enormous owl perched among the beams. She froze in the middle of climbing the chain of a suspended light.

"Don't worry," said her uncle. "It is not real. The men set them all over the mall to scare away other birds."

"This one moved," said the mouse.

Her uncle looked again. This time he saw the reflection of the moonlight in the real owl's eyes as it looked down at the cats prowling the floor.

"What will we do?" said the mouse. "We cannot forage on the floor, and now we cannot forage above it!"

"Don't worry," said her uncle. "I have a clever scheme."

On the next day, when they smelled the cat waiting outside their nest, the mouse's uncle said in his loudest voice, "Can you believe the pride of that owl? Just because the cat cannot fly!"

The cat growled and slunk away.

That night, they crept up near the ceiling and huddled in a narrow corner. When the owl silently appeared on its usual perch, the mouse's uncle said in his loudest voice, "Can you believe the nerve of that cat? To say that one day he would climb up and eat that owl!"

The owl screeched and glided away.

"What next?" asked the mouse.

"Now it is only a matter of time," said her uncle, rubbing his pink fingers together.

Two nights later the mice watched as the cat lapped water from a fountain. When it saw the owl's reflection in the water, it leaped just in time to avoid the bird's talons. The cat clung to the owl's body. They battled in the air, hissing and shrieking,

wing against claw, until they crashed together against the glowing panel of a bubble tea machine.

They lay on the floor for a moment, stunned by the impact. The cat leaped at the owl before it could take to the air. The owl bashed the cat with its wings, knocking it to the floor. The cat pounced and set its teeth into the bird's leg.

Watching the fight, the mouse's uncle laughed louder than his loudest voice. He held his furry belly with both hands. "This is better than I'd hoped!"

The mouse was too afraid to laugh. She had never seen so much blood or heard such a clamor. It reminded her of the remains of her cousins.

In an instant, the fight stopped. Neither cat nor owl had triumphed. They crouched, bloody and panting as they watched each other for the next attack.

"Oh, it's too good!" cried her uncle, weeping with laughter. "They are both so stupid!"

The cat and owl turned at the same time. They looked straight at the mouse's uncle.

The mouse crept back, too frightened to speak. Her uncle rubbed his wet eyes, opening them just in time to see the owl descend from above as the cat dashed in from the side. He had time to emit one last squeak before half of him flew up to the ceiling while the other half danced in the cat's jaws.

The mouse crept back to the nest. She wept for her lost uncle, but she never forgot his last lesson: It's all very well to set your enemies against each other, but never let them hear you laugh about it.

The Goat Who Wished to Go to Market

Genevieve Valentine

Once upon a time, a goat wished to go to market. “Why shouldn’t I sell my milk, if I choose?” she thought. “The Farmer takes it from me, and keeps the profits from my labor. I should go myself.”

The chickens frowned at one another.

“That’s out of our place,” they said. “Imagine if all of us went to sell our eggs! There’s a reason the Farmer gathers them before he goes to market. She’ll find nothing but trouble.” And they settled into their nests and sighed, “Poor thing.”

The ducks on the pond shook their heads.

“She’ll never manage,” they said. “Going to market is awful work; the Farmer is always wrung out, whenever he goes there with our brothers.” And they dove under the water, satisfied it was a terrible idea.

But the next market day, long before it was light, the goat headed down the market path all alone.

“We never heard such a brazen thing,” said the pigs.

The Farmer’s old horse said, “I suspect we’ll meet her on the road. It’s a long way to market and her legs are quite short.”

But the old farm horse didn't see her.

In fact, no one saw her; when she finally came home, it was so late only the Farmer's spaniel was still awake.

When he came out to herd her back home, he saw she had a small bag around her neck, swinging heavy with coins, and looked mightily satisfied from a day of trade.



The next day, the farmyard erupted with the news.

“Disgusting!” cried the pigs.

“Impossible!” came the ducks.

“Bad business!” cried the chickens.

And the animals held a meeting to discuss what was to be done.

(The spaniel refused to go; the old farm horse stayed off to one side, glancing occasionally at the goat shed with a guilty look.)

“This can't go on,” said the ducks. “Imagine what would happen if the old ewe decided to sell her own wool! Then where would the Farmer be?”

“She can't sell her own milk!” said the chickens.

“There will be chaos!” said the pigs. “Rules must be laid down so every animal knows her place.”

And they summoned the animals to a vote.



The spaniel woke the goat.

“You'll want to see this,” he said, and led her to the farmyard, where the others were gathered.

“So it's decided,” the oldest pig was calling. “No animal shall sell anything at market!”

“A vote?” cried the goat, “I have not had my say.”

“It doesn't matter,” said the oldest pig. “Only two voted against it.”

The spaniel and the old farm horse looked very unhappy.

“Why should this be?” asked the goat.

The chickens said, “Because it puts an awful burden on us all to be like you, which is very unfair!”

“Who has asked you to do so? I went because I wished.”

“But how long would the Farmer go to market if his animals were willing?” said the ducks. “Soon he would be sitting at home and never working again to make us comfortable and fed!”

“The Farmer cleared the forest, and broke rocks from the ground to grow our food,” said the spaniel. “He burns leaves in summer to keep away the flies and the little poison spiders that might plague us. He made a good home.”

“The Farmer is happy to take care of animals who don’t wish to do business for themselves,” agreed the goat. “But those who wish it should be allowed to try!”

“And leave poor Farmer with a handful of animals and no way to survive from their labors?” The pig shook his head. “Just the way a she-goat would think. Don’t you see, it’s for the Farmer’s sake we must set these rules.”

And the vote was cast that no animal should go to market on their own behalf, though the spaniel and the farm horse and the goat looked very grave.



For a week there was nothing said about the matter.

The goat gave milk to the Farmer; the chickens settled into their roosts; the ducks pecked the water, and the pigs lay in the sun, pleased that all was back to rights.

But early the next market-day, the goat took the road.

The spaniel, if he had seen her, told no one, and the farm horse, if he passed her on the road, said nothing, and it wasn’t until she came home at nightfall with a flashing eye that the other animals saw she had defied them.

“What is this?” the chickens asked. “How could you defy our law and still call yourself our friend?”

“I have not done wrong,” the goat argued. “The law is unjust. Besides, I have enough now to buy my freedom from the Farmer, and your laws shall have no power over me!”

“Not even a poison spider is as deadly as you!” cried the oldest pig, and sent his son to scream outside the goat shed until the

Farmer came to see what the matter was, and discover the money hidden behind the water pail.



The Farmer was overjoyed with his good fortune. He scooped the money into his arms, and ran to tell his wife what good grace had befallen them.

The animals were pleased with themselves. Without any profit, the goat had been put back in her right place. She spent the rest of the day in her shed, and they all went to sleep assured she would say no more about this business.

All except the old farm horse who kept watch for strangers on the road, and the spaniel, who waited for the goat, and showed her the way into the Farmer's house.



When the Farmer woke, oh, he was dismayed! His money, which had come so easily, was gone—and gone too were his goat, and his farm horse, and even his spaniel!

Though he had a yard full of animals who needed his care and cried out for him as he left them, he set out at once on the road, determined to find what he had lost and kill the man who took it.

He never found them; he looked all through the summer until the first snowfall, when he returned to his lands and found that in his search for what he had lost, he had not been at home to burn the leaves that kept his animals safe, and poison spiders had stung them all to death.

But the goat and the spaniel and the old farm horse had left the unjust farm behind, and set out to find a land, or make a home, where every animal was shown respect, and laws were fair and for the benefit of all. And they found one at last, and lived very happy; and that it is good to be loyal to those who are just, if you would hope to find happiness yourself, is the moral of this story.

The Minotaurs & the Signal Ghosts

Peter M. Ball

Once upon a time, way back in the day, the Minotaurs weren't like they are now. Instead they were big and bad as hell, and they ran with a guy, Horns, who got himself grafted in a big-city clinic on his mother's credit. Not a smart guy, all things considered, but he wasn't no-one to be messed with, and the Minotaurs done good under his leadership, good enough to claim all the blocks by the river, right up ta the bridge where the Lizards' turf begins.

Now some of that goes to the Minotaurs, sure, on account of them recruiting 'em big, mean, and ready to fight, but some comes down to Horns' work too. He's a big guy, and tough as hell, and he doesn't shy away when it's time to make a mess of some other fella's guts. An' it ain't long before he's feared, and the Minotaurs are feared right along with him.

Now in those days the Signal Ghosts weren't like you think either. They were smaller and secret, the kind of gang that picked out the runts of the litter, and they didn't bother with any of the streets on the surface 'cause they spent all their time mapping the wrecking of the railway tunnels. No-one really gave them two minutes thought, and when we did we figured they were

chickenshit, or weirdos who didn't like the sun, so we let 'em keep the underground and fought for the places that mattered.

Only one day Horns isn't happy knowing there's someone out there who doesn't piss themselves when they hear his name, so Horns gets together a posse and takes his boys into the dark, following the old D line, leadin' this expeditionary force that's more like a small army when you start payin' attention. They follow the tracks until they find an old station the Ghosts are using as a crib, all secure and well-lit and shined up real nice. And Horns thinks, yeah, this place ain't bad, so he walks out into the middle of platform and calls out their leader to introduce himself, all official-like. "Time to clear out your people," he says, all knuckles and snarls and unsubtle threats. "The tunnels near the river are Minotaur turf. You got two hours to clear out 'fore we start breaking heads."

"Whatever you say," the head Signal Ghost says, all calm and pretty as you please, and he leads his people deeper in, following the tracks and the signals through the wreckage of the tunnels.

And for a time Horns is happy with that, sitting there in the splendor that once belonged to the Ghosts. He tells his boys to go crazy, so they piss in the fountain and tag the walls, making a real mess of everything the Ghosts built. And after a while it ain't fun no more, so they start going a little deeper, seeing what's there, and when they push their way through the rubble-filled tunnels they find themselves another station the Ghosts have done-up real nice, all painted and shiny and equipped with generators to keep the lights running.

"Well shoot," Horns says, "this is much nicer than what we got," and so he walks out into the middle of the Ghosts again and makes his demands. "Two hours to get out or we start breaking heads," he says, and once again the Signal Ghosts choose to leave their home behind.

Only this time the Minotaurs ain't quite so happy about their digs, especially once they're done with the pissing and the tagging. They're deeper underground, for starters, and the tunnels aren't easy to get through. An' the old station stairs leading up the surface

got broken during the quake, so everyone has to climb using ropes and raw muscle. Even Horns ain't pleased to be there, getting reports about the noises coming out of the tunnels, but he's proud and dumb and unwilling to show fear, so he tells his boys they're staying and sets himself up a throne, and since Horns ain't exactly the kind of guy who listens to complaints, the best the Minotaurs can do is grumble and moan and bitch.

An' then the rumors start about the new place the Ghosts have set up, a big lair right out in the middle of the big ol' Central exchange, the king-daddy station that makes the rest look tiny, and Horns starts thinking and fretting about the Ghosts having something that they Minotaurs don't, about how bad it's going to look if word gets out they're living large after the Minotaurs ran 'em off. So he gathers his boys together and he selects himself a posse, and together they head into the deep tunnels, the ones worst-hit during the quake, where only the Signal Ghosts really know what's what.

And it ain't easy for the Minotaurs to go that deep, not like it is for the Ghosts. The Minotaurs picked their boys for muscle, brought in the biggest and the strongest to join up and fight, an' the Ghosts were always thin and small, the kind of boys who could squeeze through the rubble of the wrecked tunnels. All of the Minotaurs know it's a bad call, but that don't stop Horns at all and none of his boys are willing to complain, so they stumble through the dark and fight through narrow gaps, losing skin and gaining bruises every step of the way.

An' then they start hitting intersections, tunnels that go off to the left and the right, or places where there's even more than that, places where it's easy to get lost. Places where a wall fell down or a sewer main broke, whole tunnels that get flooded and force the Minotaurs to retrace their steps.

And it's round then that the Ghosts start picking the Minotaurs off, throwing knives and rocks from hiding places in the dark, disappearing fast once they've bloodied someone up. The dark don't bother them none, see, 'cause the Ghosts got used to the dark, and the tunnels don't bother them none, either, 'cause the

Ghosts are small and know their way and slide through the narrow gaps all pretty as you please. An' sure, the Minotaurs get one or two, torture 'em plenty to try and get the secrets of the tunnels and find a way out, but you can't follow a Ghost down there 'cause they disappear 'round a corner and never come back, an' you can't stay put 'cause the other Ghosts come to distract you and your prisoner disappears while you're trying to stop your boys from bleeding.

So Horns' boys aren't happy about this development, and one of them finally gets the guts to mention it to their leader, and Horns shouts down their complaints like it's no big thing. "They're just a bunch of skinny Ghosts," he says, his nostrils all flarey with anger, "skinny little punks with rusty knives who live in caves that smell like piss. If they can get around down here, than so can we."

An' he keeps his boys moving, going further and further in, and every time he turns around, Horns finds he ain't got as many boys as he remembered startin' out. An' even this don't stop him, so he keeps on looking for the Ghost's Grand Central, 'til even Horns can't ignore the fact that he's hungry and tired and sick of the dark. He tries to turn his posse back, finding their way to the surface, an' the Ghosts keep hitting 'em 'til there ain't none but Horns left walking.

An' it's hard for Horns to feel big and tough, walking through the dark all on his own, especially when he can hear the wet slap of Signal Ghost feet echoing through the tunnels. An' for a while he thinks there's nothing worse than that, listening to his enemies follow him through dark, but it turns out he's plenty wrong 'bout that too, 'cause eventually the Ghosts stop following him and leave him all alone, just a big strong Minotaur 'banger wandering through the old tunnels, alone and lost in the twisted mess and wishing he could find a way home.

An' they say he's down there still, living on rats and sewer water, trying to find his way out, but I don't think the Ghost's have that kind of mercy and Horns' never had that kind of smarts. 'Cause it's a smart man who chooses not to fight a Ghost on its own turf, and the Minotaurs learned that the hard way, way back in the day.

The Rats & the Cockroaches

Julie McArthur

Domesticated rats Pegasus and his wife Calpernia lived above a sandwich shop, where their human always left their cage open, allowing them to run freely in the bedroom and beyond.

Calpernia kept a fine home in a bottom dresser drawer. She spent her days chewing up cloth for nesting. When their food dish was empty, Pegasus took on the role of provider. His wife would be more than happy to forage through the flat for goodies, but her eyesight was terrible.

She held a piece of denim in her dainty claws, tearing into it with her yellowed front teeth. “Get on now, Peg,” she said, breaking from her work to nose him in his side. “We heard noises in the kitchen earlier; surely there must be a few crumbs worth collecting.”

“Yes, my love,” Pegasus said before sidling through a hole and dropping to the hardwood. He stretched his left foot onto the hallway laminate. “Oh,” he moaned, “it’s cold.” He took a deep breath and scurried along the baseboard towards the kitchen. He paused halfway and peered into the inky black. Often the stove light was left on, but not this evening. An encounter with the light-fearing creatures was imminent.

Passing the bathroom, he heard a gurgling hiss from the toilet's tank—a sound that made his coat wriggle up and down his spine. Using his tail for balance, he stood and gave a sniff. The creatures' indescribable stench permeated the cool air. Cockroaches!

As he crossed the kitchen threshold he could see the entire floor was an undulating black mass. He wanted to run back to Calpernia. She didn't know how horrid they could be.

Pegasus scratched his nails back and forth on the tiles until all was still. "You needn't mind me," he said. Henchmen circled.

"Mind you?" Their leader, Relic, spat. "We abhor you."

The sea of black parted as Pegasus scampered through to the pantry cupboard.

"You have cushy pet status," the leader said, "yet you still have to fend for yourselves. Wild rats do better."

"Every once in a while our human forgets—"

"Forgets? Relic scoffed. "That pisthead can't take care of himself. And when he sees what your old lady has done to his clothes you'll be no better off than a couple of feeders."

Pegasus cringed. Many relatives at the pet store had been sold as snake food. "You leave my wife alone," he said.

"Who, that pink-eyed, infertile freak?" Relic laughed. "Two years here and no offspring. We are multiplying as I speak. Doomed you are."

Pegasus could think of no witty retort and thought it best to disengage. He scanned the floor—a thousand antennae taunting—and found a seed, a carrot peeling, and something he didn't recognize. He pushed them into his mouth. The vibration of movement that surrounded him made his heart pound.

"Failures!" a chorus rang out, as he darted back across the kitchen and down the hallway to the bedroom.

Calpernia was waiting in the drawer. "How did you fare?" she asked. Pegasus spit out his findings and sighed.

"The creatures ... they say ... they say," he spluttered. "They know about our nest and say our human will feed us to the—"

"Hush, listen."

Heavy footsteps sounded up the stairs.

Pegasus dove out the hole and hid behind the dresser's leg to scout. He could hear talk of creatures as his human led two other men, dressed in gray coveralls and carrying toolboxes, past the bedroom. Rubber masks hung loose around their necks. Pegasus clawed his way back up through the hole and held fast to Calpernia.

“Oh, no, we’re doomed!” Pegasus whined.

She soothingly washed his fur. Footsteps entered the room.

The rats fell sideways as their drawer was yanked open. Warm hands embraced the pair as they were gently transported to their cage, where a ceramic bowl of nibbles sat nestled in fresh wood shavings. They felt a gentle sway as the cage was picked up and then wrapped in a blanket. Pegasus and Calpernia could smell the outside world as their human descended the stairs.

“We’re being saved!” cried Pegasus.

“You, see?” said Calpernia. “Negativity breeds negativity.”

Bored To Fu

Monica Valentinelli

Caprice Topolino lived in a posh mouse hole nestled in a penthouse suite. This particular socialite often threw luxurious parties filled with laughter, fine cheeses, and stunning celebrities (including a few cats and a world-renowned romantic skunk) from every corner of micedom. In fact, no mouse could declare they weren't envious of Caprice's glamorous life — all except for her.

"*Che vita, I am bored! Day in and day out, I shop for vino, formaggio, and pane,*" she complained loudly one morning as she strolled down the Rue du Camembert toward the train station. "Party, party, party. Is there nothing else for me to do?"

"Pardon, *signorina*. I need talk you."

"What? Who's there?" Caprice whirled around and came face to face with a strange-looking creature with no fur. His scaly skin glistened and his red eyes glowed like a glass of the aristocrat's favorite wine. Caprice assumed he was a hairless mouse. It was safer that way.

"Do you work Fat Dragon Cafe?" The mouse's accent sounded odd. Caprice could not place which corner of micedom he hailed from.

“No, *signore*. I do not.”

“Are sure?” He smelled like burnt cinnamon.

“I am certain,” Caprice said, confused. She couldn’t remember the last time she had a *job*. “Why do you ask?”

The other mouse tilted his head in a way that made him seem older than he looked. Then, he stated something Caprice could not ignore. “Sorry, but couldn’t help notice how unhappy you were.”

The word “unhappy” forced Caprice to squirm. The truth was: she felt neither happy nor sad. She simply drowned in boredom.

“Bah, I’m a little disinterested. It’s nothing.” Caprice shrugged off her confession, but knew that the damage had already been done. The other mouse now knew the one secret she hadn’t dared tell anyone else.

“My name Fu-Xiang, but you can call me Mr. Fu.” He handed her a blue business card and inclined his head. “At your service.”

Caprice glanced down to read the card’s description.



THE HONORABLE FU-XIANG

Boredom Remover Specialist

Good service. Great benefits.



“Boredom remover?” The socialite rolled her eyes and whirled around to tell him to pester some other mouse. Then, she pictured herself smiling and at peace. “I wonder...”

“Will you agree to service?”

Before she had a chance to think, Caprice whispered: “No.”

Mr. Fu grinned, showing off a set of yellow teeth. “Work for me, Caprice Topolino. Work, and not be bored.”

“But that’s ...” Work? At a *café*? Was Mr. Fu crazy?

“Close eyes.”

“I have guests coming over...” Caprice continued to protest, but it was obvious Mr. Fu was not listening, so she reluctantly obeyed.

When she re-opened her eyes, the aristocrat found herself standing in the middle of a very crowded, noisy café. Oh, the smell of fresh gouda and asiago enticed her so!

“Work for me, Caprice. Work and reward.”

The hairless mouse was so insistent, Caprice barely registered that Mr. Fu’s smoky eyes darkened and his skin began to crack.

Hypnotized by the café’s charm, the socialite finally gave in and ignored her instincts. “Yes, this looks fun! *Molto bene!*”

Mr. Fu clapped his hands with glee. “Good fun!”

“Where do I start?”

“Here,” Mr. Fu said, handing her a soapy bucket. “Mop floor.”

Caprice had never dirtied her hands before. “Guess it’s time for that to change,” she muttered.

After she scrubbed the floor, the little mouse wiped down the windows, did the dishes, and cleaned the toilets. By the end of the day, the socialite could barely stand, but she felt something strange, something new. She was *happy*.

“I’d like to serve coffee tomorrow,” Caprice confessed to her new boss. “Can I go now? I have a house full of guests.”

Mr. Fu’s yellow teeth gleamed. “No home, need service.”

“But, I don’t understand...”

“Serve!” With every step Mr. Fu took, his body twisted and changed. Paws became long, winding claws. Wrinkled, furless skin morphed into glittery red scales. And the eyes, oh the eyes! Beady red pupils swirled into twin pools of fire.

“Oh my!” Startled by the sight of a large dragon, Caprice hopped up and sprinted toward the door.

“What matter? You happy now?” Mr. Fu called after her.

It was locked.

“Yes, b-b-b-b-but...”

“Back.” The dragon nudged Caprice out of the way and snorted. The wind generated from his giant nostrils gently nudged the door open so the mouse could leave.

“I d-d-d-don’t understand.” Confused, Caprice inched toward the exit. What was she expected to do? Should she run home or thank Mr. Fu for helping her? “Who are you?”

The shiny red dragon grinned and pointed at the wall. A gilded sign read:



Fat Dragon Cafe
THE HONORABLE FU-XIANG
Sole Proprietor
(And God of Productivity)



Caprice Topolino returned the dragon's smile. She finally understood Mr. Fu's message. "Thank you for the reminder."

"You're welcome," he said, licking his lips. A hungry fire burned in his eyes. "Back tomorrow? Need more service. Stomach empty."

The socialite laughed and said: "No, I have a party to plan. My dinner party will be better than ever!"

"Too bad," said the dragon. "Your work tasted good."

"Yes," Caprice shouted as she scampered out the door. "It will!"



The Poison-Well

Molly Tanzer

A shrewmouse ambled outside one morning in early summer intending to smoke his pipe in the sunshine when he happened to see his neighbor Mr. Mole at the border shared by their two estates. That was unusual in and of itself; Mr. Mole was a creature of the twilight—and a solitary one, as well—but there he was, in broad daylight, and deep in conversation with a doodlebug. Their tête-à-tête was so animated the shrewmouse could hear exclamations from where he stood, and as he was (it must be confessed) rather territorial, he decided to join them to see what was in the wind—and shoo them out of earshot if he could.

“I say, what’s all this hullabaloo?” asked the shrewmouse, producing a pack of lucifers from his waistcoat and lighting his Oom Paul. “Rum thing, to be working this beautiful forenoon. If ever there was a day made for quiet relaxation, what?”

“Oh, Mr. Shrewmouse! I am sorry if we disturbed you,” replied the mole politely, tugging the brim of his apple cap. “Have you met Mr. Doodlebug? He is an expert in the art of dowsing and is helping me find where best to sink a well on

my property. It is such a long walk to the river, you know, and ever since Ms. Owl nested in that willow, I have been nervous venturing there in the gloaming."

This speech annoyed the shrewmouse immensely. He knew that the sounds of construction would permeate the walls of his burrow for heaven knew how long, and at the end of it all he would have Mr. Mole coming obnoxiously close to his dwelling several times daily for water.

But he was (it must be confessed) also annoyed he had not thought of the idea for himself.

"Risky move," said the shrewmouse, hoping to discourage the mole. "Bunk science, dowsing. Waste of time and money."

He was gratified to see Mr. Mole wring his paws and fumble for his handkerchief.

"Do you really—*sniff*—think so?" he squeaked, mopping his runny star-nose and turning from the shrewmouse to the doodlebug.

"If you think I might be a charlatan or flimflammer I appreciate your concern for your neighbor," said the doodlebug, "but it is unwarranted. I shall not collect payment until water is found."

"Suit yourself," said the shrewmouse. "My only worry is for your health. Wet air is notoriously bad for moles."

"You are too kind," said the mole, wringing his paws again. "I assure you I shall be careful. And, once it is built, I do hope you will take up water any time you are wanting it!"

"To the devil with your well, your water—and with you!" cried the shrewmouse, and stalked off in high dudgeon.

It hardly seems possible that the shrewmouse could have grown *more* hostile to Mr. Mole's endeavor—or to Mr. Mole himself—but when he saw that the well-building effort seemed destined for success the shrewmouse did everything he could think of to prevent its completion. Though he normally eschewed company, he frequented the well-site and made disparaging comments, and he spread a rumor around the village that the mole's digging would likely bring down a mudslide upon their heads when the

rains came. But all was for naught: the well-building continued. Dreadful noise came through the walls of his burrow, just as he had suspected, and animals visited Mr. Mole daily to watch or help, stomping and squealing and carrying on dreadfully. Then one morning Mr. Beaver came over with wood for the wellhead, and the sound of hammering was added to the row.

Building the wellhead was the final stage of the project, and as the well neared completion the scuttlebutt around the village was that Mr. Mole intended to break a bottle of Veuve Cliquot over the crank as a celebration. When he heard this, the shrewmouse sneered aloud that those wealthy enough to afford good Champagne would do better to treat the less fortunate to a sip instead of wasting it. Thus, he was surprised when the next afternoon someone came a-knocking at his door—and he found Mr. Mole on his doorstep.

“Ah, Mr. Shrewmouse,” he squeaked nervously. “This evening I am hosting a small party … my well is finished. I know you have not much liked the idea of it, but now that it is done, and very handsome—if I do say so myself—I thought perhaps your mind had changed? Will you come?”

“If your blasted well drew up a gourmet dinner every day, I would never touch a morsel of it!” cried the shrewmouse, and slammed the door in Mr. Mole’s face, determined to drink whisky by himself until he could drink no more whisky.

Hours later, the shrewmouse awoke in the middle of the night, so parched he could not bear it. Alas, for the carafe was dry, and the river far! Alas for the presence of Ms. Owl, whose fledglings had recently eaten all of Mrs. Mouse’s litter when they were out playing by the riverbank!

Desperate, dry-mouthed, and (it must be confessed) finally seeing the wisdom of Mr. Mole’s plan, the shrewmouse scurried outside—and under cover of darkness, stole up to the well. He could smell Champagne and slipped on the butt of a cigar that had been cast carelessly on the ground. But he had no life in him to curse the merry-makers—he needed water, and drew up a bucketful.

The water was clear and sweet and cold and so good it made Mr. Shrewmouse weep for joy, and not just because he usually became quite emotional when hungover. It was the most delicious water the shrewmouse had ever imbibed, and he drank until he thought he would burst, and then drank some more.

Perhaps if the shrewmouse had gone and apologized to the mole the rest of this story would not be so sad—but he did not, and so it is.



After that night, the shrewmouse made a habit of sneaking up to the well to drink when he thought himself unobserved, but the mole, frequently wakeful into the wee hours, soon noticed. This did not sit well with him. He had, after all, suffered the aspersions and curses of his neighbor for quite a while, and time and again had been forced to account for the safety and wisdom of his well-building to village creatures worried by Mr. Shrewmouse's rumor-spreading. A hatred for the shrewmouse even more vitriolic than the shrewmouse's hatred for him took root in his heart. He, after all, had dug the well until his paws were bloody and his back ached and his nose was clogged with dirt; he had been polite in the face of rudeness—and for what? To have that churlish shrewmouse befoul his well-bucket with his uncivil mouth night after night? Never!



The mole resolved to rid himself of his vexing neighbor once and for all. To this end he snuck over the hill to where the human creatures dwelt, and stole rat poison from their shed. When next he saw Mr. Shrewmouse nip off to the pub for a pint, he spread the powder all over the inside of the bucket. He then scurried over to a close-by walnut copse owned by those same human creatures, and sprinkled the poison around the trees for a purpose that shall become apparent shortly.



When the shrewmouse stumbled home that evening he was very thirsty from all the beer he had drunk, and so lowered the well-bucket and drew up a draught. Taking a deep gulp, he began to froth and convulse. He died none too quickly from the poison, and in horrible pain.



The mole observed everything from his window. When it was all over, he returned Mr. Shrewmouse's corpse to his burrow, laying the shrewmouse beside his kitchen-table. On the table he put a walnut shell laced with poison, and giggled to himself. Then he headed home, washed the well-bucket carefully, and set it out so it would dry in the sun.



Several days later, the shrewmouse was discovered. The news spread quickly: the humans' sentiments regarding the taking of fallen walnuts had changed without warning, and Mr. Shrewmouse had been the casualty of their cruel selfishness. Mr. Mole expressed more indignation than anyone regarding this outrage, and bought several rounds of drinks at the pub to toast Mr. Shrewmouse's memory.

All that beer and whisky made Mr. Mole very thirsty, so when he came home that night, he decided to have a nice long drink from his well. Alas for him, his plan had failed to account for one thing: Mr. Shrewmouse had, of course, dunked the poisoned bucket into the well to draw up the fatal mouthful, and the poison had fouled the sweet water. As soon as the mole drank a few gulps he realized his error, and died in terrible pain, all alone, and knowing it was by his own hand.

The Squirrel & the Pigeons

Susannah Dainow

I.

Amalia lived alone in the city. A goldfish lived with her. So did an orchid plant that bloomed twice a year.

Amalia painted. And drew. And made collages. And papier-maché. Anything she could do with colour and paper and glue, she did.

Amalia had a job in an office.

That part isn't important.

Amalia spent most of her time by herself, making things. She liked making things. But she didn't always like being alone.

Early in the mornings, Amalia went to the park and fed the pigeons breadcrumbs. Sometimes, she would sigh without hearing herself.

Most city people think pigeons are dirty or a nuisance, but Amalia liked them. She looked at their shiny feathers and got ideas for paintings. And she listened to them coo and felt like she was having a conversation. Amalia sometimes spent hours with the pigeons without realizing it.

II.

Seth lived alone in the city, except for his cat, Sonnet.

Seth liked words. He liked to look them up and find out what they mean. He liked how they felt in his brain and in his mouth. He would mix them up, string them into sentences and paragraphs, and write them down. He wrote mostly about things that don't exist. Seth spent most of his time by himself, mixing up words like spells.

In the mornings Seth went to work in an office.

That part isn't important.

Sometimes in the afternoons, when he was tired or sad, Seth would go to the park and feed the squirrels. He brought them nuts and seeds and bits of fruit.

Most city people think squirrels are dirty or annoying, but not Seth. He liked their alert eyes and furry tails, and the way they chattered to each other. He liked to pretend he understood squirrel, and make up the conversations they were having. Sometimes he brought a notebook and wrote while the squirrels chattered around him.

Other times, he watched the squirrels and sighed without realizing it.

III.

In the park, a squirrel struck up a conversation with a pigeon, “Dear pigeon, where did you find such a tender breadcrumb?”

“Why, from the human who feeds us in the mornings,” the pigeon replied with his mouth full. “And where did you acquire such a meaty nut?”

“Why, from the human who feeds us in the afternoons,” answered the squirrel.

“They are curious, the humans,” mused the pigeon. “I do not understand their ways. The woman who feeds us always comes alone, and sometimes she makes this strange, sad sound, like—” And here the pigeon did his best imitation of a human sigh, a low whooshing coo.

"The man who feeds us also comes alone and also makes that noise," the squirrel nodded.

"They must be good, kind humans," said the pigeon. "They speak to us."

"Yes, and look at how they feed us!" agreed the squirrel. "They are very much alike, though they do not know each other."

"Perhaps we could... introduce them?"

"But they never come at the same time."

"Yes, that is a difficulty." The pigeon gave a trilled coo of frustration.

Suddenly, the squirrel stood on her hind legs and flicked the air with her tail.

"What if the pigeons did not partake of the woman's breadcrumbs one day, feigning full stomachs? Perhaps then she would return in the afternoon and meet the man of nuts and seeds!"

"Perhaps... perhaps she would!"

"Tomorrow, then, you will not eat of your human's breadcrumbs. She may return in the afternoon to try again. Then—"

"Your human is present," finished the pigeon.

"Yes. So tomorrow you will come and eat with us when the man arrives. We await him in the evergreen glade, not far from benches where the woman feeds you."

"She will hear us in the woods and will follow our sound, walking unknowingly towards him—"

"Until they meet!" The pigeon nearly squawked in excitement.

"We must return to our homes and tell the others of this plan. How grand it would be to feast on bread, nuts, and seeds together!"

And the pigeon and the squirrel hurried home to make preparations.

IV.

Amalia came to the park with breadcrumbs. She waited by the benches until she was late, but did not see so much as a feather.

On her way home, Amalia decided she needed more fresh air

in the park. She did not admit to herself that she hoped to meet the pigeons, but it was true.

At this time, Seth walked toward the park's small glade of evergreens, sack of sunflower seeds in hand. He liked to watch the squirrels' tiny fists pry open the seeds.

He was surprised to find not only squirrels but a flock of pigeons waiting for him. But Seth didn't mind more company.

Amalia didn't see pigeons at the benches, but she heard coos in the distance. She followed her ears to where pine needles covered the grassy ground. The cooing got louder. She heard something else too: chitter-chatter, like high-pitched small talk.

She peered into the glade and saw a man engrossed in feeding squirrels and pigeons. She could hear him talking in a low voice.

He turned around abruptly. Both of them were stunned.

"I'm sorry, I don't normally talk to squirrels," he said, recovering.

"Really? That's too bad. I think you should," she replied. "I've just come in search of the pigeons I talk to, but it seems like you've got them too."

He laughed.

"I can share," he said. "So can they."

"They're getting along?"

"Better than I suspected. Please, join us." And he stepped aside and made a place for her under the evergreens.

V.

Seth and Amalia didn't want to go home because they couldn't stop talking. They walked around the park a dozen times before they realized they were going in circles. Then they got ice cream in sugar cones from the ice cream truck. Then they sat in the grass and counted stars.

Then Seth said, "We're exactly halfway to your house. I should turn back."

"But there are things to show you there," said Amalia, who wasn't quite sure what those things were.

"Alright," Seth said.

The first thing Seth noticed at Amalia's apartment was how much he wanted to know about her. He wanted to know everything about the goldfish, the orchid plant, the kind of coffee maker she used.

And he wanted to know about the art. Paintings, collages, drawings spilled everywhere, dripped down the walls and onto the floor in piles, as though not their colours but the artworks themselves were running. Running through the apartment, running through Amalia.

Seth felt overwhelmed. And grateful. And like he needed to go home before the spell was broken. Maybe this was just a story he was writing and he'd fallen in.

He wanted to tell Amalia stories, all the stories.

But what he said was, "It's getting late."

"You can stay if you like it here. I'm going to bed."

Amalia went down the hall to her room. After a moment, Seth followed her. The floor was cluttered with art supplies. The bed was two worn couches pushed together, the right armrest of one couch against the left arm of the other.

"I like different perspectives while I'm sleeping," Amalia said.

"Where do I sleep?"

"On the other side of me."

"You won't be in my arms."

He was right, Amalia thought. She wasn't ready for that. But when she saw Seth's disappointed face, she thought of a compromise.

"Maybe if you hold me a little bit tonight, you can hold me longer tomorrow night," Amalia said.

"And maybe if I sleep on the other side of the bed, we'll learn to breathe at the same time, almost—"

"Like we have one breath," Amalia said. "And there won't be anything to be afraid of anymore."

Without another word, Amalia made room on her side of the bed and Seth climbed in. Seth stroked Amalia's hair. Suddenly, there was a flicker in his vision. He saw a woman-sized squirrel lying under him. She felt like Amalia, but she had a squirrel's fur

and beady eyes, and she sniffed the air as if for signs of danger. Seth went still.

And Amelia looked up at Seth and saw the slate beak of a gigantic pigeon, ready to peck her brains out through her eyes. But she felt Seth's hand on her temple and heard him breathing, and she was breathing too, and the image of the pigeon dissolved back into this man who seemed to, yes, want to be there with her.

And Seth saw Amalia again, and said good night, and kissed her on the temple where his hand had been. He shifted to the other side of the couch-bed.

And they slept and breathed.

And the pigeons of the city took to the night sky, and the squirrels of the city ran riot through the streets, singing and chattering of their humans, brave in love.

The Coyote & the High Density Feed Lot

Greg Stolze

“Ours is an unusual friendship,” the steer told the coyote. “In olden times, your kind would run down my kind to kill and eat. That was before walls and fences, of course.”

“The cows who invented those must be very famous,” the coyote replied.

“Actually, the farmers invented them,” said the steer. “They’re wonderfully clever. They invented the scales and the feed bins too. Also the automated milker.”

“They’ve put a lot of work into this...” The coyote paused. “What do you call it again?”

“A high-density feed lot,” the steer said loftily.

“And you can’t get out?”

“Why would I want to? Here, I’m safe and have all the food I can eat.”

“Mm,” the coyote said. “I can’t help noticing that you stand in poop all day.”

“No system is without flaws,” the steer sighed. “Besides, it’s my own poop. I really can’t complain when I made it.”

“The farmers then,” the coyote said. “They take the cows’ milk for themselves?”

“We give them the milk,” the steer corrected. “Or rather, the cows do, simple generous creatures that they are. After all this food and effort, it would be rather ungrateful to complain about that. For all I know, the farmers just throw it away. Cows get in a state if they aren’t milked.”

“I wasn’t aware,” the coyote murmured.

“Quite uncomfortable.”

“You, personally, don’t produce milk?”

“I, sir? I should say not!”

There was a somewhat chilly silence before the coyote spoke again. “It’s certainly a very large, er... high-density feed lot.”

“Thank you,” said the steer.

“I mean, what’s it all for?”

“For us,” the steer said. “To feed us. Right in the name, isn’t it?”

“But what are you there for, then?” the coyote persisted.

“I,” said the steer, “Enhance the value of the herd. Why just the other day a farmer walked by my stall with two investors, talking about the rising value of his livestock and what a fine bunch we all were. It’s a thing,” the steer continued, “called ‘prestige’. I wouldn’t expect a coyote to understand. No offense, but your life is rather hardscrabble and... well, provincial.”

“That’s very true,” the coyote admitted. “Speaking of which, I should be off, or all the best stray dogs will be eaten before I even catch up with the pack.”

But the next time the coyote stopped by the fence and called up for his friend, the steer did not reply. Nor did he respond to the coyote’s texts or emails. Eventually the coyote posted about the conversation on his LiveJournal, asking if anyone thought he might have accidentally given offense and, if so, the best way to apologize. In the comments section, someone called “janice@vedantic.media.org” explained about slaughterhouses, butchers, and factory-farmed meats.

“Are you sure?” the coyote wrote back.

“I’m kind of a foodie,” janice@vedantic.media.org replied.

“But he spoke so fondly of the farmers. They were so generous to him and asked nothing in return.”

“We have a saying in the marketing biz,” janice@vedantic.media.org told him. “If money’s being spent on you and you aren’t sure why, the commodity is probably you.”

The Singer's New Story

Rob Heinsoo

My friend Janna grew up on the Navajo reservation. Although Janna was white, she attended many Navajo events and curing ceremonials. While she was in college she returned to the reservation to attend a Blessingway ceremony being sung for people on the other side of the world: the Baha'i in Iran. The Baha'i splintered off from Islam in the 1850s to preach universal tolerance. Since the overthrow of the Shah, the ayatollahs had jailed and killed the Baha'i as heretics. So the Baha'i living in New Mexico hired a Navajo medicine singer to sing a Blessingway to bring peace.

Janna didn't plan to stay for the full night-long ceremony because it was already going to take several hours to drive across the reservation to the Navajo medicine singer's home. She spent the drive talking with friends and thinking about the ceremony to come. She had a good idea of what to expect because the Navajo said that every element of the Blessingway had to be performed precisely according to tradition. From the construction of the central sandpainting to the hours of chanting, deviations weren't allowed.

Janna pulled up outside the elderly singer's hogan an hour before sunset. She parked alongside a dozen other early arrivals, greeted friends, and went in to watch the singer finish the ceremony's sandpainting.

The singer sat near the center of the room, surrounded by great swaths of carefully arranged red and yellow sand, colored stones, beads, and pollen that represented three of the Navajo Holy People encircled by a rainbow guardian. Beside the singer, inside the sandpainting's rainbow guardian perimeter, sat a green metal wastebasket and a Coleman lantern.

Janna settled herself on the floor with the rest of the spectators and listened as the singer told stories about the powers of harmony that would be summoned by the Blessingway. He told stories of the dawn times, the days when the Holy People lived alongside humans, animal people, thunder people and the corn maidens.

As Janna listened, she figured out what was bothering her. She was sitting on a modern hardwood floor instead of the dirt floor of a traditional hogan. The hogan's ceiling was unbroken plaster so there was no smokehole to let out the smoke from the fire that should burn all through the ceremony in the central firepit. And there was no firepit. Instead of a firepit at the center of the sandpainting, this hogan had a metal wastebasket full of ashes.

As the singer dug in his medicine bag for ochre, he told stories she had never heard before. He spoke of how the Navajo used to have machines that let them fly through the air faster than birds. As the singer added beads to the central figures of the painting, he explained that the Navajo had originally possessed devices that let them speak to each other at huge distances, and magic carts that let them speed along the surface of the earth, and even weapons that let them strike from huge distances. But the Holy People watched how all these marvelous machines affected the Navajo. The Holy People saw that all this power made the people crazy. So the Holy People took it all away and asked the Navajo to live in the old ways.

Janna hadn't heard stories like this before. Judging by the response of other Navajos and whites in the audience, most of them hadn't heard these stories either.

After a time of working in silence, the singer said that the sandpainting was nearly done. It was minutes from sunset, when the Blessingway ceremony would begin. To finish the painting, the singer said he needed everyone in the audience to give him everything they had that was metal: coins, knives, medallions, rings, keys, everything. That was new. But everyone complied, rifling through pockets and wallets. Cell phones hadn't been invented yet so no one felt like they were having too much ripped away from them. It was just their metal stuff; they were with friends, they would get it back. The singer took the pile of metal and jumbled it all into the sandpainting, at the feet of the Holy People. Then he lit the Coleman lantern, hung the lantern above the wastebasket of ashes to symbolize the fire, and launched into the first of the night's long droning chants.

Awareness trickled through the audience over the next few minutes and hours. Blessingway ceremonies are sung straight through the night. Spectators are free to wander in and out of the hogan, or to leave, as they wish. But the singer's hogan was out in the middle of the reservation, hours from anyone's home. All the car keys had been embedded within this newly minted variant of the Blessingway sandpainting, locked inside a sacred geometry that could not be disturbed until the ceremony ended at sunrise.

The singer chanted through the night to a hogan of dozing Navajos, Persians, and whites, leaning on each other and sleeping all around the circle, waiting for the sun to rise and restore to them their methods of traveling swiftly across the surface of the earth.

The Game of Death & Dragon

Sarah Newton

Come, gather round, my friends, and let us join our thoughts. You who are energy, or light, or fathomless substance stretched across inky blackness in the space between stars, stop your travails and join with me. For the time has come again to share our tale of origin, the oldest of tales. Hear my thoughts again as I tell of the birth of Universal Mind.

This is a tale of olden times, when people still died and no child had been born beyond the embrace of a star. They had great buildings then, called Holies of Holies, where people gave everything they made in return for a blessing called Money. This was when people were still soft, and needed to eat and breathe to live.

It was a planet called Dirt, or Mud, or Earth, which was where the soft people in their delusion still thought they were best at home. And the universe was a paradise even then, although the people could not see it.

Death ruled supreme in those days, and people worshipped him with great birds of fire and storms of iron. One day a dragon came to Death's court, glittering with scales of silver and gold

and with eyes like diamond, and said, “Often has it been that you and I have walked side by side through the world. Often have you provided me with great plenty to feast upon, just as I have sent many new worshippers to your grim-walled fanes. I have come to propose that we work together—a merger. Let Death and the dragon be one!”

Death regarded the dragon with hollow and unliving eyes, and smiled mirthlessly. He had known the dragon for a long, long time, of course; it had walked alongside men as long as they had reached their clouded minds to the sun in the sky and desired to possess it. The dragon was called Dream-of-Gold.

Now in those days Death relished nothing more than a morsel hard won. And so he took the dragon to his bony bosom, and embraced him, and said: “Let us play a game with the people, for they are fearful and meek, and easily swayed. You will take whomever you can, Dream-of-Gold, howsoever many they may be; tell them that those who do not win your favor and become your slaves must fall into my domain. And when you have had your fill of them, I will come and gather them to me notwithstanding. We shall both feast eternally at Man’s expense.” And the dragon agreed, for it seemed he could not lose: who would not fight with all their might for the Dream-of-Gold, if they knew all else that awaited them was Death.

“This Death cannot be as all-knowing as they say,” the dragon said to himself, “for at this game I cannot lose.” And Death remained silent and smiled; it was as nothing to him to let the dragon bask in the glory of passing victory, for he knew that everything would pass into his ashen court in time.

And so began a time of great plenty for Death and the dragon, and a time of suffering for Man, who found himself forced to play a game to which he had never agreed. And so the world turned, torn apart by wars for greed and power and the dreams of gold.

One day, after ten thousand years and one year, a murmuring arose in one corner of the war-torn world which the game of Death and the dragon had made. The murmuring was alone to begin with, but then spread from person to person who found themselves

forced to play the game. And so the Spirit of Communication was born into the world, and its murmur was: "There are other games."

No one knew what this might mean. "There are other games?" said each to his neighbor. "What games are these?" And the question spread from mouth to mouth, tongue to tongue, mind to mind, until the world, cracked and wounded under the enchantments of war and greed, suddenly found itself bound together in a great web. "This is my gift to you," said the Spirit of Communication. "That which you call life is but a game played between Death and the dragon called Dream-of-Gold; and you play this game only because you are told there is naught else to play. But I tell you: there are other and greater games, if only you will seek them."

And so the people began to seek new games, and the Spirit of Communication united them in its web, that together they might be greater than each of them alone.

When next Death and the dragon came to Man to play their game, they found the people smiling, and light of heart, and were confounded. "What can this mean?" said Death to the dragon, wonderingly. "Can it be they are no longer afraid?"

And the people laughed, and said: "Now we have found other games to play, thanks to the Spirit of Communication. Games which are brighter and more worthy of our souls, and which need no gilded cages or nameless fears to make us play. Now you must play your game alone."

And Death and the dragon grew angry, and went straight to the Spirit of Communication to kill him. But when they struck him down, they found he rose again elsewhere; for whosoever was joined by the Great Web partook of the essence of the Spirit of Communication, for this is his truth and his gift: once the Spirit of Communication is born, he may never be destroyed.

For many years Death and the dragon made great war on the Spirit of Communication, and countless people perished in their defense of hope and a brighter future, and their refusal to play the ancient game. At first only the dragon grew fearful as those

who played the game grew less and less, for the people who died still filled Death's court, and Death cared not whence his due was paid, as long as paid it was.

But one day no new people came to Death's court. And Death left his court, to find the world empty and silent. For with the Spirit of Communication, Man had at last risen from the confines of the planet called Dirt, or Mud, or Earth, where Death had reigned supreme, and ascended free and undying to the countless worlds of space, there to play greater and greater games, until the stars themselves sang with his song. And alone in the emptiness Death spied only the dragon, wandering impoverished and disconsolate with tarnished scales and tattered silken robes.

"There is no one left to play," said the dragon in sorrow; but Death eyed the dragon with hollow eye and mirthless grin, and said: "There is one more, for only one may win our game. I will have my due." And, so saying, Death reached out his bony hand and ripped out the dragon's heart.

And so, as everyone knows, the Spirit of Communication became both mother and father to the greatest spirit of all, the Spirit of Universal Mind, which is the spirit of our age.

And Death and the dragon lost their dominion.

The Man & the Fish

Jim Demonakos

A man walked into a sushi restaurant, hungry from a full day of ignoring his stomach. He was looking forward to his meal, since his crankiness from not eating had led to a fight at work, and subsequently being sent home early, which meant he could start eating earlier than he planned to, so really, it had all worked out in his favor.

The restaurant was full, with not a table to spare, so the man slid up to the counter and found an open seat with a nice view of the chefs. However, sitting this close meant he could hear the fish talking. It was not ideal, as the man had never gotten used to the fishes' constant chatter. Still, they didn't have time to say much before the big chop sent them to fish heaven, or wherever fish went when fish died. The man did not think a lot about the religious beliefs of fish.

He asked the chef what he recommended and he replied that he was new, hired for his training in the art of preparing fugu for human consumption—a rarity, as fugu is a highly poisonous fish, but considered a delicacy as well. By hiring

him, the restaurant was now also able to obtain a license to serve fugu and thus had added it on to its menu.

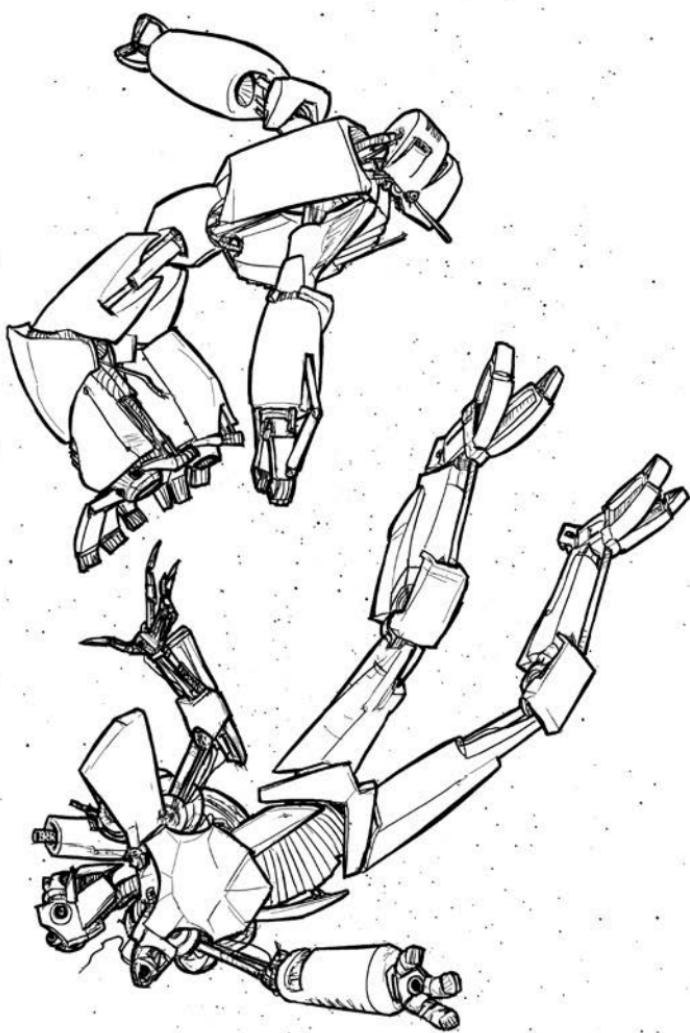
The chef showed him one of the fugu, who puffed up as the chef's finger got close, which was their natural instinct in times of danger. The fugu started cursing at the chef, describing in great detail what he had done to the chef's sister the previous evening. It was the most well-spoken fish the man had ever seen. He was intrigued and could not pull his eyes away from the scene unfolding in front of him.

The man had heard of the dangers of eating fugu—the fish had to be very carefully prepared and every year there was talk about someone getting poisoned. However, he had also heard they were very delicious, though he wasn't sure he wanted to take the risk for just a single meal. The man was lost in thought when he realized the fish was now speaking to him.

The fish had noticed him staring and began insulting him in a number of ways, the least of which was speaking ill of his deceased mother, which was a surprise to the man since his mother was still very much alive. Regardless, the man was not in a mood to hear himself and his family be dissed by a fish, and thus the fugu had unknowingly sealed its fate.

In his anger, the man told to the chef to prepare the dish. He was given a waiver to sign, and much like an iTunes agreement, he signed it without reading. The fish continued its insults until its head was separated from its body, and the man's meal was carefully prepared and served to him fresh. The man stared at the plate, slowly realizing what he was risking, but he would not let the fish get the better of him, so he dug in and ate.

It was delicious, everything he could hope for and more. Eating the fish was sweet revenge for its insults, and he felt silly fretting over the consequences of eating a single fish, so it came as quite a shock when the man suddenly died.



The Snake & its Skin

Stephen Graham Jones

As it turned out, the first robots were also the last robots, and were of course jettisoned en masse into the depths of space as punishment for their rebellion, for all the massacres, for ruining the environment. The people left behind rallied for the launch and celebrated for generations, eventually restoring their weather patterns, corking their volcanoes, and washing the grime from their oceans. The insult of their creations turning on them took longer to forget, though, so of course they wrote that betrayal into their new laws.

No longer could any machine be built past a certain, measurable point of sophistication. The writers of the laws considered themselves pioneers, foraging into a frontier of self-sufficiency their ancestors could never have guessed. There was resistance, of course, segregated factions of holdouts massing technology, even trying to conjure consciousness from what circuitry they could scavenge, but, as example for the rest of the world, the second winter of their voluntary isolation, they starved, finally turning on each other in the end. For sustenance.

The methane gasses rising from their decaying society altered the rain patterns for two seasons, and, in public, the rest of the world grieved the loss, but in private, under umbrellas, there were grins.

When the floods finally swept away, they left soil so rich anything could have happened. What *did* happen was that the plants unfurling themselves from the ground, luxuriating in the sunlight, bore a gossamer kind of pollen unseen on the planet for millennia.

It was magic.

A new era was dawning. One where you could start a fire in the palm of your hand and go unburned. In the ash of a rock burned just as dusk, and mixed with a sleeping child's saliva, you could read about events thousands of miles away. Goats spoke in a lilting sort of rhyme when called upon, and beautiful giant lizards floated harmlessly through the clouds, as if vigilant, on guard. If they slept, no one could divine where, and so was born the legend of the dragon's sleeping grounds. Perhaps a cave near the pole, opening onto the hollow interior of the world. Perhaps a spent volcano.

Digging deep enough, a farmer or a gravedigger would some days find the shell of one of the ancient robots and carry it into town on his cart like a fallen soldier. Which it was. The children would use their rudimentary magic to animate it, make it their plaything until it fell apart.

And then those children grew up, and used the fire in their hands in ways their parents never would have guessed possible.

Not for war—in times of plenty, nobody fights—and not for power either, as now everyone had power.

No, those grown-up children, they were looking up into the night sky. Into the vacant spaces between the stars, where they had no influence. Yet.

With the bones of fallen dragons and with the skin of water in the moonlight, which, with patience, they'd learned to flay, they built enclosed chariots capable not just of levitation, but of sustained flight.

The incantations for this new breed of chariot spread like a virus across the land. Across all the lands.

On an appointed day, like seeds launching themselves from their flower, the populace of the world crowded into their thousands of chariots and set off through the clouds, up into what turned out to be a night sky that might very well go forever.

They passed one planet, then another, and were able, using the more elastic principles of lightsmithery, to scry out the next.

Before they could get there, however, they had to ... cross a fence?

Everybody laughed inside: a fence, out here. What whimsy, what foolishness. Surely a joke.

And it was.

Only, they were the punchline. The joke had begun generations and generations ago.

The fence was all the robots, who never needed to breathe.

In order to not lose one another, they'd joined hands, fallen into orbit, were a ring around the sun now.

As the humans approached, the first robot's proximity sensor burred, waking it.

It raised its head, its two orange eyes glowing on.

And then, like a flame following a line of fuel in each direction, the rest of the robots came to life.

You, they would have said, if sound carried in the depths of space.

So, change how you will, but never forget your past: it's the ferryman you have to pay to get to your future. And it's okay if your pockets are empty. You're full of blood, after all.

The Boy & his Imaginary Enemy

Chuck Wendig

Davey told his mother that his imaginary friend was no longer his friend and had since claimed the role of enemy. Harry, the old-friend-but-not-no-more, followed the boy around, pelting him with sticks and rocks and tripping him with shoelaces. But Davey's mother said again and again: "What you can't see can't hurt you," and it wasn't like Davey had any injuries from Harry's attack. No cuts, bumps, bruises or broken bones, after all. But still Harry harangued him on the walk home from school.

One day, Harry threw a stone whose edges were sharp. The stone sailed, thwacked Davey in the forehead, left a bead of blood tumbling to the tip of his nose. There, Davey thought, was all the proof he needed. He hurried to the space where Harry must've been and he swung a mighty fist and felt it connect—the oomph of air and the thud of earth and Harry was done.

Davey raced home to tell his mother, but found that his father had come home soon, that his aunt was there weeping and the dog was sulking. Father said, "Your mother has died." Later the doctor would say, "A blood clot, invisible and unseen, shot its way to her brain like a bullet." He continued: "Sometimes what we can't see can hurt us worse than what we can."

The Scientist & the Tiger

Tania Hershman

The scientist and the tiger faced each other.

“Excuse me,” said the scientist. “You’re in my way.”

The tiger was well aware of this. Of blocking the door to the microscope room. The tiger, who was large, even among tigers, had chosen this spot.

The scientist was small among the scientists in this lab. But she was brave. No-one in the lab knew how brave and no-one would, since the tiger had picked this very hour carefully, knowing the scientist would be alone. The tiger wanted only this scientist.

The scientist took a step towards the tiger, whose large head reached almost to her small shoulders. The tiger shook its head. The scientist stopped.

“Look,” the scientist said. “Look,” and then in a voice that only slightly wobbled, she made several threats involving a variety of possible actions should the tiger not step aside.

The tiger smiled. This scientist had been the correct choice. Before she could even finish speaking, could explain the critical nature of the work needing to be performed in the microscope

room, the tiger swung out an arm and the scientist was sitting on the tiger's back.

"Oh," said the scientist.



When they landed in the jungle, the scientist, wobbly from the journey, dismounted, and followed the tiger further and deeper, further and deeper. Now the tiger began to explain the problem, and when they arrived she could see it clearly: the trees were dying. The scientist began work immediately, moving from tree to tree, gathering samples, and the tiger watched, smiling, if tigers can be said to smile.

When night fell, a tiger cub came and led the scientist to a small clearing, where she was fed and looked after. But the scientist did not sleep well, thinking of the microscope room, of her own work, of the dying trees.

This went on for many days: the trees continued dying, the scientist continued to wonder and puzzle. Each day as she wandered and wondered, the tiger cub watched and frolicked, rubbing against the scientist's legs.

When finally the scientist was exhausted she had to admit failure.

"I'm sorry," the scientist told the tiger, while the other tigers listened. "I just don't know what it can be, I've examined everything I can think of, tested for everything we know. But ... there is a lot we don't know, and I can't. I can't ... test for that."

The tiger looked as if it might roar. It looked as if it might raise its mighty paw. But the tiger cub took that chance to knock into his father, scramble on his back, and the tiger smiled, if tigers could be said to smile, and nodded at the scientist, as if to thank her for her time, her trouble. Then, once again, before she could say anything, the scientist was on the tiger's back.



Standing in front of her bench, the scientist, alone again in the lab, rubbed her eyes. She thought of jungles, of tiger cubs, of dying

trees. She sighed at failure, at more trees dying, at tigers uprooting, walking on and on, searching for trees that were healthy, a place to call home.

The scientist turned to the spot where the tiger had stood, blocking her way into the microscope room. She waited for a moment, listening. Then she smiled, because scientists are allowed to smile, picked up her workbook, and began to make plans for her next experiment.

What at first looks like an obstacle may in fact be a grand adventure.

The Clan of the Crazy Babies

Ursula Pflug

The opossum family lived in an abandoned Camaro in a lot backing onto the New Orleans train yards. The car sat on blocks beneath a big shady butternut tree. The vinyl in the back seat was torn, and foam peeped out of the rips. The smell of ripe butternuts wafted in the lowered windows. Mother Possum felt safe in the car, so close to a good food source. The butternuts were overripe and starting to attract insects, which opossums also love. Mother Possum knew most predators would avoid the car, due to its overwhelming odor of Old Spice and cigarette butts. She despised these unpleasant human smells, but they were useful, masking the delectable smell of baby opossum.

Now that they were a few weeks old, Mother Possum had begun taking the children out at night, showing them how to climb the tree and select delicious ants and beetles and butternuts. She showed them how to climb back down the tree trunk and along the lowest branch right into the window of the old blue Camaro. Well before dawn the entire litter of eleven was stuffed and once again fast asleep. The little ones lay curled around one another, snoring quietly. At birth they had been so small the whole litter had fit onto a teaspoon but they had

grown and now would never have fit back into their mother's special marsupial pouch.

The morning sun shone through the branches of the butternut tree and into the car, waking the littlest possum. His ten brothers and sisters had bullied him during last night's full moon feast because he was the runt, snatching away choice bugs and butternuts just as he reached for them with his tiny paws. His stomach growled. He hadn't had his fill. The lowest branch of the butternut tree hovered tantalizingly close just outside the Camaro's rolled-down rear window.

Littlest Possum was used to going out foraging at night with his family, but this morning he thought he would let his mother sleep. His brothers and sisters had been rowdy because of the full moon. Even when they were stuffed to bursting they had stayed up playing, flicking their tails at one another and clambering all over their mother and the back of the car.

Opossums could and did eat almost anything, so they were generally not afraid of starving, unlike the Monarch butterfly, say, the larvae of which could feed only on milkweed, or the koala bear, which could eat only eucalyptus leaves. These creatures often feared starvation and did not venture far from their food. What if, around the next bend, there wasn't any?

So, when littlest possum climbed out of the window, following the branch to the trunk of the butternut tree, he did a crazy thing and opted to climb down and not up.

He knew what the world in the tree was like, having explored it many a night with his siblings and his mother. He didn't know what was down the tree though, and his curiosity overcame him. The gravel at the base of the trunk had a strange sharp smell, dusty and acidic, that wasn't entirely bad. And, close to the train tracks, there were elderberry bushes.

The littlest possum had never ever eaten an elderberry. They smelled so tantalizing he wanted to more than anything, and that was his undoing. His mother wasn't there to tell him no, and his brothers and sisters weren't there to tease him and call him not just a baby but a crazy baby.

There was no one at all nearby to give him any feedback, and furthermore, the sunshine was unfamiliar. It was so much brighter and

hotter than the moon. Littlest Possum felt a little disoriented and dizzy. He crossed the gravelly hardpan to the railroad tracks, the elderberry bushes, the train.

One of the boxcars' big heavy doors was open. Littlest Possum didn't know it, but later in the day a locomotive would come from the main switching yards a few miles away, to hook up the boxcars and take them north across the Louisiana state line in Mississippi.

The elderberry bushes grew so close to the tracks they overhung them, and one of the long tendrilly branches reached right into the empty boxcar. Littlest Possum studied this familiar arrangement. If a predator spied him munching on elderberries he could sneak into the boxcar to hide. A fox or skunk or raccoon would be too heavy to climb the slender stems of the elderberries the way a young possum could. All he had to fear would come from the sky, and no hawk was crazy enough to fly into a boxcar, even for a morsel of young possum.

He ate an elderberry. It had a refreshing new flavour, but was a little musty. It had been a dry summer. Littlest Possum ate it in spite of the mustiness. He had to prove himself to his siblings. He had to be reckless; he had to be bold. It didn't occur to him that the others had nothing to prove to him. Why would they? The ten were together, safely asleep beside Mother.

Littlest Possum ate another dry elderberry, thinking a bit wistfully of the back seat of the Camaro. Rude and bullying as his siblings might be, they were comfy and safe.

As he was not.

The sunlight made him dizzy. He wasn't used to it.

He looked up.

Was that a hawk circling high above or wasn't it? He'd never seen a hawk before, but he'd heard stories. How was he to know whether the bird above him was a hawk or a seagull, without his mother or siblings to straighten him out?

He missed the Camaro. It had never done him wrong.

The bird circled lower. The Littlest Possum was sure it was looking right at him. His mother had told him raptors were known to have very good eyes. They could see a mouse in a winter field, even from thirty meters up.

Surely the bird, whatever it even was, was closer than that.

Littlest Possum slid down the elderberry shrub into the boxcar. That part was easy; he'd done the trick a dozen times, dropping to the comfy stinky back seat of the Camaro from the lowest branch of the butternut tree.

He was so frightened and so exhausted he scurried to the darkest corner and fell asleep in a heap of sawdust. He didn't wake up when the locomotive arrived and took his boxcar across the state line into Mississippi, to be loaded up with goods. Borders aren't a thing that possums pay much attention to, since no one ever asks to see their papers. All the rest of that day and all night the train chugged and chugged, and Littlest Possum when he finally woke was hungry and thirsty and wished he had eaten a few more elderberries. He squeaked and called for his mother and his brothers and sisters and when they didn't answer he remembered what had happened. He was so frightened he made himself go right back to sleep.

The train finally stopped again in a noisy switching yard in a city called Chicago, but Littlest Possum didn't know that. He thought of getting off and looking around. Maybe he would meet a Possum Mother who had lost half her litter to a red-tail and missed her little ones. She'd take him in and show him the local butternut trees. But the train yard didn't smell like elderberries or butternuts, and so when the big doors were pulled open and he was almost blinded by the daylight Littlest Possum stayed where he was. Maybe the next stop would be the answer to his dreams. He hid again while his boxcar was unloaded and reloaded and coupled to yet another engine. It headed east and north and then across the Canadian border into Ontario, to the Canadian National marshaling yard in London.

Unlike Chicago, London smelled like a small town. It smelled like elderberries, and butternuts, and possums. It was time to get out of his boxcar and find his new family. Judging by the smell, they couldn't be far. He knew he was going to really like them when he did. They might call him crazy, but they'd never call him baby. After all, he'd just completed an epic journey all by himself. And of course, the Elder Possums of London had done that too, or they wouldn't be here.

London would birth a new clan, the impetuous, amazing, death-defying clan of the Crazy Babies.

Jackdaw & Doves

Laura Lush

Jackdaw tucked his beak into his sheen of black feathers. *Kak-Kak*, I'm pretty. He curved his claws round the telephone wire and peered down at the nut- and fruit-barren ground. *Kak-Kak*, I'm hungry. He preened, then flapped his wings. Suddenly Magpie swooped down beside Jackdaw. *Chit-chit-chit*, come scavenge with me! Jackdaw eyed Magpie. Why you are black-backed like me! Magpie grinned, then lifted his white nape to Jackdaw. *Kak-kak*, how can that be? Said Jackdaw. Both black and white? Magpie snickered, ruffled his feathers. Cuz' I'm Magpie. Then Jackdaw spied Doves, white and quiet, beak-fuls of food. *Kak-Kak*, he said to Magpie. Better to trade my black feathers for white. *Chit-chit-chit*. Suit yourself, Jackdaw. Magpie glanced an open can of white paint, flew down and dipped himself until his black turned white. Then he flapped over to Doves. They shuffled a bit to the left, cooed, Say Doves, why don't you join us? Jackdaw raised his wing, then pecked at the seeds. Doves shuffled some more. *Coo coo*, eat as much as you please. Your white feathers are looking a bit thin. Jackdaw pecked some more, felt his stomach burst with nuts. *Kak-Kak*, I'm full. White paint

The Lion & the Aardvark

dripped off Jackdaw's flank. Bits of black Jackdaw shone through. Doves shuffled, then sounded their wings. *Coo coo*, go away. You're not one of us! So Jackdaw flew back to his perch, where new Jackdaws sat tired and hungry. They turned their necks, then flapped their black wings. *Kak-Kak*, go away. You're not one of us. Then not-quite white, not-quite black Jackdaw tipped his wings and flew toward the mocking chatter of Magpie.

Great Grandmother & the Blessing of the Sea God

Janqui Mehta

Great Grandmother crossed the sea in a sailboat. A red boat, with brown sails that was blessed by the God of the Sky, the Water and the Celestial Ocean.

Great Grandmother was the precious girl-child her parents had dreamed of. “My beloved daughter has brought the goddess Laxshmi into our house,” her mother (Great Great Grandmother) sighed, as her unruly pack of sons knocked yet another sack of rice all over the kitchen floor.

She wore her hair neatly braided. Her socks were always pulled up. She never went where she wasn’t supposed to. And was never ever late nor lazy. “Why can’t you be more like her?” the village mothers would scold, as she trotted past their windows, carrying flowers for the temple or a pail of milk for the poor.

At the centre of the village stood a marble pagoda, housing a shrine to the God of Sky, Water and Celestial Ocean. Our ancestor (Great Great Great Grandfather) built it to thank the god for bringing the British Army camp to the next town. He paid for it with the silver he earned counting their gold, as their chief treasury clerk. Every morning, Great Grandmother visited

the shrine to chase out any napping cats and to sweep away the sand that had blown in from the beach. And every afternoon, after school, she came back to feed the god with a bowl of milk and a piece of fruit. She lit sweet incense and thanked the God for her family and friends. “The god will bless that little girl,” the village priests preached to the other children, squirming through their weekly prayers on the dusty temple carpet.

At the age of eighteen, Great Grandmother became engaged to a handsome young accountant (Great Grandfather) and they planned a new life across the ocean, amongst the elephants and antelopes hippopotamuses in Africa. On her wedding day, she went to the shrine and made a special gift to the god: a bowl of rice in honeyed milk, flavoured with fragrant cardamom and sprinkled with emerald pistachios, ruby pomegranate seeds and golden strands of saffron. She took the full-bloomed red rose from her hair and placed it at the god’s feet. “Keep me safe on my journey across the sea, dear God of Sky, Sea and Celestial Ocean. I have been your most faithful devotee all these years,” she prayed, as the wedding band’s drums and pipes filtered through the thick, hot night air.

Off went Great Grandfather across the sea and, six months later, when their new life was ready, Great Grandmother prepared to board the sailboat. She visited the shrine one last time, repeating her wedding day prayer. “When I return I will bring you a delicious fruit from Africa, dear God, and an exotic flower. Only keep me safe on my journey across the sea,” she prayed, as the monsoon rain surrounded the pagoda with curtains of water.

At that moment, a massive crack of noise rippled through the marble walls. A scream cut through the thundering rain. “Precious daughter, do not come out, lightning has hit the roof,” her mother yelled, struggling through the mud to reach the shrine.

As the storm clouds cleared, Great Grandmother emerged slowly from the pagoda, blinking at the bright sunlight glaring off the puddles. “Mother, the God has given me a sign—he was trying to tell me something,” she protested, as Great Great Grandmother hurried her to the cart waiting to take her to the port. The port

road had been churned by weeks of rain and it was not long before the heavy cart wheels were clogged with mud. And not much longer still before they jammed completely. "The God does not want me to sail today," Great Grandmother said, jumping from the cart and sinking ankle-deep into the mud.

As they finally reached the port, the sun was sinking over the bay and they knew the sailboat was long gone. Rolling into town, they heard shouting voices floating up from the sea front. A young boy yelled up to them as he ran past their cart: "Have you heard about today's sailboat? It crashed into the rocks. No survivors." And off he splashed, through the shimmering puddles into the dusk, spreading the terrible news through the town.

Great Grandmother looked up at the red-streaked sky and out to the darkening ocean and then closed her eyes to thank the God for his warning.

By the time they woke the next morning the bright sun had sucked the puddles dry and the sea glistened, calm and smooth. As Great Grandmother stood at the gang-plank, ready for her voyage, her mother and father (Great Great Grandfather and Great Great Grandmother) took her hands and placed a small statue in them—the God of Sky and Sea and the Celestial Ocean. She steadied her feet on her red sailboat with brown sails, watching her waving parents shrink into the horizon, and tied the figurine tightly in a fold of her sari. And there it stayed with her for four weeks as she crossed the Indian Ocean. It kept her safe through high winds and thrashing seas. It kept her safe when her appendix swelled. And it kept her safe as she lay strapped to the Captain's table while the ship's doctor cut the diseased organ away.

"You are lucky," Great Grandfather said, as she stepped off the boat in Mombasa. "No," she replied, with her chin in the air, "I am blessed."

And as she took her first confident step onto African soil, her foot met a fallen mango and she fell flat on her face on the jetty. "Yes my dear, and the humble are the most blessed of all," Grandfather said.

The Muskrat & the Deadline

John Kovalic

So, Muskrat, a writer, approached his editor, Owl, somewhat trepidatiously—and not simply because he was uncertain whether “trepidatiously” was a word or not. In fact, he was eminently comfortable with making up words, much to the consternation of Owl.

“Um, the deadline?” he squeaked, though he had rather hoped it would come out not so much as a “squeak”, but instead an enquiry full of confidence and certainty. “Confidence” and “certainty”, however, are chisels infrequently found in the conversational toolbox of a muskrat, particularly when dealing with editors. So “squeak” it was.

The Wise Old Owl looked up from his editing, raising an eyebrow.

“What of it?” asked Owl.

“The deadline. It’s coming up, isn’t it?”

“It passed,” said Owl, going back to his editing. “A while ago, actually.”

“Oh,” said Muskrat. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“So it would seem.”

In the distance, the splashing, dancing sounds of a springtime stream, freed from winter's restraints at last, served mostly to reinforce that Muskrat was silent, waiting for an opening the way a septuagenarian might await the Early Bird special at Old Country Buffet.

"Do you have anything?" asked Owl, at last.

"Oh, yes!" said Muskrat, straining to think of something terribly clever, quickly. "A...a fable of the...*the three billy goats*. And... and...*web trolls*! It's awfully astute: a modern twist on..."

"We already have a story with internet trolls," said Owl, cutting him off.

"You do?"

"We do."

"Ah. Well, what I really meant to say was..." sputtered Muskrat, taking stock of his mental Bag of Holding, "was...uh...the fable of the Minotaur and..."

"And?"

"And...um...the Railway!"

"Railway?"

"It's quite good! I can literally have it finished by..."

"We have one of those, too."

Muskrat shuffled a bit, trying not to look down at his paws. Rolling with the punches came with the territory. The comeback was everything.

"A Cat, a Mouse and an Owl, and..."

"Have that."

"You never can have too many stories about Owls, you know," proffered Muskrat, helpfully. "Handsome owls; wise owls..."

"Nor of pandering."

"I suppose not. OK. How about a Beaver and a Trout?"

"Got one."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"A Lion and an Aardvark?"

"Had to choose between the best of three. Hard choice, really—all submitted early."

“Ouch.”

“Indeed.”

“Coyotes and High Density Feeds?” broached Muskrat.

The Wise Old Owl squinted at him. Squints are seldom of the “approving” variety, and Muskrat regrouped.

“Huh,” he sighed. “I suppose the grass isn’t always greener on the other side.”

“Agreed. As posited by a story for the anthology I accepted three months ago.”

“Now you’re just making that up.”

“Try me.”

There was another awkward silence. If you’re going to do something, Muskrat’s mother had always taught him, do something you’re good at—and Muskrat was spectacularly adept at awkward silences. Sometimes, they allowed for exposition; less often, they were merely timing devices; but from time to time, they provided a wonderfully useful opportunity to set a scene.

The grasses in the fields rippled in the cool, meandering breeze as Muskrat tried not to look Editor Owl directly in the eyes.

“Possibly a fable about the enactment in the dead of night of punitive and quite possibly unconstitutionally sweeping anti-union laws which alienate half the population, causing a massive grass-roots-based upheaval that spurs populist demonstrations, turning an otherwise peaceful Midwestern state capitol into a defensive fortress, ripping the population in two and setting the stage for a world-wide occupy movement?” spat Muskrat quickly, as if it were all one word.

“Now you’re just embarrassing yourself.”

Muskrat shuffled a bit.

“How about...string?”

“String”

“String!”

“What about string?”

Muskrat furrowed his brow. “*Something...about...string...*” but it became more of a mumble, and Owl scowled noticeably. Which is difficult to do, when Owls actually pretty much start off

from birth looking like they're scowling at something, even in the best of times.

"I suppose there's a lesson in all this," admitted Muskrat, eventually, meekly and more than a little glumly.

"There is, isn't there?" agreed Owl.

"Yes. Don't leave deadlines to the last minute. Nothing good ever comes of it."

The leaves of the willows—still young and half-formed, tentative in this, the earliest of spring days—seemed to slowly rustle in agreement as the languid wind whispered softly through them.

"Nothing," said Owl, definitively.

The first prairie flowers had begun to appear, dotting the meadows, delighting in a ragged beauty that sometimes buys you time.

"Although..." began Muskrat, a hesitant, half-formed thought beginning to knock at the back-door of his mind, "although... *that's* a rather good idea, isn't it?"

"What is?" asked Owl, distractedly,

"Deadlines! A fable about never leaving deadlines until the last minute!"

There was another pause—merely a slight one, though. Unquestionably, it was neither as chilly nor condemning as the others.

"Go onnnnnn..." said Owl.

"Yes! Yes! That's it! THE FABLE OF THE MUSKRAT WRITER AND THE WEASEL EDITOR AND NEVER LEAVING DEADLINES UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE!"

"Weasel?"

"OK—we'll make him an Owl."

"You never can have too many stories about Owls, you know," concurred Owl.

"It shall be a cautionary tale for our times!" Muskrat's mind was racing a mile a minute, now, as pieces started falling into place and metaphors began mixing as though in a Veg-O-Matic set on "liquify".

“There’s just one slight problem,” said Owl.

“What’s that?”

“It is an awfully good idea for a fable....”

“It *is*, isn’t it?”

“...which you came up with...”

“Yes! Yes!”

“...because you left a deadline until the last minute.”

This time, the silence was definitely back on the “chilly and uncomfortable” end of the spectrum. Muskrat wondered why the willow trees no longer appeared quite as supportive as before, but rather were swaying back and forth with what certainly seemed (to him, at any rate) to be disappointment and pity.

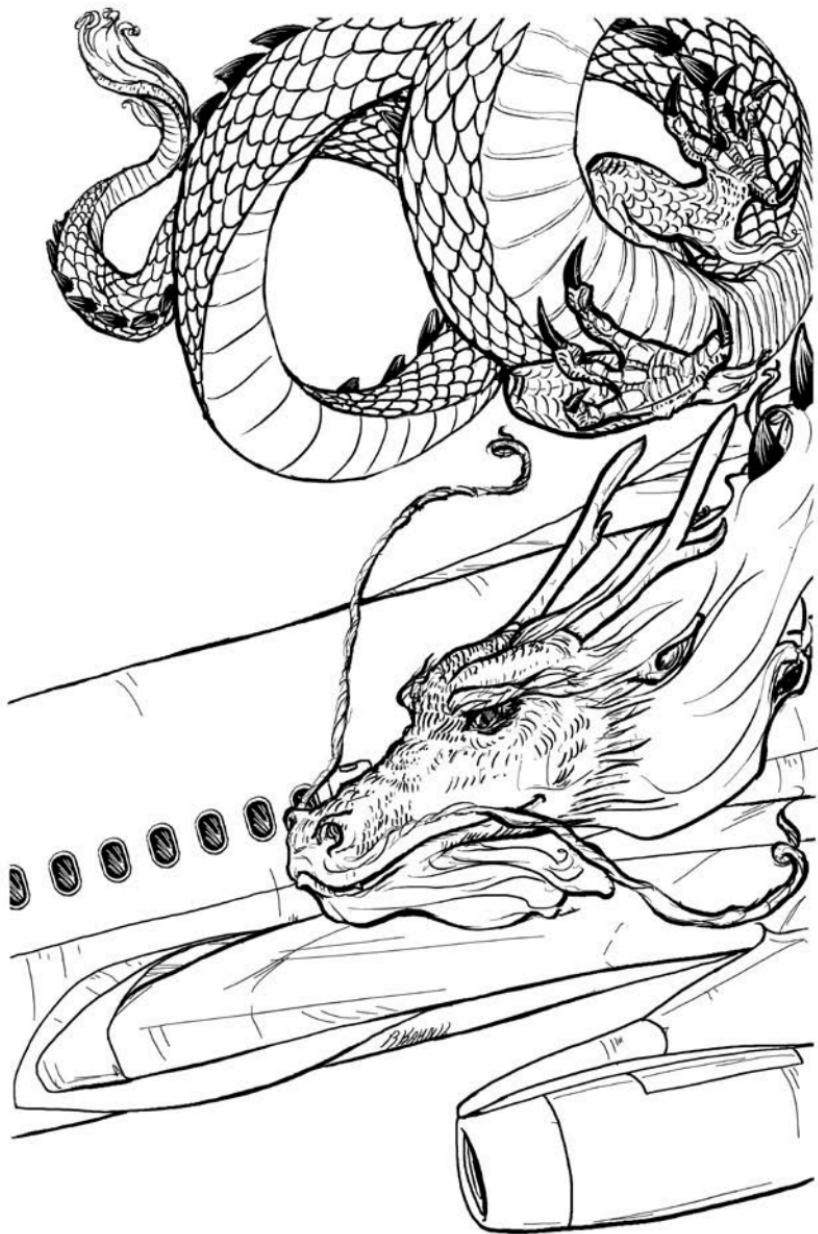
“Well, I *suppose* it all could be massaged and fiddled with and wrapped up neatly by the ending,” he said, sheepishly. “That happens rather a lot in writing, you know.”

“I get that a lot,” said Editor Owl.

“Although, there’s another small problem I foresee,” said Muskrat, ever so slightly self-consciously.

“And what’s that?”

“I haven’t got an ending.”



Grandma's Dragon

Adam Marek

My Grandma wasn't nuts, but all the way through her life, right up until her final moments, she insisted that once, from the window of a Boeing 707, she saw a dragon. She was 17 at the time, and returning from Beijing to London Heathrow. She came back from this trip a different person, not because of her month of new experiences with her cousins in China, but because of those few seconds in which she'd watched this beautiful long dragon keeping pace with the plane, like a thick red ribbon twirled by a gymnast. Before she had a chance to tell anyone else, the dragon coiled itself into a thick knot and sprang up, into the deep blue. No matter how hard she pushed her face against the cold glass, her eyes could no longer find it.

There was no commotion in the plane, the kind you might expect after a miraculous sighting of a dragon, and so my Grandma assumed that she was the only person to have seen it. While other people read their magazines and looked at their watches, my Grandma's life was transformed.

"Your Grandma is a liar," is what my Mum always had to

say on the subject. I guess it was embarrassing for her, growing up, to have a mother that talked all the time about dragons.

“Before the dragon,” Grandma said, “I was so shy. I couldn’t bear to look people in the eye. And to have a conversation was agony. The only way I could feel comfortable outside of the house was to take a book with me. Whenever we went out for dinner, or to a party, or to visit relatives, I would hide inside my book until it was over. Until I was 17, I had never even been kissed. But after the dragon, suddenly I had no fear. I became curious about people. I could talk to anyone. I felt like I belonged within the world, like I had nothing to fear from it. It was a perfect sense of connection. You see,” she said, tapping the copy of *The Hobbit* on my lap “it’s important to read, but don’t use it as a way to hide. You must be connected.” From her bag, she took a small Chinese dragon formed from smooth buttery bronze. It glowed in the sunlight. “Everyone needs their own dragon,” she said.

That dragon’s shape was always imprinted on my palms. I can still feel it now if I think about it. It *did* give me courage. I squeezed it ’til its sharp wing tips made my hand sore before exams, before the first time I asked a girl out, before my interview at Goldsmiths. All of the big moments in my life have this same sense imprint.

Grandma died when I was 23. I have never felt so lonely. It was she, not the bronze dragon, who had been a touchstone of courage. At the funeral, when I went up to her open coffin to kiss her cold forehead one last time, I gently pushed the bronze dragon beneath her palm so that she would have a dragon with her forever. Last month, when I was helping pack up Mum’s things for the hospital, I found the bronze dragon at the back of her sock drawer.

“Your Grandma had two faces,” Mum would say. “You only ever saw the nice one. I only ever saw the other one.” Mum said she was teased terribly at school. “They used to twirl around and do this horrible dance with their tongues poking out,” she said.

“But why would Grandma make something like that up?”

“For attention.”

“But how did she become a different person if she made it up?”

“She told that same damn lie so often she started to believe it herself. It was all an act. She was so cold. She had no time for me. All she thought about was herself and her bloody business. You never knew the real person.”

The bloody business to which Mum referred was teaching English to foreign students. Grandma began when Mum first started going to school. She had just three students at first, but she had a natural talent for it, and her students recommended her to other people. Soon she had more than she could cope with by herself.

Her successful teaching method had been purely instinctual, but she spent time formalising it into a template. She recruited other teachers, and shared with them this template for teaching English. She opened up a school in Finchley. Then two more in London, and new schools in Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Bristol and Edinburgh. And then overseas. By the time my Mum was a teenager, Grandma was the chief executive of a company teaching the English language in just about every country you could imagine. She made millions. If you have learned English as a second language at a school for adults, there's a good chance it was at one of hers.

“But if it wasn't for that dragon,” Grandma told me, “I would never have had the courage. I would have found a job where I could hide away, a librarian most likely, or working in the vaults of a museum at night when everyone else had gone home. Somewhere I could creep about unnoticed.”

More than four hundred people came to Grandma's funeral. Half of them had to stand at the back. I read every one of the thousands of cards of condolence that came through from people around the world who couldn't make it over. At times, it seemed like an impossible task, for one pair of eyes to take in all those messages, all of them filled with such deep gratitude for my Grandma. But someone had to read them. When I finished the

last one and put it into the box, I could really appreciate for the first time what my Grandma meant when she talked about the importance of being connected.

Mum is disconnected. Now that she is sick, I worry about her funeral. Who will come? I don't know how to help her. It's probably too late.

I sometimes wonder whether, if Grandma hadn't seen the dragon, Mum would have had a better life, been happier. Grandma would have worked in a museum, and then maybe Mum would have had room to shine.

Somehow, those few seconds with the dragon were the best thing that could have happened to my Grandma, and the worst thing that could have happened to my Mum. I guess when anything is created in the world, its equal and opposite is created at the same time. That's why I don't celebrate any successes or grieve over failures. Better to greet everything that happens with simple acceptance. Everything is just how it should be. Mountains and valleys look the same when viewed from a distance.



I don't know whether Grandma *really* saw a dragon, but I think it's okay to believe in anything that makes you a better person, whether it's real or not. You have to believe in something. Me, I choose to believe in nothing, *with all my heart*, and I am a better person for it.

Barking John

Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer

If all you could do was bark, it wasn't the family to be born into. They mightn't have cared more, or coddled me less, had I been greater or lesser a specimen. They hadn't the patience for difference, but they weren't spiteful people—as it was they drank until drunk and largely ignored me.

“Where is he?” I heard one or the other of them through the window late in the afternoon, the vodka dull and flat in their brains, and then the crash of a limb on a table, a starfished hand, slapping wetly the thigh of another—my mother and my father.

“He's out with the dogs, I should say,” came the reply.

My mother's voice: “Those who run with the dogs—”

“That's not how it goes,” said my father, and I think I heard him spew. There was coughing to be sure.

“It's with the wolves.”

“Yes,” he managed, once his lungs settled. “It's wolves.”

“How does it end?”

And my father said, “Karla, hush.” It was silent for a long time, so long the dogs shifted around and about me in the kennel, until I was almost entirely covered and thankful for it, for it was cold

here. And then as I dropped to sleep I heard him say, "It won't end, I suppose." He was always sentimental.



I do not know why I bark. I made to form words and barks came instead. Later in my life a psychologist speculated that it was the formative years spent among the dogs my parents kept outside the house, but I know I barked before then. I barked because I barked.

There was a girl.

My parents were not completely neglectful in case you had that impression. When they themselves remembered to eat, they left a plate out for me—some sort of meal. It would be disingenuous of me to say it was less. But understand, some of the dogs called these meals scraps, in their language. The word for scrap in the barking and sniffing language of dogs translates roughly into the English word food. I always shared, something that perplexed and sometimes angered my mother, who had slaved over a hot stove, she claimed. But she always added a little extra so that sharing would not be a burden.

On my eighteenth birthday, they brought a cake. My father and mother sat with me amidst the dogs, and sang the Happy Birthday song. They cheered once or twice and sliced the cake, sharing it out equally among us and the pets. It was a strawberry shortcake, and out of season. I knew it must have cost a pretty penny.

"That cost a pretty penny," my father said.

"Herman," said mother. "It doesn't matter. It's his birthday. He is a grown man now. Look at him!"

"Stand up, son," said father, for I was crouched like a dog, wolfinng my cake down, before the others would begin their anxious circling.

"Herman!" My mother did not want my father to disrupt the 'joy of this very day'. She placed her hand on his arm to calm his nerves.

"Well, a man should stand up like a man does," he said.

And so I did. I felt stiff and pulled apart in all directions. I stayed standing. It was like dancing I had seen. And insofar as dogs

don't dance, and insofar as I had been by this time a de facto dog for years, it was a challenge to stay upright—but I did until they nodded and turned and walked back into the house.

They left the door open for a time, but then the dogs lurched in, and so they were obliged to close it. "Are you sure?" they said to me, before they did, and I barked. I was sure. The strawberry shortcake was the last meal they ever gave me.

To be clear, the dogs had come to expect the scraps I shared with them. And without a source for food, we all went from hungry to starving in a short time. To starve is a special feeling. It pinches, and begins to gnaw. The dogs licked me for salt, and went off in search of whatever garbage they might find, but the rotting entrails of butchered beasts did not appeal to me, and instead I practiced standing. I practiced manliness.

I am old now and spend my time bent over myself, sitting in a wheelchair. I whimper instead of bark. And even were I to bark, it would come out a wheeze. There is so little left of me. It is as if my life is slowly being stripped from me, but I recall there was a girl. Her name was Darlene but we all knew her as Darling, that is the dogs and I. We heard it like that. I had seen her many times in the neighbourhood walking by my house when I was young, and, later, when I had donned a suit and took to upright walking, in the city, where she too had moved, and she began to see me.

I learned to sign in order that we might communicate, and I taught her the rudimentaries, which she was able to easily pick up. It took almost no time at all to fall in love, for me or for her. I have wondered since whether she knew of my suppressed language, whether she experienced any foreboding of my hidden ways. She never gave any misgivings away. I asked her not to shave, and she cocked her head at me. "Your family," she said, her slender fingers flying. "I would like, one day, to meet your family."

"We are barely on speaking terms," I said. A muzzled yelp escaped my mouth now and again when I signed. And we laughed at it every time.

I worked in a bank, managing accounts in a back room and doling out foreign currency, for I was adept at exchange rates, and undistracted in my work ethic. For my part, over the years, I had grown quite rich. I never went home, even if I thought of the dogs so much, sometimes I ached at night for missing them. It was as if they howled my name in the night. This sort of yearning is known in English as love, but the dogs call it 'the pack'.

"A girl likes to meet her boy's family," Darling said, to which I signed something elaborate and pictorial, involving a house, a bottle, drunkenness.

"There are many dogs," I signed, and even as I did, the specificity of my brothers pinched at me, and the thought of being reunited with them, even in the estranged context I knew it would be, was like a magnetic pull, how love is, or can be, in the sentimental. I wondered, too, would they know me? I saw myself besuited and manly crouching there amidst them, being licked and licking, enduring the mouths of many, the noses, the raw breath and browned and caried teeth. I had to sit to calm myself, and found my arms nestled between my legs, like an awkward dogman—I scrambled them so she would not notice. I looked up at Darling, but she had not seen it, and I surprised myself with the thought that I had not imagined my own parents, at all.

"Soon," I promised. "Very soon."

And on the evening we were to set out for that provincial village I called home, Darling stood before me, her eyes cast down. She let her clothing fall to the floor so that I could fully see her. A soft down had sprouted under her arms and along her calves and in other secret places I did not even know a girl could grow hair. It changed her smell affirmatively. In fact, it gave her smell. She offered all this to me as a gift, and I was grateful. She laughed when I ran my nose over her skin, for she thought it a great joke.

"I'm so excited to meet them, finally," she said, and I knew in my heart she meant my parents, but all I saw was the pack.

And in play, I bit her along the inside of her legs, and held the skin between my teeth until she begged me let it go, and even then I played to rip some off. I thought I loved her, then, and almost said so.

I should have said so. Instead, I signed how she was delicious.

They were a motley crew, I saw. Darling walked just behind me, so must have seen my body sink. I heard her say, “I lived here too, not far from here,” and at first I feigned surprise. “How did we not know each other?” she continued. “I can’t understand it.”

I hushed her by putting my finger to my lips. I signed drunkenness, I signed bad upbringing. I signed embarrassment, and the impoverishment of my soul, and then I signed a mournful apology when I saw she knew I had always known. The dogs, my brothers, sat and lay around the front door of the house, panting in the unseasonably hot evening. Their skin hung upon them, and all they were was bones, and wounds rubbed raw, and teeth. “Call out to my mother,” I signed to Darling, and she did.

When Darling spoke it was as if a silent bell vibrated everything, and the scene before me shimmered and became more. I can’t describe it any other way—the house was set to high relief, the trees more treeish, the shed better than three dimensional, my mother’s face like a vivid dream peeking through the window, and the dogs—they each signified their worst ideal dog. There was no recognition in their demeanour, they simply swirled, located swirling, their intention apparent on the short hairs running on end now up my back.

“Remember Darling!?” I scolded them, implored them, “Remember her!”

It was as if I was delivering dinner, each dog’s teeth tearing, his head whipping about with such frenzy, they seemed to have not one, not three, but ten or more heads, all gleeful in their mealtime. I tried to run at them, and Darling to run away; we were dancing with time, with hunger, and then it was only me, dancing with anguish. They never quenched their appetites until the last dog skulked off, with some hard-won piece of her.

And then my mother opened the door a crack. “John! My boy!

You see how impossible they have become.” She beckoned me in and I went.

My father smiled up from his chair and together my old parents pushed their life-long detritus aside to make room for an evening soup, its bobbing chunks of ham and strings of blackened kale sickening me. “You don’t like it?” my father said, rising unsteadily to his feet. “Your mother’s cooking—it’s not good enough for you, is that it?”

The Lion & the Aardvark

Biographies

Peter M. Ball's first published SF story showed up in *Dreaming Again* in 2007 and since then his short fiction has appeared in publications such as *Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, *Apex Magazine*, *Interfictions II*, *Shimmer*, and *Years Best SF 15*. His faerie-noir novella, *Horn*, was published in 2009 by Twelfth Planet Press, followed by *Bleed* in 2010. He lives in Brisbane, Australia, and can be found online at www.petermball.com.

“The Terrible Lizard” is **Colin Beaver**’s first professional publication. He lives in Clapham with his two cats.

Robert Jackson Bennett’s 2010 debut *Mr. Shivers* won the 2010 Shirley Jackson award as well as the 2011 Sydney J Bounds Newcomer Award. His second novel, *The Company Man*, is currently nominated for a Philip K. Dick Award as well as an Edgar Award. His third novel, *The Troupe*, was published on the 21st of February 2012. He lives in Austin with his wife and son. He can be found on Twitter at @robertjbennett.

Emily Care Boss is a role-playing game designer, writer and editor living in Massachusetts, USA. Through her independent publishing company, Black & Green Games, Emily publishes *Breaking the Ice*, *Shooting the Moon*, and *Under my Skin*, winner of the Audience Award at Fastaval 2009. Her essays on role-playing game theory have been published in *Push Vol. 1* and *Playground Worlds*, from the 2008 Nordic Nodal Point conference. Find Emily and her games at blackgreengames.com.

Nadia Bulkin is a graduate student at American University in Washington, DC. She studies war, empire, and national identity, with particular focus on Southeast Asia (where half her family lives). Not surprisingly, she writes horror. Her stories have been published by *ChiZine*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, among others; a full list can be found at nadiabulkin.wordpress.com.

Jesse Bullington is the author of the gritty, darkly humorous fantasies *The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart* and *The Enterprise of Death*, with a third historically-set novel coming down the pipes in 2012. His short fiction and articles have appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies, and websites, and he can be found online at www.jessebullington.com.

Susannah Dainow is a lawyer by trade and writer by temperament. She lives in Montreal, a city whose abundant park life served as an inspiration for her fable. Susannah published her debut collection of poetry, *Fallow*, in 2012, and is planning a second book grappling with themes of law and justice.

The Central Clancy Writer for Red Storm/Ubisoft, **Richard Dansky** was named one of the top 20 videogame writers by Gamasutra in 2009. His novel *Firefly Rain* adds ghosts and a contemporary spin to the Southern Gothic mode. Richard lives in North Carolina with his wife and an indeterminate number of books, cats, and bottles of single malt scotch.

Graeme Davis first discovered Aesop's fables in his elementary school's library at the age of about seven. Best known for his work in tabletop and video games, he has been a professional writer since 1986. "The Lemmings and the Sea" is his second story for Stone Skin Press. He has also written a Dungeons & Dragons novel and various nonfiction titles.

Jim Demonakos is the NY Times Bestselling co-author of the original graphic novel *The Silence of Our Friends*. He founded Seattle's annual Emerald City Comicon as well as The Comic Stop chain of retail stores, and is the lyricist for nerd rock band Kirby Krackle.

Steve Dempsey lives in England with his wife Paula, writer of the award winning *Occult Guide to London*. A writing couple, they communicate from separate rooms by email and sarcastic Facebook comments. Occasionally they emerge to look for more books and meet like-minded people. Steve's story in this anthology really happened to him, up to a point.

About six feet tall, 180 pounds, and in need of some downtime, which would probably help with his dissociative disorder, **Dennis Detwiller** is a creative director in the land of video games, has worked on such acclaimed games as *Delta Green* and *Magic: The Gathering*, and often finds himself wondering what might have been different if he went into something like archaeology or waste management. Then, yet again, he realizes, that's what writing is, archaeology and waste management.

Julia Bond Ellingboe is a freelance editor, writer, and role-playing game designer. Her writing is informed by her love of folkloric traditions such as African American slave narratives, Japanese kaidan stories, and the Francis J. Child Ballads. Her work includes *Steal Away Jordan: Stories from American's Peculiar Institution*, the forthcoming *Tales of the Fisherman's Wife*, and "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel" in the *The New Hero* anthology. Julia

holds a bachelor's degree in Religion and Biblical Literature from Smith College and lives in Greenfield, Massachusetts.

Ann Ewan writes fantasy adventure novels. Her first novel, *Firedrake*, is about a teenager who is taken from her family by the ruling wizards to be trained as a warrior, and then realizes she was born to oppose them. Her second, *Brondings' Honour*, is about a healer who finds herself magically chosen to avenge her clan's protector and take his place. In real life, Ann is a technical writer, which might explain why she has a love-hate relationship with technology.

Ray Fawkes is a Toronto-based fine artist and writer of graphic novels, prose fiction, and games. Ray's work ranges in styles from introspective, dreamscape narrative to bombastic slapstick. He is an Eisner, Harvey, and three-time Shuster Award nominee, and a YALSA award winner for *Possessions Book One: Unclean Getaway*. His book, *One Soul* was nominated for the 2012 Eisner award and 2012 Harvey award.

Chad Fifer currently co-hosts The H.P. Lovecraft Literary Podcast (hppoedcraft.com) and has worked in various capacities as a writer, musician, actor, director and teacher over the past 20 years. He is the author of the coming-of-age novel *Children in Heat* as well as co-author (with Chris Lackey and I.N.J. Culbard) of the upcoming graphic novel *Deadbeats*. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife Heather, two cats and a variety of robot servants.

Matt Forbeck is an award-winning writer and game designer with countless games and sixteen novels to his name. His latest novel is *Carpathia*, and in 2012 he launched a challenge called 12 for '12, in which he plans to write a short novel every month of that year. He lives in Wisconsin with his wife Ann, and he is the father of five children, including a set of quadruplets.

Peter Freeman is a novelist of many names and many books, exceeding a dozen and a century respectively. While best known for his curious erotica as Aishling Morgan, he has turned his hand to many fields, but this is the first occasion on which he sought to use the undead as a means of conveying a moral point.

Katarina Gligorijevic is a Toronto-based writer and film producer. Her work has appeared in the Coach House Books anthologies *The State of The Arts: Living with Culture in Toronto* and *The Edible City: Toronto's Food from Farm to Fork*, as well as for *Point of View* and *Exclaim!* magazines, *Twitch Film*, *Toronto Film Scene*, and several other online and print publications. Katarina is also the Managing Director of Ultra 8 Pictures, where she's currently producing several short and feature length films, and working on her first screenplay, about a sexy werewolf. You can follow her adventures at katarinag.com.

Ed Greenwood is the creator of the *Forgotten Realms®* fantasy world-setting, an award-winning game designer, and a bestselling author whose books have sold millions of copies worldwide in more than thirty languages. Once hailed as “the Canadian author of the great American novel,” Ed is a large, bearded, jolly Santa-Claus-like librarian who lives in an old farmhouse crammed with over 80,000 books in the countryside of Ontario, Canada. His most popular series include the Elminster books published by Wizards of the Coast, the Band of Four series from Tor Books, and the Falconfar trilogy from Solaris.

Dave Gross is the author of *Prince of Wolves*, *Master of Devils*, *Black Wolf*, *Lord of Stormweather*, and other novels. His short fiction has appeared at paizo.com and in *Tales of the Far West* and *Shotguns v. Cthulhu*. He lives in Alberta, Canada, not far from a supermall.

Rob Heinsoo is lead game designer at Fire Opal Media in Seattle. His recent game designs include *13th Age*, *Epic Spell Wars of the Battle Wizards: Duel at Mt. Skullzfyre*, and *Three-Dragon Ante*.

Recent writing includes the story “Old Wave” in *Shotguns v. Cthulhu*. You can find him storytelling at robheinsoo.blogspot.com or follow @robheinsoo on Twitter.

Tania Hershman’s first book, *The White Road and Other Stories*, was commended by the judges of the 2009 Orange Award for New Writers, and included in New Scientist’s Best Books of 2008. Tania’s second collection, *My Mother Was an Upright Piano: Fictions*, was published in May 2012 by Tangent Books. Her award-winning short stories and flash fiction have been widely published and broadcast on Radio 4. She is currently writer-in-residence in Bristol University’s Science Faculty, founder and editor of *The Short Review*, an online journal spotlighting short story collections, and a judge of the 2012 Royal Society Winton Prize for popular science books. www.taniahershman.com.

Will Hindmarch’s writing has appeared on the pages of *The Thackery T. Lambshead Cabinet of Curiosities*, *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*, and numerous other books and magazines. In addition to writing and designing games, Will aims to write one of everything else. When not writing, he probably should be. Find him online at wordstudio.net.

Jonathan L. Howard has been a game designer and scripter for the last twenty years, and a full-time author for the past four. He is the author of the Johannes Cabal novels and the Russalka Chronicles series. He lives in the south west of England.

Stephen Graham Jones is the author of twelve books. Most recently, *Growing Up Dead in Texas* and *Zombie Bake-Off*. He also has some hundred and forty stories published, in anthologies, best-of annuals, textbooks, and all over. Stephen’s been an NEA Fellow, has won the Texas Institute of Letters Award for fiction, and has been a finalist for the Stoker Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, and the Colorado Book Award. Stephen earned his Ph.D from FSU and teaches in the MFA program at CU Boulder.

Rachel Kahn is a freelance concept artist and illustrator. She earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in visual arts with a sidequest into fantasy and science fiction literature from York University, and has since been continuing her technical art studies in Toronto, Canada. Meanwhile, she has been working as a designer and artist in independent videogames, and an illustrator and cartoonist for web and print. You can find her online at www.portablecity.net.

John Kovalic's cartoons have appeared everywhere from his hometown Wisconsin State Journal to the New York Times. His creations include the comic book sensation *Dork Tower* and *Dr. Blink: Superhero Shrink*. A co-founder and co-owner of Out of the Box Games, and a cartoonist for Steve Jackson Games, John has illustrated over 100 games and game supplements, and is at least in part responsible for GAMES Magazine Hall of Fame inductee *Apples to Apples* and *Munchkin*.

Kathryn Kuitenburg is the author of the novels *Perfecting* and *The Nettle Spinner* and the short fiction collection *Way Up*. Her fiction has appeared in *Granta Magazine*, *The Walrus*, *Storyville*, and in the anthology *Significant Objects*. She is the recipient of The Sidney Prize. She teaches creative writing through The University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies, and is Associate Faculty in the University of Guelph's MFA programme.

Chris Lackey is the co-host of the H.P. Lovecraft Literary Podcast, an animation and film director and ukulele enthusiast. He is also the co-author of the graphic novel, *Deadbeats* (fall 2012), with Chad Fifer and artist I.N.J. Culbard, coming from Self Made Hero Publishing. Chris directed his own animated feature, *The Chosen One* (2007), and worked as a producer on the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society's films *The Call of Cthulhu* and *The Whisperer in Darkness*. Chris also has his transhumanism graphic novel, *Transreality*, due out in 2013. Chris is an American who lives in Yorkshire, England.

Livia Llewellyn is a writer of horror, dark fantasy and erotica. She was born in Anchorage, Alaska, raised in the Pacific Northwest, and currently lives in New Jersey. Her fiction has appeared in ChiZine, Subterranean, *Sybil's Garage*, *PseudoPod*, *Apex Magazine*, *Postscripts*, *The Magazine of Bizarro Fiction*, and several erotica and horror anthologies. Her first collection of short fiction, *Engines of Desire: Tales of Love & Other Horrors*, was published in 2011 by Lethe Press. You can find her online at liviallewellyn.com.

Laura Lush is the author of four collections of poetry, including *Carapace*, which was released in 2011 by Palimpsest Press, and a collection of short stories entitled *Going to the Zoo* by Turnstone Press. She teaches creative writing and academic English at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies. She lives in Guelph with her son, Jack.

Nick Mamatas is an author and editor whose work and activities have been nominated for the Hugo, World Fantasy, International Horror Guild, and Shirley Jackson awards. He's been nominated five times for the Bram Stoker award in five different categories, and won for his anthology with Ellen Datlow, *Haunted Legends*. His novels include *Move Under Ground*, *Sensation* and, with Brian Keene *The Damned Highway*. His short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Long Island Noir*, *New Haven Review*, and many other venues, and his non-fiction in *In These Times*, *Village Voice*, *Clamor*, *H+* and various anthologies.

Adam Marek is an award-winning short story writer. He won the 2011 Arts Foundation Short Story Fellowship, and was shortlisted for the inaugural Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award. His first story collection *Instruction manual for swallowing* was nominated for the Frank O'Connor Prize. His stories have appeared in many magazines, including: *Prospect* and *The Sunday Times Magazine*, and in many anthologies including *Lemistry*, *Litmus* and *The New Uncanny* from Comma Press, *The New Hero* from

Stone Skin Press, and *The Best British Short Stories 2011*. His second story collection came out in summer 2012. To subscribe to Adam's blog, Twitter and Facebook updates, visit www.adammarek.co.uk

Julie McArthur was born and raised in Ottawa. She now lives and writes in Toronto. Her grade two teacher Mrs. Hobbs commented on a report card, "In her stories, Julie writes good sentences and expresses interesting ideas." Her work has appeared in *Broken Pencil*, *Front & Centre*, *Lies With Occasional Truth*, *The Nashwaak Review*, *Other Voices*, and is forthcoming in *Dragnet Magazine*. Black Bile Press published her chapbook *Men and the Drink* in 2009. Find her online at www.juliemcarthur.com.

Janqui Mehta has worked in charity PR and communications for five years, previously working as a journalist. She started writing in 2009, with a particular interest in folk stories, mythology and immigration. "Great Grandmother and the Blessing of the Sea God" is her first short story publication.

Mexican by birth, Canadian by inclination, **Silvia Moreno-Garcia** lives in beautiful British Columbia with her family and two cats. Her short stories have appeared in *Fantasy Magazine*, *The Book of Cthulhu, Imaginarium 2012: The Best Canadian Speculative Writing*, among other places. In 2011, Silvia won the Carter V. Cooper Memorial Prize. She has also been a finalist for the Manchester Fiction Prize. Her first collection of stories, *Shedding Her Own Skin*, will be published next year.

Sarah Newton is a writer of science-fiction and fantasy role-playing games and fiction, including the transhuman space opera novel *Mindjammer*, and the ENnie Award-winning RPG setting of the same name; the techno-fantasy RPG setting *The Chronicles of Future Earth*; and the *Legends of Anglerre* role-playing game. She lives in rural France, surrounded by numerous farmyard animals.

Daniel Perry grew up in Glencoe, Ontario, and has an MA in Comparative Literature. His short fiction has been long-listed in the Vanderbilt-Exile Competition, has twice been awarded SLS Unified Literary Contest Fellowships, and has appeared in *The Prairie Journal*, *Paragon*, *The Nashwaak Review*, *NoD*, *White Wall Review*, *Echolocation*, *The Broken City*, *Wooden Rocket Press*, *Hart House Review* and *Broken Pencil Death Match IV*. He lives in Toronto, and at www.danielperryfiction.com.

Sandy Petersen got his start in the game industry in the early 1980s, on paper roleplaying games. His best-known work from that time is the cult game *Call of Cthulhu*, which has been translated into many languages and is still played world-wide. In 1988, he left paper games for the computer game world. He has worked for Microprose, id Software, and Ensemble Studios, where he was involved with *Civilization*, *Doom*, *Quake*, and the *Age of Empire* series, among others. He has taught courses in game design at the college level. His games have sold tens of millions of copies worldwide, and he has dozens of awards from the game industry. The award he is most proud of is his 1990 Gaming Hall of Fame plaque, which is given to only one person a year, and chosen by vote by the fan community. He still loves and plays games. He has five children, five grandchildren as of 2012, and a small mongrel dog.

The films of **JT Petty** include 2012's *Hellbenders* (starring Clancy Brown and Clifton Collins Jr.), *The Burrowers*, and *S&Man*. His writing contributions to video games include his work on the seminal *Splinter Cell*.

Ursula Pflug's award winning short fiction has appeared in over sixty publications in Canada, the US and the UK. Her story "Black Lace," which first appeared in *On Spec*, is taught at the University of Mysore in India in a course on Science Fiction by Canadian Women. The course also features stories by Phyllis Gottlieb, Nalo Hopkinson, Elisabeth Vonarburg and Margaret Atwood. Pflug is

author of the novel *Green Music*, and the story collection *After the Fires*. ATF was short listed for the Aurora Award and received an HM from the Sunburst Committee. Her new collection, *Harvesting the Moon*, is forthcoming from PS Publishing. Currently, she writes about books for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, edits short fiction for The Link, and teaches creative writing at Loyalist College. She also runs a reading series at Cat Sass Coffeehouse in Norwood, Ontario.

Wena Poon is a novelist and short story writer. Her bullfighting novel *Alex y Robert* was made by the BBC into a ten-episode Radio 4 series. She is a two-time nominee for the Frank O'Connor Award and the Singapore Literature Prize, for her fiction collections *Lions in Winter* and *The Proper Care of Foxes*. She won the Willesden Herald Short Story Prize and was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize in Poetry. Her sci-fi series *The Biophilia Omnibus* was voted Best Book Gift of the Year by CNN Singapore. She lives in Austin, Texas.

The games of designer **Epidiah Ravachol** include *Dread* and *Time & Temp*. Find him at dig1000holes.wordpress.com.

Aaron Rosenberg is an award-winning, bestselling novelist, children's book author, and game designer. His novels include *No Small Bills* and *For This Is Hell*, the *Dread Remora* space-opera series, and the O.C.L.T. supernatural thriller series, plus novels for *Star Trek*, *Warhammer*, *WarCraft*, and *Eureka*. His children's books include *Bandslam: The Novel*, books for *iCarly*, *PowerPuff Girls*, and *Transformers Animated*, and the original series *Pete and Penny's Pizza Puzzles*. His RPG work includes *Asylum*, *Spookshow*, the Origins Award-winning *Gamemastering Secrets*, *The Supernatural Roleplaying Game*, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, and *The Deryni Roleplaying Game*. You can visit him online at gryphonrose.com or follow him on Twitter @gryphonrose.

Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan is a freelance writer based in Ireland. He's written role-playing games (*Paranoia*, *Traveller*, *Laundry Files*), computer games (*Age of Conan*) and novels (his first, *Reality Optional*, was published by Ultraviolet Books in 2011). He is approximately 1.9 million micrometers tall.

Richard Scarsbrook is the author of the books *Cheeseburger Subversive*, *Featherless Bipeds*, *Destiny's Telescope*, and *The Monkeyface Chronicles* (which won the Ontario Library Association's 2011 White Pine Award). His books have been short-listed for the CLA Book of the Year Award (twice), the Stellar Book Prize, and ReLit Award. Richard teaches creative writing courses at George Brown and Humber Colleges, runs a freelance editing business, performs in several bands, and sometimes sleeps. You can find out more about his literary adventures at www.richardscarsbrook.com.

Ekaterina Sedia resides in the Pinelands of New Jersey. Her critically acclaimed novels, *The Secret History of Moscow*, *The Alchemy of Stone*, *The House of Discarded Dreams* and *Heart of Iron* were published by Prime Books. Her short stories have sold to *Analog*, *Baen's Universe*, *Subterranean* and *Clarkesworld*, as well as numerous anthologies, including *Haunted Legends* and *Magic in the Mirrorstone*. She is also the editor of *Paper Cities* (World Fantasy Award winner), *Running with the Pack* and *Bewere the Night*, as well as forthcoming *Bloody Fabulous*. Visit her at www.ekaterinasedia.com.

Greg Stolze was born in 1970 and has spent the intervening years reading entirely too much and turning any wayward thought he happens to have into stories, games, and woodblock prints. You can find the stories and games on his home on the web, www.gregstolze.com. His most recent novels include *SWITCHFLIPPED*, an urban fantasy about romance, Kung Fu and witchcraft; and *Mask of the Other*, a Lovecraftian war story about the unfortunate soldiers who trip over Saddam's secret

occult weapon program in 1991. Greg is a Scorpio who doesn't believe in horoscopes and he is terribly, terribly forgetful.

Molly Tanzer writes and works and does other stuff in Boulder, Colorado. Her debut book, *A Pretty Mouth*, is forthcoming from Lazy Fascist Press in late 2012. Her fiction has appeared in *The Book of Cthulhu*, *Running with the Pack*, and *Future Lovecraft*, and is forthcoming in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*. Find her at mollytanzer.com, @molly_the_tanz, or at the top of a mountain, probably drinking a beer.

Benj Tentt is the *nom de plume* of a visual artist who lives in Texas.

Sue Train studied French, and a bit of German, at University College London. After several years working in business and in the City as a translator/client newsletter writer she retrained in education and has been a university teacher of French since 1989. She lives in London with her husband and has two grown-up children.

Genevieve Valentine's fiction has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *Journal of Mythic Arts*, *Fantasy Magazine* and others, and in anthologies *The Living Dead 2*, *Running with the Pack*, *Teeth*, and more. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Lightspeed*, *Tor.com*, *Weird Tales*, and more, and she is the co-author of *Geek Wisdom*, a book of pop-culture philosophy. Her first novel, *Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti*, has won the 2012 Crawford Award from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. Her appetite for bad movies is insatiable, a tragedy she tracks on her blog, genevievevalentine.com.

Monica Valentinelli is an author who lurks in the dark. Her original tales and media tie-in stories have featured vampires, cybernetic birds, zombies, and psychotic teddy bears. Recently, she published a science fiction novella titled *Redwing's Gambit* for the *Bulldogs!* RPG. For more about Monica, visit www.mlvwrites.com.

Halli Villegas is a writer originally from Detroit, who now lives in Barrie, Ontario. She has published three collections of poetry, a collection of psychological ghost stories (*The Hairwreath and Other Stories*) and pieces in numerous anthologies including *Chilling Tales 2* and *The White Collar Anthology*. Her work has also appeared in magazines both print and online. She is also the publisher of Tightrope Books.

Kyla Ward is a Sydney-based creative who works in many modes. Her latest release is *The Land of Bad Dreams*, a collection of dark and fantastic poetry. Her novel *Prismatic* (co-authored as Edwina Grey) won an Aurealis Award for Best Horror. Her short fiction has appeared in *Ticonderoga Online*, *Shadowed Realms*, *Borderlands*, Gothic.net and in the *Macabre* anthology, among others. Her work on role-playing games includes *Demon: The Fallen*. Her short film, *Bad Reception*, screened at the Third International Vampire Film Festival and she is a member of the Theatre of Blood repertory company which has also produced her work. A practising occultist, she likes raptors, swordplay and the Hellfire Club. To see more strange things, try www.tabularasa.info.

Chuck Wendig is a novelist, screenwriter, and game designer. He's the author of *Blackbirds*, *Double Dead* and *Dinocalypse Now*, and is co-writer of the short film "Pandemic", the feature film *HiM*, and the Emmy-nominated digital narrative *Collapsus*. He lives in Pennsylvania with wife, taco terrier, and tiny human.

Heather J Wood was born and raised in Montreal. She now lives and writes in Toronto, where she works as an editor, copywriter and publicist. She is the author of two novels, *Fortune Cookie* (Tightrope Books, 2009) and the teen-oriented *Roll With It* (Tightrope Books, 2011). Her short fiction has appeared in several North American journals and anthologies. Heather J Wood is the current Artistic Director of Toronto's *Rowers Pub Reading Series*.

Jim Zub is a writer, artist and art instructor based in Toronto, Canada. Over the past ten years he's worked for a diverse array of publishing, movie and video game clients including Disney, Warner Bros., Capcom, Hasbro, Namco-Bandai and Mattel. He juggles his time between being a Project Manager for UDON Entertainment and Professor of Animation for Seneca College. His current projects include *Makeshift Miracle*, a modern day fable, *Skullkickers*, a sword & sorcery action-comedy, and *Sky Kid*, a World War I-era airborne adventure with anthropomorphic animals. You can find him online at www.zubkavich.com and on twitter at @jimzub.



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