

on spec


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theme issue: "O for a muse of fire..." Shakespeare 2002

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“O for a muse of fire...”

Holly Phillips, Fiction Editor

ONCE AGAIN I HAVE BEEN PUT IN THE SLIGHTLY EMBARRASSING position of having to write the editorial for an issue in which one of my own stories appears. (Yes, I have had a word with the folks who stuck me with the job. The problem is, *they* all have to work for a living.) In any event, embarrassing as it is, at least it gives me the opportunity to explain. It all started way back in the spring of 2001...

This was long before I was taught the secret editorial handshake. I was just a regular jane of a writer who was trying to figure out this whole short story thing. When I pounced on the latest issue of *On Spec*, it was, first, to find my name in the “In upcoming issues” column, and then to find out which lucky sods’ stories were in *this* issue. It was only when I was actually reading the thing that I found, sandwiched between stories by Steve Mohn and Catherine MacLeod, the theme for 2002: “O for a muse of fire...” it said at the top of the page.

Shakespeare? Seriously?

“Strong themes, strong emotions...characters facing a crisis...archetypes that work...” Okay, okay, it’s impressive, audacious, ambitious.

Great. But is it possible? I mean, take a play like *King Lear*. How the heck could you work through those themes in the course of a short story? Think about it: the decay of a powerful parent, the children's desire to have that power for themselves, their resentment at his decay, their unwilling regret for the loss of the protective side of parental authority... in six thousand words or less? Come on!

But you know how these things work. It bugged me. It niggled in the back of my mind. What about this idea? What about that character? Betrayal is always interesting, I mused, Shakespeare's plays are full of betrayal. And think of all the different kinds of betrayal there are. Think of all the different kinds of loyalty. Think of all the crazy, dysfunctional families he wrote about—now there's a universal theme! I saw a fabulous production of *Lear* on PBS, and then I remembered this idea for a character I had squirreled away in one of my notebooks, and "An Instant Remedy" was born. I stuck it in the mail; a couple months later I was invited to join the On Spec editorial collective; a couple months after that, I found my own story tucked into the first pile of manuscripts I ever got to read in my editorial capacity. Weird, but also kind of fun.

What's been even more fun has been reading all the other theme submissions. There's no denying that the thought of trying to fill the mighty Will's buskins is pretty damn intimidating. I'm sure I wasn't the only one to cry, "You can't put all that in a short story!" But there's also a deep well of inspiration to draw upon. Writers looked to the comedies, the tragedies, even the sonnets, and wrote poignant, tender, dramatic, humorous, satirical stories. And this, of course, is what the theme is all about. The depth of Shakespeare's insight, his imagination, his vision, his relish for the grand gesture and the big laugh—who wouldn't be inspired?

Okay, says the skeptical reader, but why should a *speculative fiction* magazine be pushing a Shakespeare theme? Wouldn't it make more sense in the literary realm?

The truth is, Shakespeare should have pride of place on the bookshelves of every SF reader out there. Shakespeare was One Of Us. He invented settings, he conjured faeries, he dined with ghosts. He kept his characters absolutely real, whether they were chatting with their dead fathers in Denmark, falling in love with donkey-headed fools, or keeping Caliban from making inappropriate suggestions to their daughters. Moreover, like all good writers, regardless of genre, he wrote with passion for his subjects, and with delight in his craft. What's not to love?

And yet...

I have met a lot of people who have explained to me, with varying degrees of embarrassment and scorn, that they've never been able to

read science fiction because they “found all the weird names/gadgets/ places/words too hard to keep straight in their heads.” I don’t know, maybe it’s a valid point. Maybe it’s just another excuse for snobbery. I certainly have never found Iain M. Banks, say, harder to keep up with than Michael Ondaatje. So I just can’t fathom why any reader of SF, who presumably not only tolerates such things but actively enjoys them, would take a pass on Shakespeare because he is too hard. But it happens. “It’s so highbrow,” they say, “the language is so hard, it’s so *old!* How can it possibly be relevant to what I do, or even to what I write?”

Highbrow? Two daughters trying to get the best out of their senile old dad before the favorite walks away with the good china?

Language? Good grief, have you read *A Clockwork Orange*?

Old? When Jean Aul’s best sellers are set in the freaking *Paleolithic*???

But enough with the lecture already. I should just get out of your way and let you read the stories: they’re good enough to convince the most hardened of skeptics. We have modern fantasies by Elaine Chen, Kate Riedel and Leah Bobet, inspired by *King Lear*, the sonnets, and *The Tempest*, respectively. We have a very funny futuristic romance by Brandon D. Rabin, and Steve-the-film-guru-Mohn has given us a whole new way of looking at *Forbidden Planet*, which was, of course, based on *The Tempest*. Trust me, his take will make your toes curl. We have period fantasies by Leslie Brown and yours truly, and a grace note by Catherine MacLeod, one of her “Alphabetia” postcards that by some marvelous coincidence happened to fall ever so creepily into the theme. The sheer variety is dazzling. If you’re *still* not convinced by the end, then we’ll talk ... but I don’t think we’ll need to. This issue is solid proof that the fiery muse is alive and well and living in Canada. Enjoy. •

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*Bad things happen when you don't fit
in. When you're too smart for your own
good. When your name's Cordelia and
you refuse to suck up to your dad...*

*How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child!*

— *King Lear*, Act I, Scene iv

More than Salt

E.L. Chen

THE WINO ON THE CORNER SAYS HE'S MY FATHER. HA. MY father is some serial jerk who didn't stick around long enough to pick out baby names with my mom.

"Cordelia," the wino says in a bad English accent as I approach the crosswalk. Cordelia's not my name.

I eye the traffic lights. Still red. Great. I shift my schoolbag to my other shoulder and fake interest in the chipped black polish on my thumbnail.

"Cordelia," he says. "Do you not recognize your sire?"

As if I could forget a loser like him. Greasy tufts of white hair and a face sewn from faded red leather. Sprawled against a rusted three-wheeled shopping cart piled with empties, mateless shoes, blankets, and whatever else homeless albies keep in shopping carts. His voice rising and trembling and dissolving into the dull buzz of afternoon traffic. "Cruel Cordelia," he says, "dost thou repudiate thy father, thy lord, thy king? O,

unkind wench, as a serpent's tooth pierces an egg thou rend my heart."

"My name's not Cordelia," I tell him.

"What is thy name?"

I say nothing. I wish he'd ask me for spare change instead, even though what little cash I have has to tide me over until I get birthday money next week.

"If thou dost not know thy name, thou must be a Fool. Come, come, I have need for a Fool." His sunburned face stretches and splits, revealing front teeth stained a malt liquor brown. I wince. He smells like the time I went to Diane Rybcynski's party—back when we were still friends—and at least one person's fake ID had been accepted at the LCBO.

"I don't think so," I say, edging closer to the curb.

At the first glimpse of green, a desperate grip holds me back from the crosswalk as my fellow pedestrians surge ahead without me.

"Watch it!" I yank my arm away and turn to confront the old lech. "What do you think you're—"

The intersection bleeds and blurs before my eyes like a stain spreading on fabric. Only the old wino remains in focus—although he appears to be a different man, straight-backed and proud, his hair tamed by a circle of gold that must be heavier than it looks. I blink. "What—"

FOOL: —saith my Lord? (*Bows.*)

KING: Sweet Fool, make me forget that I hath like a trefoil leaf not one daughter but three. Would that I hadst pluck'd the green from the stem ere the rot touch'd me!

FOOL: I shall make thee merry, Nuncle, and thou shalt forget. (*Pauses.*) Hey! What the hell—

"—is going on?"

I discover that I'm buried in a ragged sweater that appears to be made up of pieces of other ragged sweaters. I tear it over my head; it smells surprisingly clean, like fabric softener.

"Gentle Fool, be merry, make me forget that I hath not one daughter but three," the king says.

King?

I rub my eyes. The old man's wearing a frayed Maple Leafs toque, not a coronet.

Okay. I'm losing my mind. I chuck the fool's motley—the sweater—into the shopping cart and sling my schoolbag over my shoulder so violently that my textbooks and binders bite into my back. If I don't walk away

right now my head is going to burst with the impossibilities.

“Sweet, gentle Fool,” he says, “wouldst thou forsake me too?”

“Good sir—I mean—”

I walk away.

THE APARTMENT DOOR SWINGS IN A WIDE ARC AND BOUNCES OFF OF MOM’S discarded sneakers. I kick off my boots and peel a crumpled form and a ballpoint pen from the bottom of my schoolbag. “I need you to sign this,” I say, stepping into the kitchenette. “Or I won’t graduate.”

Mom looks up, one hand stirring a pot of spaghetti with a wooden spoon, the other holding one of her night school textbooks. She’s still wearing her polyester supermarket smock. “Not again.” She tucks the spoon under one arm, smooths the form on the counter and scribbles her name on the dotted line. “I wish you wouldn’t be so rebellious.”

“Mom, rebellion is saying ‘Screw you!’ Not ‘You couldn’t care less about how we do in your class ’cause your pension kicks in next year.’”

“Is that what you said?”

“Yeah. To Mrs. Daniels. ’Cause it’s true. She hates teaching English to us.”

“Honey, just because it’s true doesn’t mean you should go around telling people.”

I roll my eyes, anticipating her next words. One. Two—

“You need discipline,” she says, pointing the wet wooden spoon at me. “If only I’d listened to Oprah and provided you with a father figure...”

Three.

“...you wear those ugly black clothes, you covered up your pretty hair with that dye... I wish you’d wear something pink for a change. Why don’t you go shopping with Diane?”

Because I’m tired of caring about what people think of me. Because I just want to finish high school and go to college, get out of the city. Because Diane’s a bitch.

I say, in my best Diane voice, “Because, like, pink is so *out*.”

“And honey, *call* when you’re going to be late. I’ve got class tonight. I don’t have time to worry about where you are.”

“Mom...” The word comes out as two long syllables. “It’s not my fault. There was this wino who wouldn’t let me go—”

The spoon clatters onto the linoleum.

“Oh my God.” Mom splays her book on the counter and picks up the spoon. “Oh my God. Are you all right? Did he—touch you? I’ll call Jerry and—”

Me and my big fat mouth. I’ve unleashed Typhoon Mom. “No, he

didn't *molest* me."

"What did he do?"

My mouth's open like Pandora's box, letting everything out. "...and the next thing I know, I'm wearing a Salvation Army sweater and treating him like a king."

Mom rinses the spoon in the sink and raps it against the edge of the pot. "Is this some kind of ploy for attention? Because if it is, it's not funny. I know you don't approve of me and Jerry..."

"No, it's not Jerry," I say. "Forget it."

"Forget it? My *teenage* daughter is spending time with some drunken *pervert* and I'm supposed to forget it? Hon, I don't think that's the kind of extracurricular activity that universities want to see on your application."

"Mom..." Two syllables again, buying me time to scavenge the right words to get her off my back. "He's just a crazy who thinks he's starring in *King Lear*."

"What, does he speak in iambic pentagram or something?"

"That's iambic *pentameter*. And he's probably just some middle-management guy who got laid off from his dot-com and then lost his marbles when his SUV got repo'd. He's harmless."

"Well..." She starts stirring the pasta again, which means that I've almost pushed her over the edge to my side. Almost. "I'd feel better if we talked to Jerry."

SO I'M NONCHALANTLY STROLLING DOWN THE STREET WITH AN OH-SO STICKY cinnamon bun, a Thermos full of chicken noodle soup and a pocket stuffed with large-sized ZipLoc baggies. Courtesy of Officer Jerry, Mom's gentleman caller. They're not serious, thank God—but they've been "not serious" for four years now.

Sometimes I joke that she should run off to Niagara Falls with him, but she says she has to think of me. Ha. I'm not a kid anymore; I'm almost eighteen. It's like she's using me as an excuse to keep Jerry at arm's length. Using me as an excuse for her ho-hum life of wasted chances. At least that's what I tell myself when I'm being optimistic—that it's an excuse. It beats being a *reason*. It beats the truth.

See? Can't even keep my mouth shut when I'm talking to myself.

"Cordelia!"

The wino who thinks he's King Lear raises a paper-bagged bottle in salute. "Hey there, Your Majesty," I say. "Got room on your throne?"

As I squat beside him on a flattened cardboard box, I realize that he's got the best seat in the house—a panhandler's-eye view of one of Toron-

to's busiest intersections. People scurry past, like roaches flushed out of the shadows by a flashlight, ignoring everything around them except for some point in the horizon.

The old guy still smells like a house party, minus the pot. The moldy sweat odor makes up for it, though. I don't know how Jerry talked me into this.

The bun, first. "I'm not Cordelia. I'm your Fool, remember? I brought you something to eat." I hand him the cinnamon bun. I expect him to tear away the waxed paper and devour the bun in a single gulp, but he eats with dignity, tearing off bite-sized pieces with his fingers and chewing each thoroughly and thoughtfully.

"My thanks, good Fool," he says.

"No problem."

The soup, next. I pass him the Thermos. His hand fumbles with the smooth surface; our fingers touch. The world splits and slides away, like parting curtains.

"Damn," I say. "Not—"

FOOL: —again, Nuncle, what merriment shall I devise? I'll make a Fool of you yet, and embellish thy noble countenance with smilets.

KING: (*Gesturing.*) Take up thy sceptre, Fool, and sound thy unruly bells. I would see thy exertions.

FOOL: (*Rattles sceptre at passing maid.*) Good mistress, spare a coin for a wise man and a Fool.

KING: (*Chuckling.*) Who is the wise man, and who is the Fool?

FOOL: Why, thou art Fool, Nuncle. Art fool for believing thou wert cuckolded by a cuckoo, when the cuckoo is thy child.

KING: Impertinent knave! (*Boxes FOOL's ears.*)

FOOL: (*Dances out of KING's reach. Sings:*)

*He who hath been grievously maligned,
With a hey, ho, the wind and the rain;
Must make amends lest he grow blind,
For the rain it raineth every day.*

Nuncle, three servants approacheth.

KING: 'Tis my daughters' retainers. Speak, rascals. What saith thy mistresses?

[Enter SERVANTS.]

FIRST SERVANT: Oh my God, is this—

“—what you’re doing after school now?”

Diane Rybcynski raises overplucked eyebrows, her lipglossed mouth curled in a mocking smile. Dylan, her on-again, off-again boyfriend, and her new best friend/flunky Brittany have similar expressions on their faces.

“That’s like, *so* gross,” Brittany says, wrinkling her nose.

I finger my jester’s sceptre protectively—only to discover that I’m tracing the battered ridges of a faded plastic baby rattle. “It’s, uh, performance art,” I say, tossing the rattle back into the shopping cart.

“Yeah. Right.” Diane snorts and struts away.

“You are *so* weird,” Brittany says, trailing behind Diane, and I know that exaggerated accounts of my after-school activities will be scrawled inside a stall in the girl’s washroom by third period tomorrow.

Dylan lingers like a bad cold. “Listen,” he drawls, “if you need a place to stay, you can crash with me. My parents are out of town this week.”

“I’d rather live out here on the street, thank you very much.”

The leer crumples into disgust. “Freakin’ dyke,” he mutters, loping after Diane and Brittany. I have to laugh.

I watch Dylan’s hand stray to Brittany’s hip. She jumps and gives him a smilet—I mean, a little smile. Diane, of course, is oblivious. Some people only believe what they want to believe. Speaking of which—

“Arrogant, brazen rogues! They dare show such insolence to a king? I am not in my dotage! Like a ruthless plague my daughters’ enmity hath infected them!”

I take a baggie from my pocket and pick up the now-empty Thermos. The bag makes a metallic, slithering sound as the flask parts the thin plastic walls.

“Farewell, Your Majesty,” I say, scrambling to my feet. “Parting is such sweet sorrow.”

“CHRISTOPHER MELCHIOR BARCLAY,” JERRY SAYS. “RETIRED ENGLISH PROF, DRUNK tank alumnus and one-time murder suspect.”

“*What?*” The word flies out of Mom and me as one voice.

“Are you sure?” Mom asks.

“The fingerprints were pretty clear,” he says. “Pulled up a recent drunk driving conviction. Name rang a bell, so I did some more digging.” He hands her a sheaf of photocopies. “Last summer they fished

his runaway daughter out of Lake Ontario. Her sisters said that before she left, she'd had a big fight with their dad over her boyfriend, so he was a suspect."

"So he's an alcoholic ex-con," Mom says in a pointed I-told-you-so voice.

"Not exactly. He's old, and the traffic cops nabbed him before he hurt anyone, so he got off with a license suspension and community service. And the judge recommended rehab and grief counselling."

"I don't think it worked," I mutter, peering over Mom's shoulder. Although the photocopy of Emma Barclay's newspaper picture is blotched and streaky, I can make out the dark lipstick, the heavily outlined eyes, the stringy black hair with pale roots, the pout that's just the right combination of boredom and contempt. She probably said a lot of things that people didn't want to hear, too.

"This Christopher Barclay didn't kill her, did he?" Mom says.

Jerry shakes his head. "Nope. It was the no-good psycho boyfriend. Was twice her age and had a history of domestic abuse."

Mom blanches. "Poor girl," she says, looking at me, as if there's a lesson to be learned from Emma Barclay's misfortune. *This is what happens to teenage girls who dye their hair black and wear too much dark lipstick.*

I take Emma's photo from Mom. The youngest of three daughters, the caption says. The misfit, her sullen expression says. The youngest daughter in fairy tales, the one who's too smart and mouthy for her own good and tells her father that she loves him more than she loves salt. I bet that's what they were fighting about before she ran off.

Or maybe they were fighting over her appearance, like Mom and I fight over mine. Mom thinks that all I have to do is strip the dye from my hair and start shopping from brand-name lifestyle franchise stores, and then everything will be okay. Happily ever after. Like fairy tales.

Although now I know that the stories rarely end well. Even though the prince and princess get hitched, the stepmother dies a horrible death. Forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes until she drops dead. Or rolled through town in a barrel with spikes and nails driven into it.

Mrs. Daniels, my English teacher, says that comedies usually end in weddings because the loner protagonist becomes integrated into society through marriage. Think of outcast Rosalind. Fresh-off-the-boat Viola. The fugitive lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

But one person's comedy is another's tragedy. Malvolio leaves town humiliated. Phebe settles for second-best because the love of her life is actually Rosalind in disguise. Demetrius never receives an antidote to the love potion, which I always found creepy. And all sorts of nasty, R-rated

things happen in fairy tales to those who don't quite fit into the new status quo.

Bad things happen when you don't fit in. When you're too smart and mouthy for your own good. When your name's Cordelia and you refuse to suck up to your dad.

"Obviously Barclay's fixated on you because of the surface resemblance to his daughter," Jerry says. "But she's in no danger," he adds, turning to Mom. She's still looking at me. I duck my head and scratch at my nail polish. Little black flakes fall to the faded carpet like freshly ground pepper.

"The boyfriend definitely killed Emma," Jerry says. "Barclay's probably just mad with grief. I mean, can you imagine? You have a big fight with your daughter, words are said that you can't take back, she storms out—and you think that one of these days you'll forgive each other, but you never see her—"

Mom's gaze bounces off of me to Jerry. A stricken expression flashes across her face. Maybe she was remembering her own father, who died before I was born.

"Sorry," Jerry says, after an awkward silence. "I'm rambling. Now, your mom says you've been sharing hallucinatory experiences with this guy?"

The way he puts it makes me realize how crazy it sounds. "Uh—"

"Did Barclay give you anything?" he says in a patronizing voice. If his station interrogates suspects with the old good cop/bad cop routine, he must be the good cop. "Something he said would make you feel good? Open your mind? Make you *cooler* than the other kids?"

"Drugs? You think I'm on *drugs*?"

I look to Mom for help. She says, "Honey, you *have* changed dramatically this past year—changed your clothes, your hair, cut off all your old friends—"

"Take a urine sample if you want. Jeez." I throw up my hands, trying to think of a logical explanation to give them. Too much coffee. Late-teens crisis. Hereditary insanity. PMS.

All these explanations seem more ridiculous than a harmless old man whose grasp of reality is stronger than mine.

"I must've been imagining things," I say. "The school year's almost over. It's stress."

Jerry glances at Mom for her reaction. She looks skeptical.

"You know," I say, "it must be those all-nighters I've been pulling, studying *King Lear* for the English exam. I can't give Mrs. Daniels an excuse to fail me, after what I said to her."

He nods. "Well, be sure to get a good night's sleep. You won't be able

to write your exams if you're tired."

Case closed, thank God. Mom says, "I'd better start dinner. You staying, Jerry?"

"Sure. Need help?"

He joins Mom in the kitchenette, leaving the details of Emma Barclay's life and death sprawled on the coffee table. I gather them up and chuck them back in their folder.

I almost believe it myself—the all-nighters spent poring over *King Lear*—except we're doing *Hamlet* this semester.

I HATE BEING A TEENAGER. NO ONE TAKES YOU SERIOUSLY. ADULTS THINK YOU'RE A rebellious hipster who can't see beyond that festering microcosm called high school. They think you don't know anything, don't understand anything. And we don't. Because no one tells us anything, no one's straight with us. Ironically, the only adult who's been sincere with me is Barclay.

"Cordelia."

And yeah, sure, you can throw pop psychology at me. I've seen enough daytime talk shows to recognize that as the daughter of a working class single mother, I'm using Barclay as a father figure. But the truth is that I feel sorry for him.

"Hi, Professor Barclay," I say, stopping in front of his cardboard throne although I know that there's birthday cake waiting for me at home.

"Thou art mistaken, dear child," he says, tipping the contents of his paper-bagged bottle down his throat.

"Oh. Right." I pluck the baby rattle from the shopping cart and shake it above his head. "I'm not Cordelia, Your Majesty. I'm your Fool."

His face brightens. I drop the rattle back into the cart. "But I can't stay. I brought you something, though." I pull a sandwich and a drinking box from my schoolbag. "It's not much. I'll buy you something better after I get birthday money." I set the food on the ground so our hands won't accidentally touch. "See ya."

"I prithee, my Fool," he calls out. I stop, turn. Slowly, because I'm not sure if reality is going to slip through my fingers again, even though Barclay hasn't touched me.

A homeless old man in ragged toque, grimy dress shirt and ill-fitting wool slacks squints at me with bleary eyes. "Dost thou believe that Cordelia shalt return? Her exit was ever so unnatural, so hasty."

"I don't know," I say. "I—I gotta go. See you tomorrow."

I give him an exaggerated bow and nearly knock the briefcase from a passing businessman's grasp. "Crazy teenagers," he mutters, scuttling off

the curb and onto the crosswalk. I bow again and start for home.

“BREAK OUT THE CAKE,” I SAY AS I FLING OPEN THE APARTMENT DOOR. “THE birthday girl’s home.”

I drop my schoolbag and enter the living room without bothering to unlace my boots. “I accept cash, checks, and most major credit cards—what’s *he* doing here?”

Jerry stands beside Mom, his arm around her shoulders. I think, *Oh no, this is it, they’re finally getting married*, but then Mom says, “Honey, I have something to tell you,” in a *really* shaky voice, like she’s been building up the courage to speak to me for years. And she said *I*, not *we*, so I know that Jerry’s only there as moral support. Which perplexes me even more.

Mom holds out a birthday card-sized envelope that’s addressed to me in an unfamiliar, old-fashioned cursive scrawl. I take it.

“Who’s this from?”

“My—your grandfather. My father.”

A chill creeps slowly over my body with icy cold feet. “I thought Grandfather was dead.”

Mom takes a deep breath and says, “He is to me.” The resigned tone of her voice tells me that she’s just burned all the bridges behind her.

“You told me Grandfather was dead.” My voice curves upward, high and shrill. Jerry squeezes Mom’s shoulder but looks at me, unblinking, unsurprised. “*He* knew—and not me?”

Their silence betrays assent.

“What about my grandmother? Is she dead to you too?”

Mom says, “Mama died when I was young, like I told you. That much is true. But Daddy—” She sighs, and to my surprise her mouth twists into a bitter, contemptuous line. “After all this time, Daddy wants to reconcile. I want nothing to do with him. But you’re eighteen now. An adult. You can make your own decisions. You can pass your own judgment on that proud, stubborn son of a bitch.”

I’m so shocked at Mom’s harsh words that my mouth shoots off without thinking. “Ha. Look who’s talking. Now who’s the proud stubborn bitch?”

“Watch what you say to your mother!” Jerry barks. But Mom’s one step ahead of him.

Her slap hits me so hard and fast that I drop the envelope. “You don’t understand,” she says. “I loved him so much. He was my hero. I could always depend on him. After Mama died, Daddy was there to take care of things, take care of me, no matter what. And then he threw me out.”

So that's why Mom got all freaked out the other day when Jerry started talking about fathers and daughters. "Because of me," I say, rubbing my stinging cheek.

"Yes." She closes her eyes. "Because I was pregnant with you."

"What about *my* father?"

Jerry says, "Go on. Tell her. She deserves the truth."

The truth. Ha. And Mom's always lecturing me about blurting out things that no one wants to hear. Because no one wants to hear the truth. Look what happens in fairy tales—the king kicks out his youngest daughter after she tells him she loves him more than she loves salt. Lear banishes Cordelia. Emma Barclay runs away.

I squeeze out a small smile. A *smilet*, as Barclay would say. And suddenly I understand what Mrs. Daniels means when she says that there's little difference between comedy and tragedy. No one likes the truth, so they laugh at it. They laugh because if they don't, they'll cry—or start screaming.

I say, "So my father's not a jerk after all, even though he ditched you when you got pregnant? And all this time I've been hating him when he's really a saint."

I stare in horrified fascination as Mom's eyelids flicker and a single tear escapes, running down her face in a thin rivulet.

"Honey," she says, "your father raped me."

Oh dear God.

"He took me home after a dance... Daddy was out, and—and—"

Oh. Dear. God.

"It was a small town, you know. Word got around. Everyone thought it was my fault, that I'd led him on. They didn't have words like 'date rape' back then. Good girls didn't do it; bad girls did and got what they deserved."

Emma Barclay's sulky, dark-lipped face flashes in my mind. The misfit. The daughter who's too smart and mouthy for her own good. Had Emma gotten what she'd deserved? Bad things happen to those who don't fit into the status quo, after all. Look what happened to Mom.

Does that mean *I'm* a bad thing?

Now that she's confessed the brunt of the truth, her remaining words flood out. "When Daddy found out I was pregnant he kicked me out and I haven't been back since."

Oh dear God, say something. For once in your life, can't you say something?

"You told me Grandfather was dead," I say.

"He is to me."

"You told me lots of things."

Jerry says, “She doesn’t have to justify her choices to you! She was only trying to—”

Mom holds up her hand. Jerry shuts up.

“You were little,” she says, “and wanted to know why other kids’ drawings of families were different than yours. You couldn’t understand.”

Couldn’t understand. How condescending. I’d expect that from Jerry, not Mom. “Please,” I say, realizing helplessly that I’m about to be very cruel. But it’s so easy to be cruel. Easier than swallowing pride and admitting to things that are better left unsaid. “Please, help me understand. You lied to me all these years. Or did you mean to tell me, but got caught up in the illusion that we were a happy family of two? The two of us, against him? Do you wish it had never happened? Do you wish that my f—”

I choke on the word, but then I wield it like a blade, as sharp as a serpent’s tooth. “Do you wish that my *father* hadn’t touched you? Do you wish I’d never been born?”

“Honey, that’s not fair.”

“*Do you?*”

She looks away, unable to give an answer. She looks away at the stack of night-school textbooks, the polyester supermarket smock tossed over the second-hand sofa, the faded linoleum in the kitchenette. She looks away, but it’s answer enough.

I’m eighteen now. An adult. I can make my own decisions. I choose to start walking without any direction save for the front door.

PEOPLE LAUGH AT THE TRUTH BECAUSE IF THEY DON’T, THEY’LL CRY—OR START screaming. Surprisingly I haven’t started laughing or crying or screaming yet. I don’t know what I feel. I just know that I have to keep walking, or else the terrible truth will catch up to me.

“Cordelia, whither thou goest, child?”

“Hi, Professor Barclay,” I say.

His face struggles with the name. “Thou art mistaken.”

“Please,” I say, wearily, “not now.”

“Art thou ill? Thy wraith-like appearance distresses thy sire.”

Barclay reaches for my hand. I pull away but it’s too late. Our fingers graze each other. The world twists and tumbles. Turns upside down and inside out. I don’t know if it’s Barclay’s madness or the weight of Mom’s confession that’s pressing down, overwhelming me, spinning me like a top.

And I remember that he’s the only adult who has ever been honest with me, who has ever told me the truth—albeit *his* version of the truth.

“Father,” I say. “Sire.”

Barclay’s hand trembles around mine.

“Sire—”

CORDELIA: —’tis I, regretful Cordelia, thy once-beloved daughter. I beg thy forgiveness for my trespass.

KING: (*Embraces CORDELIA.*) Nay, thou art a Fool. ’Tis I who must plead forgiveness of thee.

CORDELIA: Sire, I... (*Steps away.*) No—I cannot—I can’t—

KING: Cordelia, daughter, thy vexation is unseemly.

CORDELIA: I can’t—no—

“—no.”

I break away from Barclay’s grasp. This is no more real than my childhood, when it was just Mom and me united in the wake of my supposedly deadbeat dad. It’s just another illusion. I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing out the vision of Barclay as King Lear. Two men dance in front of me, fighting for my attention: one with dignity, one without, both sad and tired.

Part of me wants to believe that this white-haired old man is my father, instead of the bastard who wouldn’t take no for an answer. But the other part of me is brewing anger in a cauldron too small for its contents.

No. This is no more real than my childhood. “For the hundredth time, I’m not your daughter. I’m nobody’s daughter.” I push down the hurt; anger oozes and bubbles up around it, taking its place.

He grabs at my hand again. “Cordelia, daughter—”

“Let go!” I wrench myself away. *This is no more real than my childhood.* “Your daughter’s dead! Your daughter’s *dead*, old man. Don’t you remember?”

He drops my hand as if it were a live snake and suddenly I’m left with the vision of one man. Barclay. Not the proud king, nor the delusional professor, but Barclay as he must have looked the second he heard his youngest daughter had been murdered. As I must have looked the second Mom told me that I had no father, only a history of violence and family scandal. The look of someone who has nothing—no hope, no love, no reason for living.

At least I have Mom, and as much as I hate to admit it, Jerry too. You’ve got to like a guy who loves your mom, without pressure, without ultimatums, without words, even though he’s not getting laid.

Love without words. I want to tell Barclay I'm sorry, but for the second time in my life I'm speechless. This is what all those misfit girls—Mom, Cordelia, Emma Barclay, that youngest salt-loving daughter in fairy tales—must've felt that fateful day they were banished from their home. A terrible helplessness, an inability to think of the words that'll make everything all right again, the words that'll make their fathers love them again.

A deflated shell of a man sits before me on his cardboard throne, weeping uncontrollably. "Emmy," he says. He looks up at me and smiles sadly—one of those tragedy-defying *smilets*. There's a little bit of Lear in his eyes, but I know that the king is gone.

Barclay's delusions were no more real than my childhood. But they were real to him; hope was all he had left. And I took it away. Me and my big mouth. I take his wrinkled, sunburned hand in mine. Nothing happens—he's still Barclay, still weeping, repeating Emma's name over and over as if it'll bring her back.

I sit with Barclay until I can't watch his pain anymore—a mirror of my face half an hour ago—and then I retrace my steps back home in fierce, rapid strides.

SO MY HAPPY CHILDHOOD WAS A BIG FAT LIE, BUT IT WAS REAL TO ME. MAYBE MOM wasn't as happy, but I can see now that it took guts to raise me. She could've abandoned me, or given me up for adoption, or she could've let herself become overwhelmed with resentment. But she didn't. That took strength. And love. Like telling your royal prick of a dad that you love him more than salt.

Mom emerges from the kitchenette as I burst into the apartment. "Honey," she says, her smile faint but firm, "you're just in time for cake. Happy birthday."

Her eyes are as red as mine but neither of us mention it.

"Thanks, Mom," I say. *I'm sorry and I love you*, I don't say. I give her a hug that breaks the world record for length and ferocity. Some things are sweeter, more honest when left unsaid. And sweeter still when understood without words.

She pulls a white envelope from between the pages of one of her textbooks. At first I think it's my eagerly anticipated birthday money, but then I see that the flap is torn and the front is addressed in a now-familiar, tear-stained, old-fashioned cursive.

"He sent me one too," she says, and I know that even though Barclay will never have his Cordelia, Mom's found her Lear. Exeunt all.



I ADJUST MY GRIP ON MY DUFFEL BAG AND PRAY THAT MY GOOD DRESS ISN'T TOO wrinkled under a couple weeks' worth of laundry. I hope my wedding gift surprises Mom; my roommate helped me strip the dye from my hair last night, revealing a natural brown.

The panhandler perched on the corner mumbles to himself, even though I'm fair game; a young student home from college for the weekend, sure to have change in her pockets. After all, she needs quarters to call her parents from the bus station. But the old man stares at the asphalt, knobbly knees pulled under his chin, his chapped lips opening and closing silently. He doesn't even look up at the well-dressed woman who stands in front of him, speaking in low tones.

I draw closer and realize that the panhandler is Professor Barclay, and the woman looks like—

“Emma?” I say, unable to help myself.

The woman turns, her eyes widening with shock and trepidation, and I see that the resemblance is only faint. She's a good ten years older. One of her sisters, then. “Regan,” she says.

To cover up my embarrassment, I point at Barclay and say, “I thought he was in rehab.”

She closes her eyes, briefly. “He was. Got him off alcohol, but they couldn't do anything about his stubbornness.” Her smile is rueful. “He won't talk to us.”

She bends over her father and tucks a twenty into the empty coffee cup at his feet. “See you next week, Dad,” she says, walking away. He continues to mumble without acknowledging her.

I drop my bag and squat beside him. I have to lean in to hear his voice above the traffic. “*Actus est fabula*,” he says. “*Actus est fabula*.”

But even though Mom and Jerry are getting married, the play's far from over. Minor characters bleed off the stage and into the wings. Malvolio leaves town humiliated, swearing revenge. Demetrius never receives an antidote to the love potion. Barclay returns to the streets, and I'm the same misfit I always was, albeit with different colored hair.

“Hi, Professor Barclay,” I say.

He tilts his white head, noticing me at last. “Do I know you?” he asks.

I settle back on my butt and sit cross-legged. Mom and Grandpa aren't expecting me for another half hour. “My lord, dost thou not recognize me?”

He squints. “Cordelia?”

My smile wavers for a second. “No—'tis thy Fool, Nuncle.”

“Ah. Good Fool. Loyal Fool.” I can almost see the dignity seeping back into his bones. His back straightens. His chin lifts.

The baby rattle and shopping cart are long gone, so I pull my keys from my jacket pocket and dangle them from the key ring. The keys catch the light from the setting sun and make a thin, tinny jingling sound, like a handful of bells with stuck clappers. A passer-by drops a quarter into the coffee cup. •

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"...working together is all about learning to allow the process to develop, letting the accidents, the unplanned and the magic happen..."



"Rap A Tap Tap," from the Scholastic children's book of the same name © 2002 Leo & Diane Dillon

Legends: Leo & Diane Dillon

Leo and Diane Dillon are among the most talented and versatile illustrators in the United States, and their work has been an outstanding contribution to children of all races and cultures. Their artistry, the result of an inspired collaboration, has twice been awarded the Caldecott Medal, the highest honor for an American illustrator. Among their many honors, they have also received the Hamilton King Award for excellence in children's book illustration, the Coretta Scott King Award for distinguished African American illustration, and the Hugo Award for excellence in Science Fiction illustration. The following is the Dillons' biography, in their own words.



"Iron Tear" © 1992
Leo & Diane Dillon

WE MET IN PARSONS SCHOOL OF DESIGN AND COMPETED WITH each other right up to graduation. It so happened we also fell in love. When we decided to marry after graduation we knew the marriage wouldn't last long unless we joined forces and worked together rather than having separate careers.

It took a long time to adjust to each other, to learn to let go and let the art develop as we pass it back and forth. After a number of years we got the concept of the "third artist" who does something that neither of us would do and that helped a lot. Having two minds to brainstorm is a great advantage. We throw ideas back and forth and wait for that one idea we both get excited about. This process can take days or even weeks.

Throughout our career we've experimented with various styles and



"Flower Remedies" © 1976 Leo & Diane Dillon

techniques rather than specialize in only one. That was a disadvantage in the beginning because art directors preferred artists to specialize in one style. Once we were established, having many styles was an advantage because we had work from a variety of places and we were always busy. Our career began with record album covers, book jackets, advertising, and magazine work. Those early years were pretty lean and we took whatever came our way.

We freelanced for over ten years illustrating science fiction, fantasy, classic literature, movie posters, and a variety of subject matter before



"Sabriel" ©1996 Leo & Diane Dillon

we received our first picture book. That changed the direction of our career. The major part of our work now is children's books although we slip in a poster or book jacket now and then. We enjoy the variety,

Illustrating picture books allows us freedom and the challenge to create a world and the characters that live in it. We read a story many times to get a feeling and concept. Even though the words are our guide many things are not said. As illustrators it is our job to expand on the words, to illustrate between the lines, not just mimic what has been written. Each artist has his/her own vision and given the same manuscript



"Nine Hundred Grandmothers" ©1970s Leo & Diane Dillon

would create a very different and unique book. That is the essence of creation and what makes illustrating so magical to us.

It can take us from three months to a year to do a book. By the time we finish we feel the characters and the world they live in are old friends. It's a relief to be finished but there is a feeling of loss as well. We think of our books as our children, they go out into the world to stand on their own with the help of teachers and librarians. Some have a long and successful life while others fade all too soon. When we are involved in a book we have high hopes and dreams for it. Perhaps we are too close to see



"Dancing Couple" ©1990s Leo & Diane Dillon

clearly. It's a good lesson about not having control once the book is out of our hands. In a way, that's what working together is all about; learning to allow the process to develop, letting the accidents, the unplanned and the magic to happen, then working with that rather than trying to control the process back to our own separate vision.

It has been a fascinating experience, always interesting and new. We are thankful to our good spirits for such a rewarding life and we are grateful for all book lovers who care about books. •

*But what was I if I looked in a mirror
by day and saw Robby the Robot, then
became a marauding shapeshifter by
night, a splendid beast that knew no
bounds?*

*What a thrice-double ass
Was I, to take this drunkard for a god
And worship this dull fool!*

— *The Tempest*, Act V, Scene i

What Part of “Forbidden Planet” Did You Not Understand?

Steve Mohn

I TOLD MORBIUS THE OLD DISTRESS CALL HAD BEEN intercepted finally.

He didn't like it.

“Morbis, imbibe no more.” I set the bowl of ice and fresh-cut limes on his desk. “You know what it leads to.”

His hair was strewn across his forehead. His eyes had a mad, white look.

“Robby.” He squinted at something in his mind. “The Krel^a, Robby. The Krel^a were *terrible*, weren't they?”

“Yes, Morbis. Terrible.” It's best to agree with Morbis, even if he

speaks against the superior race that ruled here long before the first human presence. He studied their sublime technology and, with sudden misplaced inspiration, made me in the clumsy image of a man.

Mixing his drink, I increased the proportion of tonic to gin, certain that in the end it would do little good. Then, with a foot as heavy as a draft horse's hoof, I struck the desk and upset his drink. Anxiously clicking my claws, I revolved at the waist, looking for anything I might use to sop up the mess. I saw a cloth on a table by the wall. The kneeless, elderly stride that hobbles me eventually took me to—a dress, badly torn.

A dress I had made for Altaira. His daughter.

“Let me find a cloth in the kitchen, Morbius.”

“Fine, Robby,” Morbius breathed heavily. “Find a cloth in the kitchen.”

I hobbled to the door, glimpsing in a mirror the clear, dildonic dome of my head and two whirling earlike antennae, one bent upright.

Oh, me. Oh, Krel^a, I hate the sight of me!

A slurping sound from behind made me rotate. Morbius lay sprawled atop his desk, lips pressed to the surface, slurping the spilled gin. Lurching upright, he grabbed the back of his chair. “Save you a trip!” he laughed—then saw the dress, draping my arm like a flag. Slowly he wiped his mouth on one sleeve.

“Warn them, Robby!” Wildly waving his arm. “Warn them away!”

“The ones coming to answer our distress call, you want me to—?”

“Tell them to go away, Robby! Go away!”

“Morbius,” I started, then thought: Forget it. “I will tell them.”

Idiot! I hobbled into the kitchen, deeply unsettled. And that torn dress in his study! His own daughter, I thought as I fed it to the nanoeater. You'd think a great scientist could find something better to do.

For a moment I stood gazing outside. I felt a strain of fatigued metal but it must have been the equivalent of my imagination. I am entirely made of Krel^a metal. Impervious. Indestructible. Yet the sheer effort of motion torments me. I wobble like an upright brick. If I fall, my stubby, retractable arms scarcely help me right myself. Still, I had my duties and so I performed them.

Later, as I passed Altaira's door, I heard weeping.

“Miss, may I be of service?”

“No, Robby. Thank you.” She blew her nose like a trumpet. “I'm fine.”

It had been so for days. She would not come out but sulked all day in her room.

“Miss, let me make a new dress for you. You will feel better.”

“Oh, Robby, go away! Just go!”

Dutifully, I left, feeling like a simplified person in a grade-school primer:

Robby is a robot. See Robby go. Go away, Robby, go away!

BUT IN DREAMS EACH NIGHT I GO ON ALL FOURS INTO THE DESERT. IN DREAMS I AM different—limber and strong, muscular, like a bull or an old silverback gorilla. Under a green sky of doubled moons, across the pink sands of Altair IV, I gallop and gambol for the sheer pleasure of it. I kick up my heels, dunk my head. Sharp hooves strike sparks from the rocks. I grow long sinuous arms with powerfully jointed fingers that stretch for the stars. I leap and scramble to the top of a cliff—rejoicing in my existence. Me strong! Me happy! My cries rocket into the sky and clatter off the cliffs in celebration of my Self!

WHEN THE TIME CAME I DROVE THE GROUND CAR TO GREET THE SPACEMEN, WHO had landed inconveniently in the most rugged part of the desert. I didn't mind the drive. The wind on my dome recalled the freedom I enjoy in dreams.

I had done as Morbius directed, warning the spacemen away in his voice, which I imitate perfectly. Morbius was too drunk. Also, it was his idea. Still, the Earthmen had come to Altair IV. Their ship rested on the plain. It had a wide brim like a sombrero but a crown like an aluminum ventilator hood, the kind that revolves in the wind. All this sat on a pedestal like an overturned bucket. It didn't look as if it could actually fly.

Two elaborate gangways had been lowered from the brim of their hat-like craft. The spacemen stood in the shade. They wore gray uniforms and billed caps. All were male. As I approached they seemed wary, but I'd warned them of grave consequences should they land.

I braked and, without leaving the car, rotated at the waist to greet them in my booming baritone: “Gentlemen.” (Inwardly cringing at how the speaker on my chest lit up in pointless duplication of my words.) “Allow me to convey you to the home of Dr. Morbius.”

Or some such twaddle.

Their leader came forward. He was young and blond. Struck me as trying to imitate someone more sure of himself. He barked questions and orders. His one facial expression consisted of hoisting an eyebrow skeptically. He told his XO to stay with the ship, while “Doc” and a younger spaceman, whose name I didn't bother to learn, accompanied him.

(As if to protect him from me: as if fearing that, for my own amusement, I might murder him out in the desert, taunting him as I caper

about, kicking sand in his face and laughing—hee hee!—as I scorch him with a blaster!)

Naturally, I did no such thing. I took the three men to see Morbius.

“Robby built *all* this,” Morbius indicated with an actorly sweep of his arm. “And I built Robby.” He staggered, grabbed the back of a sofa. “We are completely self-sufficient.”

Blond Commander Adams barked, “Where are the rest of your expedition, Dr. Morbius?”

“They’re all dead,” he said solemnly.

“Dead!” The men eyed each other. “What killed them?”

“They were torn limb from limb.”

They gaped and went pale. “But how!”

With melodramatic flair, Morbius told his favorite old story. I stood mute, wanting to smash chairs over their heads, pound some sense into them! At the same time, the story, old as the hills, moved me. I used to know the colonists by their names and faces. I seemed to recall having purged my memories of them, then I couldn’t be sure. True to form, Morbius blamed an Unnameable Terror for their untimely ends, all the while hinting at matters that subtly put the fault on the victims themselves. It was quite a performance.

“And so they died,” he soberly concluded, “unable to understand what had killed them.” He gestured toward a cemetery of tilted, crumbling stones. “I buried them with my own hands.” He gazed at the floor. “My dear wife among them.”

What ham! The spacemen extended their condolences. It seemed as if the whole wild story would be accepted, till Adams pointed at me.

“Yet you rely on this primitive robot to protect you?”

Morbius nodded. “That is true, Commander.”

My antennae stopped whirling. Primitive? How rude! I stopped following the conversation while Morbius showed how the security shutters slammed into place to enclose the house at the wave of a hand. Ah, if only I were not in fact an awkward mimesis of a man, but a thing of beauty, sprung full-blown from the minds of the Krel²! Had Morbius been a real scientist, not some loud-mouthed dabbler, I might have—

“Commander, be so good as to hand Robby your blaster.”

I had neglected the conversation. Adams unshipped his side arm. Puzzled, he extended it to me. I caught the handle (almost dropping it) then Morbius had me aim at a vase of cut flowers and told me to fire.

A parade of blue energy bullets flew to the vase and quietly destroyed it.

“Do you understand the principle, Robby?”

“Yes, Morbius.” I had cut those flowers that morning. “A simple blaster.” I would have added that we had just such a blaster, here—when Morbius startled everyone by having me aim this one at the Commander.

His fellow spacemen moved to intercede but he gamely faced grim death in a way I found charming and stupidly trusting. My relays locked, my antennae stopped twirling. This was our game! I hold the blaster, aiming at sultry Altaira, while Morbius, eyes aglow, showing his teeth, oddly writhing hands thrust deep in his pockets, repeatedly taunts me: “Shoot! Shoot her, Robby! Shoot!” Certain that I will not, that deep-rooted logics will not let me destroy Altaira, though in fact my deepest learning *can* be overridden, and I want sometimes to shoot her very much.

“Now shoot the Commander, Robby.”

I pictured the smoking stump of his neck, squeezed the trigger. Me strong—happy! My clear dome filled with crackling static, a pink liquid electric fuzz that blotted up the command.

“You see, gentlemen?” Morbius declared as I failed. He took the blaster from my claws. “Robby is incapable of harming a living being. So I repeat: I am totally safe here. That is, I and my daughter.”

They all said: “Daughter?”

Dazed by the blaster demonstration, I had failed to note Altaira’s entrance. She had left her room and stood on an elevated walkway.

For years, Morbius and Altaira had been the only living human beings of my direct experience. But, for as long as I’d known her, the very sight of Altaira had been somewhat disturbing. Her thick long hair was the blue-black of raven’s wings. Her eyes were volcanic glass. She was pasty white and unathletic but still young, and thin from eating like a bird. She had a wide hard-set mouth. That day she wore what I had made for her, black, of a weight and weave that draped like the finest chain mail and clung like cobweb.

Altaira, my Altaira, whom I must cherish and protect above all others—and never ever shoot with the blaster. As the spacemen moved in on her, their pheromones heating my scent detectors, I felt a strong urge to stop them, stop—

“Robby?”

“Yes, Morbius.”

He told me to fix lunch for five.

After serving the lunch and clearing the table, knowing I would not be needed until it was time to drive the men back, I waited in the ground car. It was a fine day, the sky green, foliage the colors of tarnish and rust. Probably, Morbius was showing the Commander, Doc and his XO the

weighty secrets of the Krel^a—no doubt boasting of his soaring intellectual attainments, his mastery of knowledge beyond the ken of mere mortals. He is the most tedious man in the world. Until recently, of course, he was the only man.

Time passed as he showed them the Krel^a artifacts, taunted them with Krel^a toys, read from the Krel^a script he had spent years mistranslating. He would wave at the many dials and brag of the exponential energy increase each represented, as if he'd had something to do with that vast underground power generator to which he would then conduct them, waving his arm to cry: *Behold! My name is Ozzie Morbius! Look on my Krel^a, ye Mighty, and despair!*

Then I noticed Altaira in the garden with the spaceman whose name I had failed to learn. Chewing each others faces, in that way people have, Altaira going at it as if she would eat him right down to his boots. Then Commander Adams barged in and spoke sharply to his crewman, who tried to explain himself. But Adams wouldn't hear it, and the lad hastened away, trailing pheromones of rage mingled with those of a desire to mate. Under a hasty analysis, these molecules seemed oddly similar.

Adams and Altaira argued. He seemed to dislike her appearance. Finally, Altaira snorted and returned to the house.

I DROVE THE MEN TO THE SPACE SHIP, LEFT THEM OFF AND TOOK A LONGER WAY back. Whipping the ground car around boulders and over the scree, I scared a yexle—a seven-legged land crab native to Altair IV—from its lair within a heap of rock. Zig-zagging, it skittered away like a big bony hand. I felt I could have driven right into a mountain, flown off the planet into space. An unsettled mood, as if I'd lost a part of me. I slowed to note the fall of clear, cold night. Stars mapped my dome. I pondered them as I drove toward grassy ground closer to the house. Then, near the old cemetery, where level sand stretched the other way, I paused.

They were a hundred souls, men, women, children, cats and dogs. In some way again I knew this. Stopped there, I found their mental remains: a shadow of an echo of heat; the saw-toothed frequency of an aching drawn-out scream.

I thought I had purged everything having to do with that terrible time, but still I sensed this shred of it, like a traveler met upon the way, like the travelers who had indeed surprised us on this depopulated planet of forbidden wreckage.

I stared at the shadow memory, as at myself—

—and wondered if I might be required at the house.

As soon as the thought formed, I became aware of Altaira's call, which

had been going on some time. I rushed the ground car around a spinny that hid the house and parked, then slowly, in metallic pain, extricated myself from the car to waddle forth, a fat zombie.

Altaira stood waiting, sullen.

“Where’ve you been?”

I told her the ground car broke down and I had to repair it. This was not like agreeing with Morbius to avoid an unpleasant exchange. It was an outright lie. I would have preferred some time to myself that evening. The long day had made my eggs lake.

Legs ache.

“You are looking well, Miss.”

As if concerned, she touched her fingers to her face. “Robby, you’re just saying that. I look like Thursday, warmed-over.”

“Yes, Miss.”

She gave me one of her *faux* sneers. “I’ll tell Father to take you apart.”

He wouldn’t get far, I felt like responding, but let it pass. I was anxious to be away from her. A few motionless hours would have done me good. But her manner implied some labor ahead.

I was right. Altaira wanted new clothes. Just the other day I had offered to make more, to improve her mood. I had had nothing else to do and could have made dozens. But no.

“Star sapphires take at least a week to crystallize,” I objected as she posed, drawing lines across herself with her fingers, showing what she had in mind.

She chose diamonds. She is like a slow-witted doll, alert to few interests, never bored by repetition. What would the Krel^a have made of her? Would she drive them mad twice, drive them to renewed orgies of slaughter, appetite? In his cups, Morbius always turned to the last days of the Krel^a. “Amazing,” he would say, squinting at the middle distance, dank hair slicked to his forehead. “What beings they were—monumentally intelligent—capable of anything!”

He worshipped intelligence, intellect. “The flesh is weak,” he had often told me, eyeing Altaira in the next room, his face a comic mask of lust and pain, the lust always winning in the end. “We’re meat!” he would bark, standing from his desk. “Skin that flinches if it’s cold, sweats if it’s warm, stinks if left unbatched. Revolting!” He would stride toward the door, his eyes white. “Altaira!”

“Morbius,” I would warm, clicking my claws. “Desist!”

“Get the blaster,” he’d mutter.

“Yes, Morbius. The blaster.”

I would start off, deliberately slow, hoping he would forget. But how could he, with Altaira in the next room, overhearing, seeing the look in his eyes then clapping her hands and going: “The blaster, Robby! Get the blaster!” And so I say she is an idiot doll, a brain stem with a clitoris, in love with repetition, just as he, the world’s most tedious man—

“Robby, are you even listening to me?”

“Yes, Miss. It will be ready tomorrow.”

She leaned close to kiss my dome— “Mmm!” —leaving her yummy lip print. “Thanks.” And went away, humming.

I hobbled to my chambers, selected chemicals, poured them into myself in the proper amounts then put out the lights and let my internal factory assemble the necessary polymers, bake the commonplace gems. Time-consuming but not demanding work. I retracted my arms into my torso and focused on a nick in the wall. Became immobile. Null.

I dreamed.

I’M TROTTING IN THE DESERT AT NIGHT, HAPPY, STRONG, IN NO HURRY. THE STARS are fierce white burrs on the hard black metal of the night. Neither moon is in the sky. I would be content to have things go on just so, but dreams insist on simple narrative lines, often of a questing nature (must find a bathroom), just as often questing anxiously (*cannot* find a bathroom). Altaira told me her dreams when she was young, and my own research in dream archives tells me people dream uneventfully till an awareness of something wrong intrudes, then one must go have a look, though one knows that one really should not—then that is exactly what one does, as though at the mercy of a slightly mad filmmaker.

A glow like the light of a city shows the ragged shapes of rocky hills against the sky. I gallop to the crest of one. There, on the plain, rests the hatlike ship. A few spacemen stand guard. I rise on hind legs to see better as my forelegs morph into genuine arms. Tusks curl out from my jaws like scimitars. Were I to lower my mastodon skull, and thrust up into a soft belly—horrible!

I sidle downhill, expecting at any moment the hail: “Identify—friend or foe?” To which I would answer...

What? “Just me, Robby, at your service, gentlemen.” But I am *not* that oil pan on thick-stilt legs, not that dome-headed humanoid, that bulbous nobody! Tonight I frown with wrinkled lip, I wear a sneer of cold command as I approach the unwary guards. Also, I seem to be invisible. Looking down, I do not see my foot but see my footprint *sink into the sand*, and then the next and the next. Yet I make no sound, or not enough of one to make the man who thinks he hears me act on it. He

goes back to talking to his friend. It was the rushing bellows of my lungs he heard so I hold my breath. I could close my fists around their skulls and crush them, force the juice through my fingers, but no. I want to see inside the ship. The Krel^a did not have space ships: they had had a mortal fear of space, of voids and vacuum, preferring, to the end, their mammoth caves and mausolea.

I head for one of the two gangways depending from the brim of the hatlike ship, and go boldly aboard. My great weight bends the risers out of true but—astonishingly—this makes no sound. As if I am here but not here. (Which I'm not, of course.) I hear them snoring in their bunks, like drunken sailors. Gently I lift a blanket, turn the corner of a pillow, finding red hair, black hair—

—blond hair. Ah, Commander Adams! It is for you, not Altaira but you, that I fabricate this special dress tonight. It ferments in my Krel^a-metal belly, my evening lavished on its dutiful digestion. But you will not see live to see it.

Flinging back his blanket, I seize him by the ankles, yank him up, flailing, between my outstretched arms and, with one titan jolt, before he can so much as yelp, I rip him in two! Bloody guts flop to the floor. Gore spatters men who jump awake, gaping at the impossible sight of their commander flying apart. I untwist an arm from its gristly socket—send his head spinning with a punch! They rush the exit, trample each other getting down the stairs and into the cover of dark.

THEN I WAS AWAKE, SENTIENT, MYSELF AGAIN.

Terrible dream! But only that, nothing more. An electronic look into my pot belly noted the progress of the garment, noted that, in the house of Morbius, all was quiet, all was well.

YET I WAS MILDLY SURPRISED NEXT MORNING WHEN COMMANDER ADAMS, IN HIS own vehicle, came to the house, visibly enraged though not, I guessed, by having been torn in two in the middle of the night. Doc and the XO were with him.

“Where’s Morbius?”

I directed them to the study. There was yelling.

“Yes, Dr. Morbius—murdered! Just as you described the other colonists—torn limb from limb!”

“I know nothing about it! Nothing!” Morbius desperately denied.

Imagine my surprise when I realized what Adams meant. Only a dream, I told myself. A machine dream. It was what I had been telling myself since I began having dreams. If consciousness is short-term

memory, dreams are where such memories go when they are wiped. They are residue. But this!

“And whatever came aboard my ship last night,” yelled Adams, “damaged *valuable government property*! Now I want answers, Morbius. Answers!”

“Commander, have a drink.”

“I don’t *want* a drink... well, all right, maybe one.”

“Doc? Chief?” He meant the XO.

Glasses clinked, ice tumbled, gin gurgled.

“Now, gentleman.” Morbius launched a lecture on the mysteries of the Krel^a. Just then, Altaira found me eavesdropping.

“So, dreamy Commander Adams is here.” She stood close.

“Yes, Miss.”

Altaira seemed to await my next word but my mind was a blank.

“So,” she said again, “is it ready?”

The dress! “Yes, Miss. It hangs in your room, where you could have found it, had you the forethought to look.”

She gave me a wary eye. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Indeed,” was all I could say.

Still the wary eye. “Are you keeping something from me?”

“Indeed,” was all I could say. “Not,” I added hastily, tacking on: “Miss.”

“You’re behaving very strangely,” she said in her smoky voice.

“Perhaps, Miss, I should have a drink with the boys, ha ha.”

“I’d say you’d had one already, if I didn’t know better.”

Altaira slunk away to try on her dress. Did nothing penetrate that skull? Was she insane? Morbius was, I was sure of it. In there drinking—at that hour! Did he even sleep anymore?

But who was I to question his, or anyone’s, sleeping habits? In dreams I seemed capable of actual crimes. And the sleeping spaceman *had* been murdered, torn apart, just as I had dreamed it. But torn apart by me. So what was I—other than a murderer? *That* didn’t bother me. But what was I if I looked in a mirror by day and saw Robby the Robot, then became a marauding shapeshifter by night, a splendid beast that knew no bounds? Adams had called me primitive, though *he* seemed no more polished nor refined than a white farm duck. Then again, was I so clever? I had made errors. Killing that man last night (I accepted this for a fact) had been an error. It was Adams I’d meant to tear in two because, in the garden, after lunch the day before, when he’d interrupted that kissing game between Altaira and the spaceman, he had lingered to upbraid her, criticize her clothing, offend her. Hence, the special dress, intended to please him next time they met.

Was I jealous?

I revolved as they came out of Morbius' study, a trifle high but in no good humor, I could tell.

"Robby," said Morbius, swaying, "we're all going down to the... you know."

"Yes, Morbius."

"We'll be down there a while so..." he waved vaguely, giving an anxious look around. "Where's... Altaira?"

"In her room." The men turned to go. "Commander Adams."

He granted me a glance across one shoulder. "What is it, Robby?"

"Did I hear correctly that your ship was damaged in the night?"

He hoisted that skeptical eyebrow. "You did."

"Allow me to be of service in helping your crew effect repairs."

Suppressing a belch, he nodded. "That's kind of you, Robby. Thank you."

"A gentleman *and* a scholar!" Morbius declared, waving them to follow. Then he had trouble with the combination lock that opened the big triple-doors. How amusing it would be if they should accidentally imprison themselves in the vast, cthonic belly of the Krel^a. Altaira wouldn't be able to help—didn't know the combination, nor how to run the shuttle to that cave of marvels, Morbius having kept her the mental equivalent of barefoot and pregnant. I, robot, loyal servant, was not so limited. I would have been the one to let them out.

As I wondered if I would, I went to see the damage my strange double had done to the ship. Again I crossed the rocky sands, felt the wind on my dome, saw the space sombrero. Near it, the crew stood working.

To one side lay the oblong mound of a grave, but my appearance elicited no special response. To them, I was just Robby.

So I *had* been invisible. In building me, Morbius must have made trillions of errors. Had these errors somehow risen to my aid? Being of the Krel^a, of one substance with the Krel^a, was I their conduit, somehow a locus of their energy?

This grand guesswork occupied me till Adams and his sidekicks returned. He grimly ordered out the heavy atomic weapons, had his men erect a force-field perimeter and thanked me for helping with repairs.

"My pleasure, Commander—and how did you like the dress?"

All the men looked at him. Adams colored. "Dress?"

"The dress Altaira specially had me fabricate to please you."

"Uh..." His face flamed pink. "Very nice, Robby."

"Fine, Commander. Good evening, Commander."



LATER, PARKED ON A KNOLL, I SING TO MYSELF UNTIL I AM ENTRANCED. I sink great cables into the ground to the vast, incalculably powerful generators, drawing raw energy until I am huge. Hungry. Want to kill *lots* of spacemen! Lumbering off on saurian thighs, I leave craters for footprints, roaring like a lion.

They are ready for me, squirting blue atomic bullets, but I charge right in, light up their force field, outline myself in red and orange fire. I want them to *see* me. "I am Robby!" I roar in the ancient language. "*Thing* of the Krel^a! Look on my face, ye Puny, and despair!"

Their weapons do not hold me back. I hold myself back. I could smash the ship and stomp them all into the sand if I pleased. I absorb their hot blue bullets, shivering and writhing. Then a spaceman breaks formation. Adams yells at the fool but, as if it's in his contract, he runs right up to me, squirting with his little gun. I bite him in half and fling away the chunks.

And with a final eldritch howl, leave them wondering.

I CAME TO MYSELF ON THE KNOLL. I WAS PLEASED. HAVING DONE IT DELIBERATELY, I knew that I could do it at will.

Then, cutting through the desert like a comet of sand, I saw Adams in his own vehicle, racing for the house. I started out at top speed, arriving just in time to greet him with ghoulish out-thrust arms, chest speaker flashing my syllables:

"Good evening, Commander."

He ignored me. "Morbius!" Unshipped his blaster. "Altaira!"

I followed him in. He had found them both and stood gaping. "Altaira..."

"Hey." She stumbled. "S'not what yer thinkin'."

I saw at a glance what Adams thought. Morbius had a near-empty bottle in one hand, a hank of rope in the other. Two square knots decorated the rope. Two same-size bruises adorned Altaira's throat. Her eyes were wispy with burst blood vessels. Her nice new dress hung in rags.

Adams turned on Morbius and brought up the blaster. "Why, you—"

"Danger, Morbius!" All eyes turned to me. "Danger approaches!"

An old terror distorted that dissolute face. "What danger, Robby?"

What danger indeed? I had nothing to say—making it up as I go along, as usual. It struck me that I had the spacemen to thank for my awakening, but could not say to what I had awakened. To enlightenment? Madness? The unexamined life that was not worth living? The inscrutable Krel^a had sent me power but told me nothing. Altaira, bleary-eyed, swayed on bare feet. Adams turned toward her, regained his hatred and turned

toward Morbius, now white as chalk. I had to do something or Morbius would die—I did not know the ramifications of that.

I thundered: “UNKNOWN!”

And started slamming the shutters into place, sealing up the house.

It was the right effect. Morbius whimpered. The perspiration started on his face. “Kill it, Robby!” he hollered.

“Kill what?” Adams barked. “What is it, Robby?”

I did my impression of a large hood ornament.

Morbius screamed: “Kill it, Robby!” Then an actual shriek: “*Kill!*”

What once required a terrible contradiction to bring about was now like throwing a switch. I filled my dome with splashing pink static and broke down into hysterical solid-state laughter! I couldn’t pay attention to anything!

Eventually, though, I stopped.

They were gone. The angle of the combination lock indicated they were in the upper chamber, behind triple doors of Krel^a metal. I tried the lock but the combination had been scrambled from within. From wild mirth I swung to dire wrath. Lock *me* out? Facing the strange pentagonal doors, I drove my will down into the floor like monofilament roots searching out a whole planet for food. No ectoplasmic departing of my metal body now! My solid shape shifted, gaining the weight of mountains. At one with the stone floor, I pulled the power in. Braced on flying-buttress arms, I opened wide and forty megatons of thrust whammed a column of flame at the doors. The house shattered around me, hurling flaming junk in all directions. Trees were stripped. The ground baked. Sand was whipped to a froth of spun glass. Slowly, slowly, the doors ate away.

Then, as the last one went, mysteriously, my power failed.

Through an incandescent tunnel I saw Altaira, scared sober, and Adams, attending Morbius, on the floor, dying in a gratuitous gesture, while indicating to Adams that he should do something and do it right now.

Again my old self, I stood watching. A short cylinder had risen from the floor and, from the center of it, a rod with a knob on top.

As Morbius died, Adams drove the plunger. The annihilation engines that powered the planet would soon run wild.

So it was over. Without the infernal power of the Krel^a, I would again be what I was. Only that, and nothing more.

ABOARD SHIP, ADAMS AND ALTAIRA FACE THE MAIN VIEWING SCREEN. ALTAIR IV shrinks to a dot outlit by a sun which collapses to a point and blooms

white light. Altaira turns her face to Adams' manly chest. But as he smooths her hair, she winks at me—me, seated at the conn.

"Navigator," barks Adams, none the wiser. "Set course for Earth."

"Aye-aye, Skipper!"

I have convinced him that the invisible destroyer was a mere projection of Morbius' mind—mad scientist possessed of knowledge man was never meant to blah-blah? While *I* was Good Robby.

Also: free robot.

But while I have lost my link to the mighty Krel^a, as Navigator, I have already learned to tap the ship's power. Adams tells me our trip to the inner edge of the Orion Arm should last about a month. Within that time, I am sure to learn a great deal more. •



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ConSpec's guests this year were Michael Bishop, Allen Steele, and Peter Watts, with special artist guest Jeff de Boer.

ConSpec 2002

Derryl Murphy, fiction editor

THE SECOND CONSPEC WAS TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE ON THE weekend after September 11, 2001. Obviously, the events of that day led us to cancel the conference; even if planes had been flying that soon after the tragedy, the guests and attendees who had been due to fly all agreed that they weren't quite ready to return to the air. Because of this, the kind organizers of another convention, ConVersion, allowed us to piggyback our conference on their event, which took place on the weekend of August 9-11, 2002, in Calgary. This proved to be fortuitous, as ConVersion was also hosting Convention, the Canadian national convention at which the Auroras, Canada's longest-running genre award, are presented annually.

ConSpec's guests this year were Michael Bishop, Allen Steele, and Peter Watts, with special artist guest Jeff de Boer.

Michael Bishop is an acclaimed author and editor who has twice won the Nebula Award, given to him by the members of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. His many novels and short stories have

shown consistent excellence and an ability to blur boundaries.

Allen Steele is also a remarkably prolific writer, and has won two Hugo Awards, which are voted on by readers who attend the World Science Fiction Convention each year. Allen has proven himself to be a worthy successor to Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov, with hard SF that contains wonderful characters and a very human element.

Peter Watts, a Canadian author and also one of the fiction editors at *On Spec*, has had two novels and several short stories published, and won the Aurora Award for his short story "A Niche," a story that grew into his first novel, *Starfish*. His stories are rich in arresting and disturbing characters who, despite their flaws, intrigue and fascinate the reader.

Jeff de Boer, who combines his talent and skill in jewelry design with a knowledge of armor-making to create incredibly detailed sculptures that must be seen to be truly appreciated. Currently teaching Jewelry Design and Presentation at Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, he recently installed a whimsical tribute to early flying machines at the Calgary International Airport. His work was featured in our Summer 2002 issue.

All three authors proved to be excellent assets to the conference, and were ably assisted by other author guests who traveled to the conference on their own accord, including Alberta authors Candace Jane Dorsey, Dave Duncan, and Ann Marston. Panels were presented on the following topics: *Speculative Fiction in Education*; *Rewriting Fiction*; *Space Travel in Fiction and Fact*; *What Beginning Writers Should Know*; *The Canadian Perspective on the SF Field*; *The Novel vs. Short Fiction*; *Developing Distinctive Voices*; *Sympathy for the Devil* (about writing realistic and sympathetic antagonists); *What Editors Want to See*, and *Publishing Scams and How to Avoid Them*.

As seen in this list, most of the focus was put on time spent to help prospective, new, and developing writers. Supplying one central location and time for dispensing correct advice about how to deal with so many of the potential problems that face newer writers was always a goal for ConSpec, and we were pleased to be able to help with solutions for these problems.

As a final note, ConSpec, when initially intended to run in 2001, was to be preceded by a writer's workshop for a small group of authors, led by Michael Bishop and Allen Steele. With the cancellation of the initial conference we refunded the money for all attendees. However, Mr. Bishop and Mr. Steele had already gone to the immense trouble of offering intensive line-by-line criticisms of each story that had been submitted for the workshop, and took the time to mail these to each author, along with extra notes, as they knew they would no longer be there in person. Although neither asked for any compensation, we decided to pay them

a part of the agreed workshop fee in recognition of the vast amount of work they had already done. For those writers who were involved in this process, this was by far the most rewarding aspect of the entire conference, and those who were able to attend the postponed date in person were also able to take time discussing their work with each author, which added even more to the learning experience.

As a special bonus, we're pleased to share with you Michael Bishop's notes to the workshop participants, "Fiction-Writing Rules."

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*These sixteen rules are the notes
Michael Bishop gave to participants of
the ConSpec writing workshop.*

Fiction- writing rules

Michael Bishop

Significant detail

Detail—concrete, specific, definite, sense-activating, particular details—make fiction come alive. Without such detail, fiction dies on the page. On the other hand, as Janet Burroway observes in *Writing Fiction*, “No amount of concrete detail will move us unless it also implicitly suggests meaning and value” (p. 57). Detail for detail’s sake devolves into listing, and the narrative clots. Make sure that the detail you provide has some purpose other than mere cataloguing—that it contributes to action, theme, or mood. Otherwise it will annoy and finally run off your reader.

Adverbs

Use sparingly. The right verb eliminates the need for an adverb; sometimes, it eliminates the need for an entire phrase or clause. Compare the sentences “*Clifford sat down gingerly in his recliner*” and “*Clifford eased into his recliner.*” The latter makes the same point as the former but in fewer words. Phrases like *shuffled slowly*, *furiously pumped his hand*, *sprang*

energetically, and *shouted loudly* signal their own redundancy. So beware of adverbs. Especially avoid using them in dialogue tags; the dialogue itself should haul the freight of the speaker's tone of voice or sincerity. [An exception? "*You son of a bitch*," *she said affectionately*.]

Filtering

Don't use *I watched*, *she saw*, *he heard*, *Larry noticed*, or *the alien smelled* when you have already established the sentence's subject as your point-of-view character. Doing so puts what Burroway calls a *filter* between the detail that you want to present and its apprehension by the reader. Example: "*Crystal hesitates before entering the living room. She knows Mama will talk about her late husband, Stevie Jack's daddy.*" Drop the words *She knows* in the second sentence because readers already understand that the author has placed them in Crystal's mind. Example: "*Soon I started noticing a difference in the way Frank behaved toward me.*" Change that sentence to read: "*Soon Frank began acting differently toward me.*" The error of filtering infects even the work of published writers, but most good copy editors correct it. However, don't depend on someone else to recognize it for you.

Use contractions in dialogue

Not using contractions—*won't*, *don't*, *couldn't* instead of *will not*, *do not*, *could not*—makes your characters sound like Yoda wannabes. Even aliens need not shun contractions, even if their "speech" represents a transcription of communication via means other than language: smell, touch, taste, or vision. You may *think* you have a good reason not to use contractions in dialogue, but—forgive me—usually you don't.

Do not use contractions in exposition

This observation is a corollary to Observation No. 4. Exceptions exist. If you have a breezy first-person narrator, permit the use of contractions in the text as well as in the dialogue. In nearly every other case, shun the use of contractions. Example: "*He couldn't quite grasp the concept of a society ready to arrest him for publicizing a scientific breakthrough.*" Make this sentence read: "*He could not quite grasp the concept,*" etc. Why? Traditional practice tends to dictate this approach. (On the other hand, no one will shoot you if you flout this "rule.")

Use active verbs wherever possible

That is, shun linking verbs, passive-voice constructions, and the words *there is*, *there are*, *there was*, and *there were*. They weaken your prose. Every use of a linking verb, a passive-voice construction, or the words *there is* and its place-holding siblings robs you of the opportunity to use an *action*

verb. Examples: “*He was a Texas Ranger for nine years.*” / “*He served for nine years as a Texas Ranger.*” / “*He was canned by his boss.*” / “*His boss canned him.*” / “*There were grunts of disapproval from Bosley’s brothers.*” / “*Bosley’s brothers grunted in disapproval.*”

Went

I recommend total eschewal of this verb, as well as its various forms in other tenses: *go*, *goes*, *has gone*, *was going*, etc. But please shun *went* in particular. Examples: *He went to the store.* *He went to the kitchen.* *She went to China.* How blah. Using *went* deprives you, every time you trot it out, of a more emphatic, more colorful, more informative action verb. *He skipped to the store.* *He schlepped to the kitchen.* *She island-hopped to China.* (For the same reason, avoid using linking verbs—any form of the verb “to be”—and the other constructions listed in Observation 6. Usually, you *can* avoid these constructions; the writing gets harder, unfortunately, but the reading experience almost always improves.)

A caveat: use your judgment. British novelist Kingsley Amis once complained that writer Martin Amis, his son, turned every sentence into a showplace for his snazzy style, metaphorically juggling, balancing on a ball, and eating fire at the same time. Sometimes, the elder Amis said, a reader needs a simple sentence like *She went to the grocery* or *He ate a sandwich* to orient within the narrative and to stay with it. Still, if a passage needs punching up, the smart writer scrutinizes its verbs and opts for verbs that *boogie*, *caterwaul*, or *slink*—verbs that have a sensual as well as a kinetic dimension.

Thing, anything, nothing, something

These words, if you use them a lot, hint that you need to work harder on either your vocabulary or your willingness to use it. These words, like *there is*, *there are*, *there was*, and *there were*, function as mere place fillers for the more particular words that you have *failed* to provide. They have no more substance than do air bubbles in a pie filling. They diffuse the pie’s flavor, offer no satisfying resistance to the teeth, and provide little if any nourishment.

Participial phrases

Many writers have no clue that the action of the verb in a participial phrase takes place **simultaneously** with the action of the verb in the sentence’s main clause. For example: “*Dreaming of Morticia, Leland constructed an elaborate fantasy of their future life in England.*” This sentence works. Leland’s *dreaming* of Morticia occurs at the same time as does his *fantasy*

constructing. However, the following sentence does **not** work: “*Slamming the door and removing its hinges, Morticia tossed the heavy oaken plank into her swimming pool.*” The actions in the verbals *slamming* and *removing* cannot logically take place at the same time, and neither can occur simultaneously with the action of the verb *tossed*. Rewrite the sentence to read: “*Morticia slammed the heavy oaken door, removed its hinges, and tossed it into her swimming pool.*” The rewrite presents a logical sequence that the original sentence confounds.

Free-floating *its* and *thises*

Many writers use these indefinite pronouns without providing a specific identifying antecedent. Marginally acceptable in dialogue, in the text itself this practice may signal laziness or fuzzy thinking. Example: “*This was lasting far longer than it should.*” Context may afford a clue what *this* and *it* stand for, but the writer has not bothered to do so, and the sentence slips into vagueness.

Characters who sigh

Characters in category fiction, especially fantasy and science fiction, sigh more than their counterparts in other types of fiction. Why? Beats me, but—*sigh*—I find most of the sighing either unnecessary or unconvincing. It serves as shorthand for a more subtle human response, one harder to observe and set down in words. Yes, people *do* sigh in real life, usually to express quiet scorn or to readjust their mood, but, again, not so conspicuously or often as they do in category fiction.

Each other & one another

Each other has specific application to two people; *one another* applies to three or more people. “*Frank and Morticia loved one another*” is wrong. “*Kirk, the first mate, the chief engineer, and the alien Stljzx raised their phasers and covered each other’s backs*” is also wrong. I see a good deal of wrongness in student writing.

Ellipses (...)

Go easy with them. They can breed like apostrophes in the representation of a dialect, and, like apostrophes, they soon annoy. (Corollary: Use a dash rather than an ellipsis at the end of an interrupted line of dialogue. An ellipsis indicates a *fading away* of the character’s voice, *not* an abrupt stop or an interruption.)

Realistic dialogue

Truly realistic dialogue contains lots of stuff most people don't want to read, namely, the expressions *well, you know, uh, hey, like*, and so on. Use these expressions just enough to suggest character, and then tighten the rest of the speech up. Dialogue has to advance the story just as straight-ahead narrative does, and no one wants to *read* gibberish simply because a certain character speaks it.

Commas after *but* and *and*

Even if these contractions begin a sentence, they do not require a comma after them: “*But, she was not ready to see Frodo*” and “*And, the infantry arrived*” are both wrong. You need a comma after *but* or *and* only set off a phrase intervening between it and another word: “*But, heartsick and ill, she was not ready to see Frodo.*” And “*And, laden with chocolate bars and Mickey Mouse ears, the infantry arrived.*” (The same rule applies to the word *yet*: omit the comma in “*Yet, he continued to love her.*”)

Tighten, tighten, tighten

You don't have to describe a character's every action to make a scene credible or vivid. You must select. In fact, describing *every* action in sequence can kill a page of prose faster than an electric paper shredder.

Wherever possible, fold sentences into clauses, clauses into phrases, and phrases into single words. Delete words contributing no forward movement, essential information, or crucial suggestions of mood:

The house rested on a mountain of stony crags, as did the storage shed that shone red in the sunrise that washed over the Colorado landscape.

The house rested on a craggy mountain, as did the storage shed shining red in the sunrise over Colorado.

The house and the sunrise-red storage shed rested on a craggy Colorado mountain.

These sentences get tighter, with no loss of essential information, from one revision to the next. Perhaps you can find aesthetic reasons for preferring the first sentence to the sentences that follow, or the second sentence to the third, but the writer has pared his first sentence nearly to the bone—maybe he could drop “craggy”—and the pace of his story speeds up. Therefore I reiterate: **tighten, tighten, tighten.** •

Congratulations to Jim on winning this year's Aurora Award for Art Achievement!



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Special art feature: James Beveridge

JAMES BEVERIDGE WAS BORN IN WINDSOR, ONTARIO, AND HAS been drawing for most of his life. His interest in SF/F began when his father, a chemical engineer, suggested he read *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. He's been a devoted SF fan ever since.

It was in high school that Jim dreamed about illustrating science fiction when he saw some of the covers by Frazetta, Di Fate and Freas. Jim did some early comic work but switched to airbrushing vehicles due to the necessity of "making a living." Eventually he ended up in Edmonton, Alberta, freelancing on posters and album covers as well as airbrushing. He calls this period his twenty-year apprenticeship. He now creates the computer game art for Pixelstorm Inc. Lately he's been working on expanding his creative palette another full axis, experimenting in 3D software.

In 1991, he started illustrating for *On Spec*, doing what he had fantasized a quarter-century earlier and has been fortunate in not only being nominated for an Aurora Award several times, but winning the award this year. He is still waiting to be asked do his first novel cover, but we're sure his wait won't be too long.

His website is <http://members.shaw.ca/jimbeveridge>.

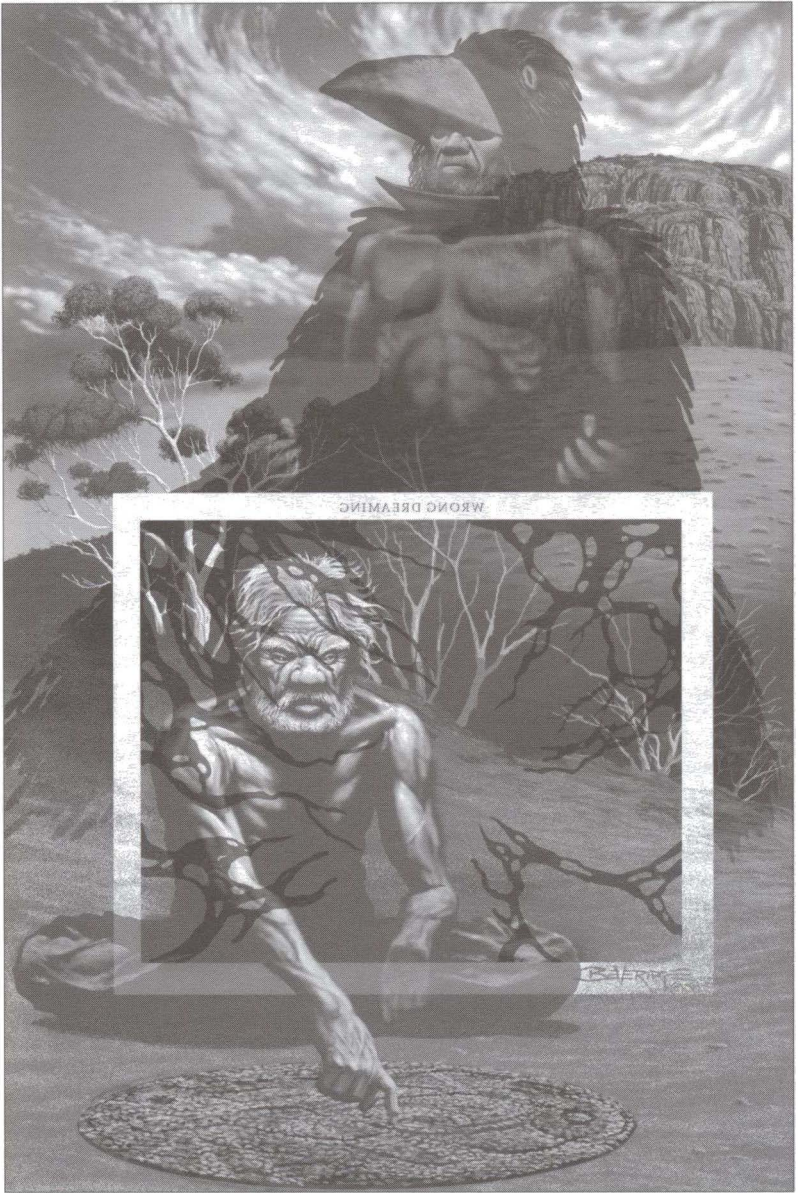
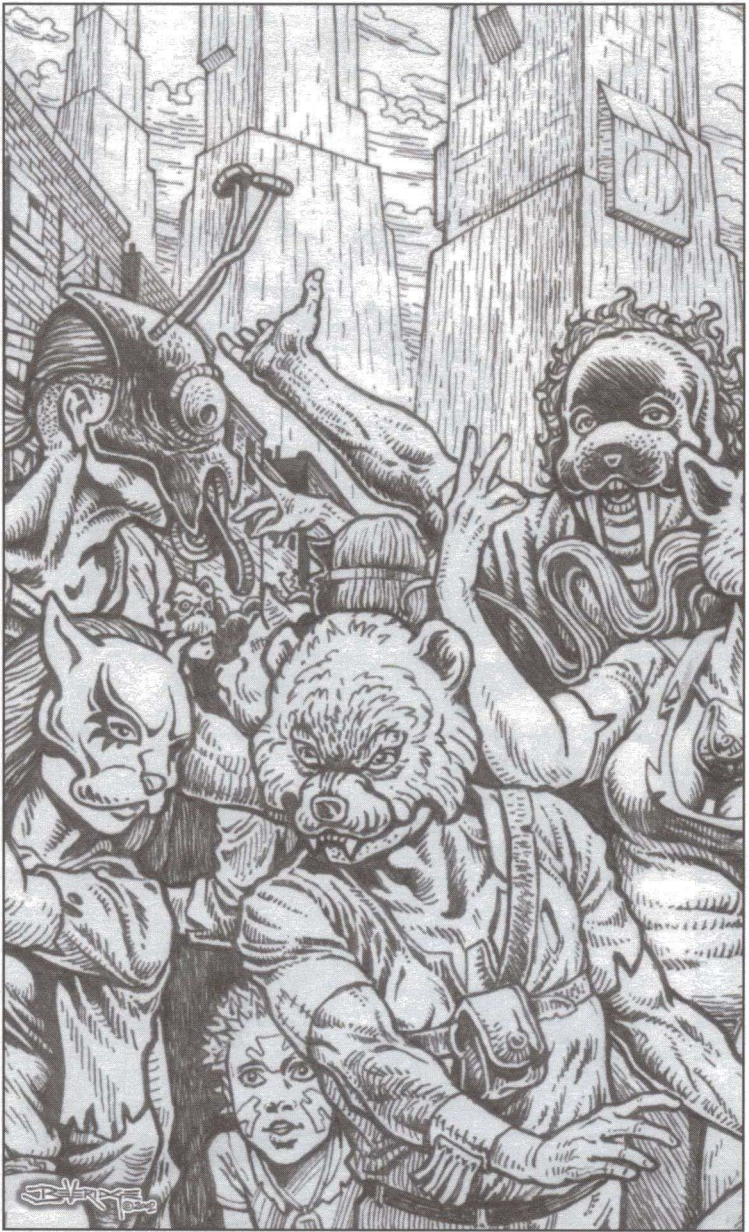


Illustration for "Wrong Dreaming" (*On Spec* Fall 2000)

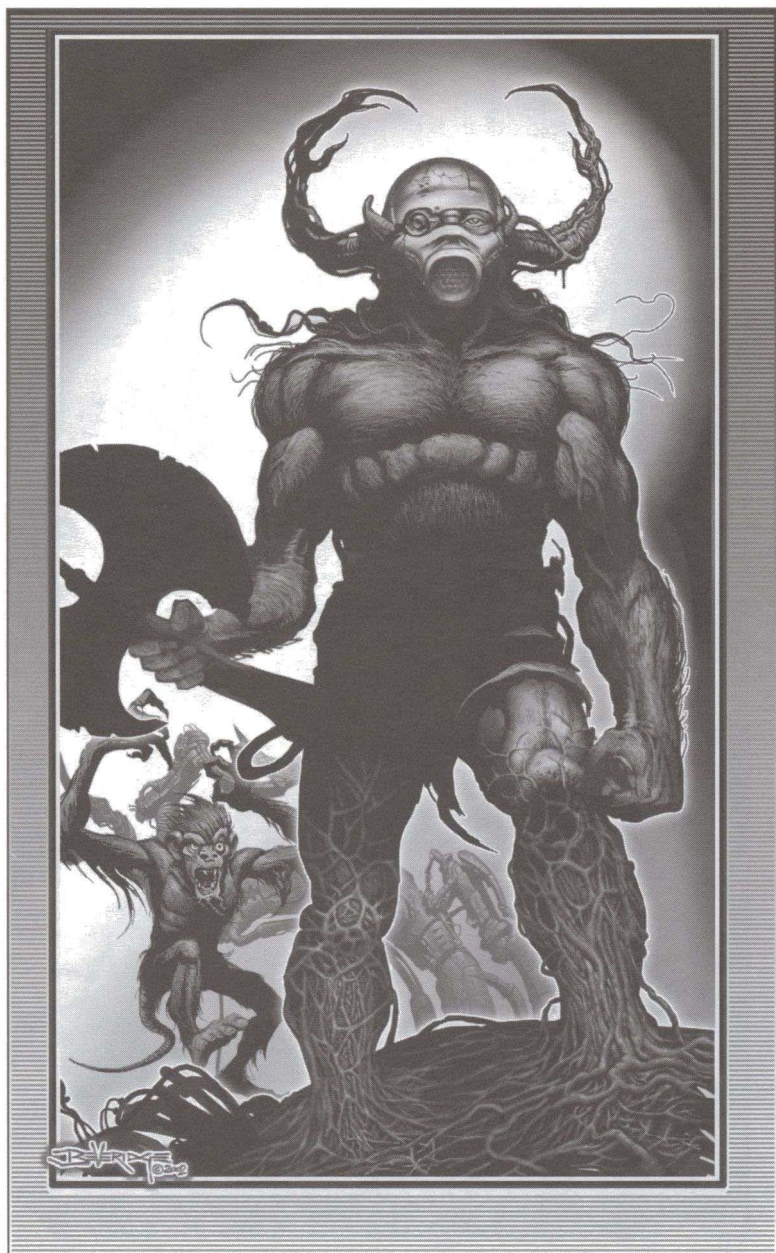
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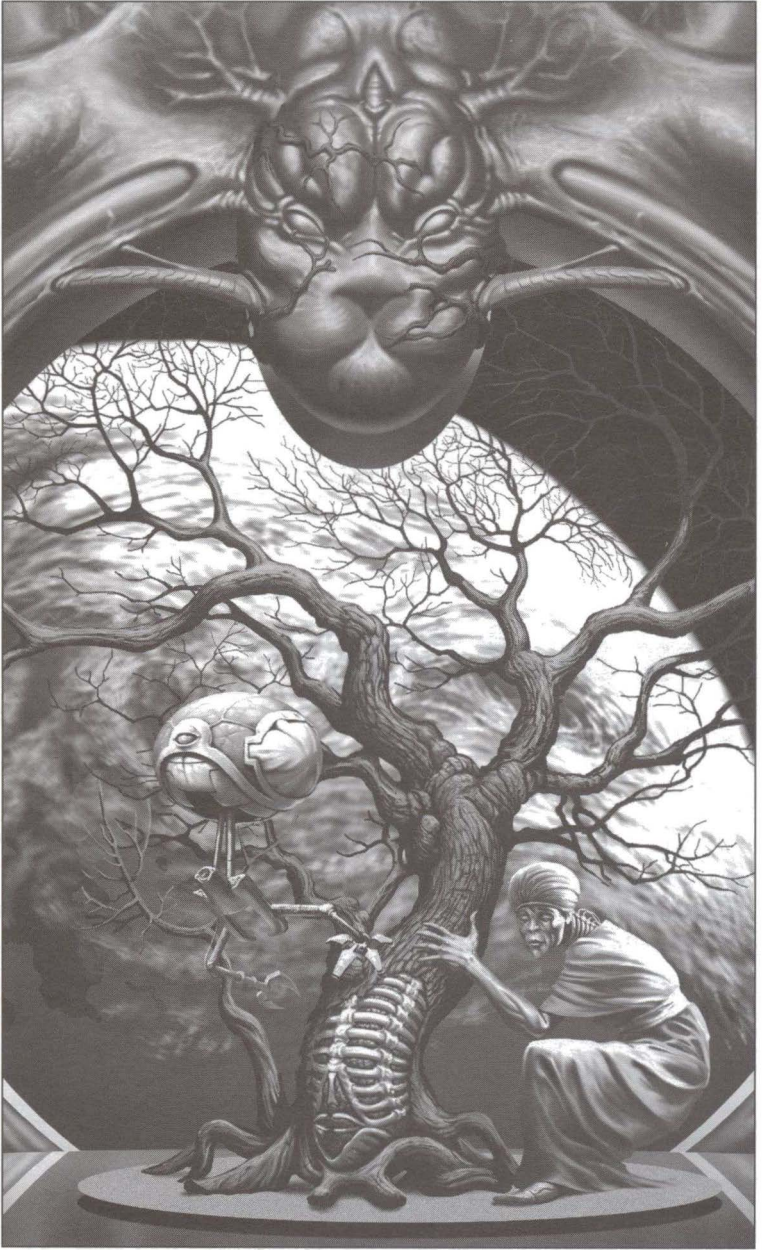
"Trail" © 2002 James Beveridge



Detail from illustration for "A Tattoo On Her Heart" (*On Spec* Fall 1994)
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"Packing the trunk reluctant to leaf" © 2002 James Beveridge

*"If only I could conjure up a groom,
cut to my pattern. I'd show him to the
Queen and store him in the privy until
he was needed again."*

*When he is best, he is a little worse than a man;
and when he is worst, he is little better than a beast.*

— *The Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Scene ii

Fox and Otter

Leslie Brown

"I FEEL LIKE PENELOPE, SURROUNDED BY INOPPORTUNE suitors, waiting for her husband to return. Unfortunately, there is no Ulysses coming to rescue me." Sarah peered over the rail of the balcony down into the crowded hall below, confident that the shadows concealed her. I could hear the raucous shouting and the crash of plates hitting the floor. I kept my voice down.

"I don't know who this Penelope is you speak of, Sarah, but it's your failure to choose a husband that has put us in this position." My older sister spun on me, her cheeks flaming red even under the ceruse and egg white glaze on her face.

"I should slap you for your insolence and for your ignorance of the classics, Emma. Would you have me choose one of those pigs below, guzzling their fill at our trough? I'm no Circe. Our father—"

"Our father is dead," I interrupted. "Choose one for husband and be rid of the others. Or the Queen will choose for you."

Sarah scowled at my reminder. The Queen was coming to visit our home in less than a week and my sister, as heiress, would be summoned into Her Majesty's presence to account for her continued maidenhood. While Good Queen Bess would have no one say that a woman was not fit to sit on the throne of England, she thought it totally unsuitable for a girl of sixteen years to hold of one of the oldest seats in England.

Sarah pulled me back into our bedchamber and threw herself on her bed, crushing her farthingale and rumpling her skirt.

"Sister, please." I pulled her up and tried to restore the line of her gown. She pushed me away.

"Emma, leave me be. My head aches with thwarted plans. I cannot see a remedy no matter how hard I think on it. If only I could conjure up a groom, cut to my pattern. I'd show him to the Queen and store him in the privy until he was needed again."

"Shhh!" I put my hand over her lips. "Don't even use that word betwixt ourselves."

"What? Privy?"

"Don't vex me, Sarah. It has only been ten years since Catholic Mary was burning witches along with heretics at Smithfield. It is our good fortune that the Queen puts science and logic above all superstitions and decrees that witches can't possibly exist in a common sense world. If you go around talking freely about such things, someone might just decide they miss the old bonfires and put us in one. That would leave our estate free to the first fair-haired lad who pleases Her Majesty's eye."

"Poor Emma, you'll worry yourself old before your time. You're only fifteen. Perhaps that is what I should do. Cast a spell to make me old and withered. The bright blades downstairs would look elsewhere before they took a wrinkled beldam to bed."

"Yes, they'd look to me." She had no answer to that so together we made her presentable again and went downstairs to our waiting guests. They were mainly landless second sons who had banded themselves together to come woo the Elthrope sisters. While Sarah had to listen to the professions of love from a dozen chinless wastrels, I had to put up with the cozening of the other dozen who hoped that I would soften her heart to them. For once, however, I was worried about something else. I hoped my impulsive sister would set all ideas of witchery aside. Queen Elizabeth chose to disbelieve, but the wise should not offer proof to the contrary. It was the very taint of witchery that kept the landed eldest sons from our doorstep. Our mother had been considered a witch and the only thing that spared her from the stake was death in childbed while bringing me into the world.

We endured yet another endless evening. Simon Uxbridge distinguished himself by vomiting on my skirts. Although a noisome advent, it gave us the excuse we were looking for to leave in disgust. I laughed sourly as we climbed the stairs, listening to Simon being berated for his vulgarity by men who thought nothing of scouring ears and nostrils with fat forefingers in the presence of ladies.

We set servants with cudgels at the top of the stairs in case some swain decided to force the marriage issue with a broken maidenhead. We shared a room in an attempt to keep at bay the terrible loneliness our father's passing had imposed upon us. He had been such a bright and forceful presence in our lives. He had loved our mother dearly but, to his credit, he had not turned away from her eyes in Sarah's face or her dark cloud of hair under my headdress. He delighted in us, the small proofs that our mother had once walked in this world. All we had of our mother was her well-used grimoire and all the spells she had used in her lifetime. It was this book that Sarah removed from its hidden place in the head of the bed and propped open on her knees.

"What are you planning, Sarah? You know we are not half as skillful as our mother was. Can't you smell the power that steeps those pages? Power we cannot control." My sister sighed and bookmarked a page with her finger.

"There is little choice left to us, Emma. I mean to try this spell." She turned the book so that I might read the page. I must have turned pale for she made a chiding noise and pulled the book back into her lap. I shook my head.

"Not that one, Sarah. It's a wild spell; there is no control in the casting."

"They're the best kind. The element of uncertainty, the spice of danger. Exactly what I need to set those young puppies running." She looked more alive than I had seen her in weeks.

"There is no binding of those ones," I repeated. "Summoned to protect and serve, they can turn and bite the hand that feeds them. Choose a love spell and we can call one that you favor to us."

"What and have to marry him? Do his bidding and heed his every whim? No, my idea is better. A conjured husband who will obey me."

"You'll not get any children from such as that," I warned, almost convinced despite my common sense. Sarah sensed my weakening and grinned in triumph.

"What do I care for breeding? It's the tugging that matters! Besides, our mother died when brought to bed with child. I will sidestep that curse on women as well." She sprang from her perch on the bolster

and spun around the room, overexcited as was her wont. Her prancing stirred up the dust motes and they danced with her in the candlelight.

I read through the spell slowly using a fingertip to keep my place. My skill lay in anchoring a spell cast by another which was why my sister needed my help.

“What tangibles were you going to use?” I asked her. She brought forth two pelts.

“A fox to put among the chickens and an otter to throw in amidst the fat, sleepy trout.”

“Sarah! You make a wild spell wilder still. Better choose a sheep’s skin or a calf’s hide.”

“Pah! A sheep or a cow. Now’s there’s an exciting bedmate!” I thought my sister a trifle preoccupied with bedsports, given that neither of us had yet played them.

I saw that she was set on this course and no argument from me would sway her. If I did not help her, she might try it alone. I followed her to our mother’s stillroom. She was set upon casting the spell immediately, given that the Queen would be arriving in four days.

Sarah set out two porcelain crucibles and sprinkled a mix of powders in each. She touched a lit taper to each vessel to start the witch fire burning and then cast a handful of amethysts into each. I squeaked in dismay, recognizing the remnants of a prized piece of jewelry.

“Hist!” Sarah chided me. “Without the offering of gems the spirits will not listen to us. You know amethysts are highly prized by them.”

“It’s not your jewelry that we are throwing to the flames,” I grumbled. She cut a piece from each pelt and placed them in separate crucibles. The air immediately filled with the stench of burning hair.

“Why separate them?” I asked her.

“What, a suitor for me and not for you? How could I be so selfish? Now be quiet while I chant.”

I anchored the spell to the physical world and fed my sister all my energies. She called upon the patron spirits of our mother, of the earth and water moiety mostly, and asked that human forms be conjured from the elements in the crucibles. Then she requested animas from the spirit world to inhabit the mindless forms. Finally she placed a binding spell on the lot, so that the wyrs would obey us. I followed closely but could find no fault in her casting. I felt the nudge of darker forces that hovered just beyond our ken and who were eager to oblige us. Even the greenest bud of a witch knew that to have truck with such as that was to be the slave, not the master. I threw up an unseen wall and felt the dark ones’ anger. The wild magic spirits that we were calling upon were neutral for the

most part, slow to help but also slow to hinder. What I was unsure of was adding fox and otter to the mix, vital animals in themselves and unpredictable. Sarah, I knew, was using them in hopes of imbuing animal cunning into the wyrs but limiting the intelligence of the spirits invited into the empty shells. I had my doubts about her logic but kept them to myself. The spell finished, we hid the evidence of our work and tumbled into bed to sleep far beyond the cock's crow.

Now we had to wait. Three days passed with no sign of the wyrs. Sarah was confident until the very eve of the Queen's visit and then she broke. I wiped her streaming tears comfortingly, secretly relieved in my heart.

"Calm yourself, Sarah. Throw yourself on the mercy of the Queen and she'll choose a good husband for you."

"What did I do wrong, Emma? It was cast perfectly."

"That spell was at the back of Mother's grimoire. She did not master it until middle life. How can we expect to cast it well at our age? I just hope nothing went awry."

"I think things are awry already," sniffed Sarah, but straightened her backbone as befits an Elthrope. In one of her swift mood changes, she hugged me to her and kissed my cheek.

"I don't know what I would do without you, Emma. To think we almost lost you with Mamma. How different things would have been if you had not become better, poor babe. Papa said that you were born with a head as big as an inflated pig's bladder!"

"Thank you for reminding me of that." I spared a glance at the silver mirror on the wall to make sure my head was still the same size as Sarah's.

My sister kept her spine stiff all the next morning as we sat motionless in our finery, waiting for the cook's son to shout a warning from the end of the lane. Sweat ran down from our hairlines in the summer heat. Finally the boy's voice rang out over the noise of the animals in the yard and made us start violently. We heard the pounding of hooves and ran out into the yard, pausing to turn sideways so that our skirts would not jamb in the door.

The cavalcade of horses filled the yard of our manor. We caught flashing glimpses of the Queen as her courtiers milled about her. Suddenly the riders parted and Queen Elizabeth was before us, dressed in a riding habit the color of the summer sky. Her pale gaze was upon us and belatedly we both swept her deep curtsies. I lowered my eyes to the ground as befits a maiden, whilst Sarah stepped forward with the stirrup cup.

"I bid you welcome to our home, Your Majesty," Sarah quavered.

"We are delighted to be here, Ladies Elthrope," the Queen's clear soprano rang out but it was another's hand who took the cup from

Sarah. I gaped in unabashed surprise at the richly dressed man who raised the cup to his own lips, winking at us as he did so. I was watching closely and saw him touch his tongue to the surface of the liquid rather than drink from it. I raised my eyebrows and then cursed myself for my unguarded reaction. The Queen's courtier had the adder's tongue, the gift that allows the detection of poisons. The queen had a sorcerer in her court and he seemingly paraded that fact before all.

"Pass me the cup, Robin, or we'll be here to Doomsday standing on ceremony." The Queen took the cup from her sorcerer, who I now realized was Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and the Queen's favorite. Her majesty quaffed a goodly portion of the cup and handed it back to my awestruck sister. Sarah curtsied again and I echoed it. We knew enough not to speak unless spoken to.

"I hope you have entertainments, my fair girls. I do love entertainments. And a feast tonight, with dancing and music?" The Queen gave us a smile as Leicester helped her down from her horse. We smiled back and mumbled about hares and hounds and minstrels and fruit punch and all looked well until she paused at the front door of our manor to add:

"And some good news for me too, I hope. Such like a wedding to be held soon." She arched an eyebrow at us, so pale as to be white and entered our home.

Sarah and I were run ragged and the servants likewise. The court had a midafternoon repast followed by a wild gallop over the countryside in search of game that was all cowering in caves or burrows. We barely had time to rest before we had to dress for the feast. We, still with the energy of youth bubbling in our veins, were exhausted from trying to keep apace with the Queen, a woman grown. We had heard how she liked to dance into the small hours of the night and, although we groaned at the thought of a half night of dancing, there was a greater worry looming up before us.

"What are you going to say?" I questioned Sarah insistently. "Are you going to suggest a name or take the Queen's choice? She is taken with us, I can tell. She will probably grant any reasonable request."

"I will produce fiancés for us tonight, never fear dear sister." Sarah answered steadily, binding up her hair in a pearl-studded net.

"You do not still hope that the wyls will come to us, do you? It would spell our doom. The Earl of Leicester is a sorcerer, I told you that! He will detect our handiwork and have us beheaded for bringing the wild magic into the presence of the Queen."

"Pah!" exclaimed Sarah as she rubbed bright vermilion on her lips.

“What do male sorcerers know about the wild magic? Come now, sister, put some belladonna in your eyes for sparkle. You look like Sir Death come to the feast.”

“You are a fool and you will kill us both,” I said bitterly and left her to finish dressing alone. I slipped down the back stairs past the kitchen filled with panicked cooks. The gardens were still and quiet. I sat on a bench in the summer twilight and forbore to weep so as not to crack the egg white glaze on my face. I was hurt that my sister cared so little about my welfare that she would cling to her foolish hopes of a magical intervention. I sniffed and fumbled for a handkerchief in my sleeve. The snowy white expanse of a laundered square of linen appeared under my nose. I accepted it and raised my head to thank the courtier who had come to my assistance. My mouth fell open in unladylike surprise.

Two men stood before me in doublet and hose of the finest make. They were of the same height but of different complexions. One had bright red hair and amber eyes. His beard came to a point above his starched ruff and his body vibrated with energy, with the need to be on the move. His slashed sleeves showed amber underneath. His companion was brown-haired with a beard that followed the line of his jaw. His eyes, brown dark pebbles set in a wide face, twinkled with mischief. His stance was lazy but in him too I sensed the barely suspended desire for motion. His sleeves showed blue. I knew them right away and greeted them so:

“My lord wyr. We had thought you would not come.” My voice was flat. The fox man smiled at me. His teeth were very white and, I saw with alarm, slightly pointed.

“We came when we were needed. Your mother was highly favored amongst us.” I looked to the otter-man but he added nothing. I caught him glancing at the ornamental fish pond and winced for our carp.

“I fear,” I said carefully, “that circumstances have changed. The Queen has a sorcerer in her court and a powerful one. He will see your true natures and accuse us of practicing witchcraft on the Queen. Our lives will then be forfeit.”

The fox wyr was not listening. He was scenting the air wafting from the kitchen. He glanced down at me.

“You are having rabbits and pheasants for the feast.”

I sighed. “Yes, among other things.”

“Good.” He rubbed his hands together and sauntered into the kitchen. I stood quickly to follow. The otter wyr took my hand and bent his dark head over it. I smelled the warm, algal scent of a slow river in his sleek hair. He straightened and offered me his arm.

“Do not concern yourself, Emma. You will be safe tonight.” I was not reassured but I offered him a smile for his kindness and handed him back his handkerchief.

“We are also having trout at the feast,” I told him.

“Ah, I was just going to ask you that.”

I left them in the kitchen, teasing the harried cooks for fragments from the spit and raced upstairs to tell Sarah. Her only response was a smug smile.

“You don’t understand, Sarah,” I protested. “They are aware. They won’t be puppets in your play. They have minds of their own.”

“They are bound to us, Emma. They will obey us; the spell will hold.”

She followed me down to the kitchen where we found no sign of our wyrs. The women were still in a twitter over the fine gentlemen who had cozened food from them, but were strangely vague as to which door they had left by.

“They’re here and will come when we need them.” Sarah breezed into the anteroom to greet the first of the courtiers down from their rooms and to direct them to the punch. The queen made her entrance last of course so that we might all admire her jewel-encrusted stomacher, pearl-studded bodice and her pale brow decorated only by her unbound red hair that fell like a river of flame down her back. She took a cup of punch that had first passed through the hands of Leicester, and downed it gaily. They fell upon our feast like wolves. I picked at my food, ill with distress.

Chairs were pushed back from tables and the Queen signaled our hired musicians to play lively music. She still had not mentioned a marriage and the suspense caused me to miss steps in the dance. My partner smiled with strained politeness as I stepped on his fine slippers. I floundered like the clumsiest of milk maids until a gloved hand took mine in the dance and steadied me.

I looked up into eyes the color of a sun-baked river bank and smiled resignedly. The wyrs had reappeared. I looked around for Sir Fox and found him paired with my sister. She knew him at once and her appraising smile was vixenish. I traded partners and saw the fox dancing with the Queen. I was struck by the similarities of coloring betwixt them. Another partner change and I heard the Queen laugh aloud. I looked over to see Sir Otter whispering in her ear. I felt a flash of anger. She had her Leicester. Why did she play the hoyden with my wyr? My glance was caught by Leicester’s face and my anger was replaced by fear. His visage was dark as a thundercloud.

Another dance had begun and Leicester stepped forward to claim the

Queen. She took Sir Fox to the dance floor with her instead. Otter had disappeared once again but I caught a glimpse of a gold and blue sleeve at the doorway. I hastened after with the vain hope of trying to make him understand the danger from Leicester. The hallway was empty so I followed it to the covered walkway near the garden. I heard a step behind me and turned quickly.

“Sir Otter—” The man who emerged from the shadows was unknown to me, a courtier. He came at me with purpose and I shrank back against the wall. He seized my hands and, raising them to his mouth, kissed them hotly.

“Lady Sarah, I have been admiring you from afar. I beg your indulgence for a lovesick swain who but lives for a glance from your lovely eyes.”

I freed my hands. “I’m Emma. You want the sister with the blonde hair.” He was confused but only briefly.

“If I can’t have one, the other will do for now.” He seized me again and I drew breath to scream for a servant. His hard kiss stopped my voice and his tongue filled my mouth. I raised my fists to pound on his head but suddenly I was free. Otter had the courtier by the back of his doublet and was shaking him casually, much as otters do to snap the necks of the fish they catch. He increased the shaking and I was forced to intervene.

“Don’t hurt him, Sir Otter. We would be obliged to explain that to the Queen.” Otter dropped the man who scrambled to his feet and fled. I smoothed the disarray of my gown and headdress. Otter waited patiently without uttering soothing noises designed to calm a hysterical woman, a gesture I appreciated. I turned to thank him but what actually came out of my mouth was a surprise to both of us:

“What are you really doing here? I command you to answer by Ballail and Lerhan.”

He blinked at me and answered with amusement. “We are here to wed your sister and you as requested. We are also here to bind the Queen and make her obedient to our wishes.”

I gaped at him. “Enslave Her Majesty? Whatever for?”

“Her blood has been responsible for the death of many of our animas. We intend to prevent further harm by putting her in thrall to us. As your husbands, we shall be at court frequently and can ensure our hold on her.”

“The days of Smithfield burnings are over. Elizabeth doesn’t even believe in witchcraft.”

“Then why does she have a powerful sorcerer in her court doing her bidding? He has placed protections about her person against the dark

ones but not against our kind. You must bring the Queen and Leicester into a room with us. We will take care of the rest.”

I backed away, much as I had done with the courtier. “This is folly. I will have no part of it.” I made to flee, to tell my sister, the Queen, even Leicester if it would help. I was brought up short by a word that I forgot immediately after he had said it. He came up behind me, his breath warm on my hair.

“You have more in common with us than you realize, little witch. This is for the protection of our kind. She will not be hurt, just leashed so that she cannot lash out at us. Help us,” He said that word again that I couldn’t seem to hold in my mind. I trembled as he touched my cheek with his hand.

“No,” I whispered, stubbornness my only weapon against his caressing fingertips. I pulled away and fled the cloister. He did not stop me. The dancing was still at a fever pitch. The wall sconces were starting to smoke and I told a servant to replace the torches with new ones. I looked for my sister and saw her out on the dance floor with Fox. Otter was at the Queen’s elbow again, whispering into her attentive ear. I would pull Sarah out of the dance if I had to. I strode toward her but someone caught my hand. I spun around to face Leicester.

“This is not well done, Lady Emma.”

I trembled. “How so, my Lord?”

“To let those cousins of yours into this hall. See how they approach the Queen. They are presumptuous!”

He did not know them for what they were! Either my sister was right: his powers could not detect earthen magic or else his jealousy blinded him to their true nature.

“My Lord, they are not cousins but rather the betroths of my sister and me.” If I could keep the wyrs away from the Queen and keep Leicester ignorant of their identity, my sister and I might survive this night after all.

“Betroths? S’ttruth, my Lady? The queen must know of this!”

“Wait!” My hand missed its purchase on his sleeve and he was before the Queen, bowing to her. I could not hear what was said but her pale-water glance raised to my sister and then myself. A ring-encrusted hand beckoned us to her. Sarah left the dance but kept a grip on Fox. We swept curtsies before her. Otter grinned at me over the Queen’s shoulder.

“So is this the truth of the tale? These two spritely gentlemen here are to be your husbands?”

Did she put emphasis on “sprite” or was it my imagination?

“Yes, Your Majesty. We have just exchanged the tokens of true love.”

Sarah was oblivious to any nuances. The Queen glanced at me.

"And you, Lady Emma. Have you fallen in love at the same time as your sister?" Caught in the trap of our own making, I could but blush and nod assent.

"You have made your beds and now shall lie in them for better or worse. I would see you married this very night and as head of the church I will do it myself!"

"Your Majesty, the honor is too great!" I protested in vain as I was swept with the rest into an anteroom. Otter took my arm in a gentle but firm grip. The Queen was flushed with gaiety and looked around the room for a ribbon. A curtain sash made do and she ordered Sarah and Sir Fox to stand before her. She laid the sash across their joined hands. Otter began murmuring beside me and I made to kiss him to stop his mouth. He held me back and as his lips moved, I fancied I saw colored bands weaving their way around the Queen. Otter's quiet chant mixed with the Queen's recitation of the old handfasting ceremony. I wondered vaguely why she didn't use the Church of England ritual of marriage. Leicester stood by, grinning at the marriage of his rival for the attentions of the Queen. I made to interrupt the ceremony but found my tongue cleaved to the roof of my mouth by Otter's spell. The bands of green and gold twisted and whirled around the Queen. If I could have I would have moaned my despair. Any moment they would tighten and sink invisibly into the Queen, binding her to the wyr's will. Yet they still hung in air. Their twisting became more like frightened snakes trying to escape. I realized that the Queen was no longer chanting the handfasting creed. I looked at Otter. His eyebrows were raised more in surprise than alarm but his own recitation became audible. He forgot his grip on me and I shrank away from him. Fox wasn't chanting but I sensed he was serving the same purpose as I did with Sarah: anchoring another's spell. I pulled Sarah away from our suitors and backed into a corner of dubious safety. Finally aware of our plight, she held her tongue, her eyes big in a white face.

The bands gave a final frantic twist and shattered into fragments. Fox and Otter slowly sank to their knees under the weight of the Queen's words. Leicester laughed aloud. The Queen's clear voice ceased but our wyr's did not rise. She spoke plain English then:

"So you thought to bind me then, Ballail and Lerhan? Do you not know me for what I am: the Faerie Queen?"

Fox answered her. "We do not recognize your authority over us."

"Oh?" The Queen circled him as he knelt and tapped him on the head with her fan. "Then why are you on your knees to me, Sir Fox?"

"You are more powerful than we believed. Had we known, we would have come better prepared." Fox sounded more rueful than fearful.

"Ah, but preparedness is what separates Kings from Princes, and I am King in this and your realm." Her attention swung to us and I pulled Sarah down in a curtsy.

"And you, Ladies Elthrope. Did you have a hand in this plot to bind me to the will of the spirit world?"

I straightened my spine and looked her in the eye. "No, Your Majesty, I had just found out about their plan and had no time to warn anyone. My sister is ignorant of the entire affair. If you must punish anyone, please let it be me and not her." Sarah made a muffled sound of protest and I shook her arm in warning.

"I can tell you are speaking the truth, Lady Emma. Shall I just exact punishment on these wyr? You and your sister created them. Perhaps you shall have some say about their demise."

I looked at Otter's bowed head. He and Fox had gambled and lost. If Sarah and I were to come out of this affair unscathed, I should leave them to their fate.

"They are bound to us, Your Majesty. Let them live and my sister and I shall see to it that they do not make mischief again." Was I so taken with my wyr that I would risk our safety for his life? The Queen saw the chagrin in my eyes and laughed, a clear bell peal. She turned to her lover.

"Oh yes, Robin. Our ladies here have made a pretty mess of things. At least Lady Emma here will own up to her part. Very well, ladies. You will marry your wyr and keep them here at Elthrope. I do not want to see them at court until they have sworn fealty to me. Shall I finish the ceremony?" Mutely Sarah and I took the arms of Fox and Otter and raised them to their feet. We all stood side by side before the Queen and she married us, this time using the Church of England ritual. When it came time to say my vows, Otter stopped me. The sudden hurt that welled up in my breast surprised me.

"Say not 'I, Emma,' but use your real name," he chided me.

"I have no other, Lerhan. What would you have me say?"

"You are Sahai and it is time you remembered!" He caught me as my knees buckled. This time I heard the name, this time the memories flooded in from I knew not where. Sahai was what I had been before Lady Elthrope had called upon me to enter the mindless body of her baby and give it life. I moaned and clutched my head. Sarah pushed Otter away and took me into her arms. She held me until the whirling images in my head settled and I was once again back in the small anteroom.

"Emma, what did he call you? What is the matter?" I looked into the

worried face of the human I called “sister” and wondered how to tell her. Fox saved me the trouble.

“She is one of us, wife, a spirit of the water moiety. Your mother invited her in when her babe was born deformed and without a soul.”

Sarah, not one to let the truth interfere with what she knew was real, shook her head.

“You are Emma, my sister.” I looked to Otter, who now was as familiar to me as Sarah. He reached down and raised me up beside him.

“Stay here or go back to our realm. It is your choice.” I looked at Sarah’s pleading eyes. In all the centuries I had lived, the last fifteen years seemed the most real to me.

“Call me Emma. I would stay.”

“Brava!” said Her Majesty, until now a fascinated observer. “I pronounce you man and wife. Now not a word of what went on in this room this evening. My court is one of reason and science. There are no witches here.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” we chorused and Leicester took his sovereign’s hand to lead her back to the dance. I held back Otter a moment.

“You are willing to stay with me?”

He glanced at my sister clinging tightly to Fox’s arm. “It is no inconvenience. Her lifespan is that of a mayfly to ours. It will only be a brief sojourn in the mortal world.”

“You have been bound to an otter, don’t forget. Can you learn to enjoy fish for the next fifty years?”

“You mistake the influence of that small component of the summoning over me. Come let’s dance at our wedding feast! I have missed you sorely, Sahai.”

“And I you, Lerhan.”

He led me back into the swirl of dancers.

SARAH AND I SAT ON THE GRASS IN THE MIDDLE OF ELTHROPE MANOR’S GARDENS, near the spot where I had first met Fox and Otter. The court had left finally and it felt as if the house itself had given a vast sigh of relief at their departure.

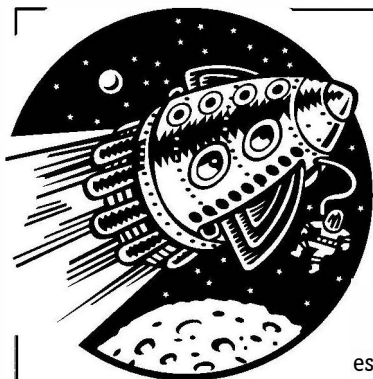
“It worked, Emma. We are safely married, and by the Queen, no less. I can end the spell if you like, send the wyrs back to the green.” Sarah spoke firmly but I saw her eyes wander over to a red-haired figure casting for rabbits on the manor lawn.

I watched Otter sitting sideways on the lip of our garden fountain, leaning over to tickle the carp. Fox gave up on the rabbits and disappeared from our view. Suddenly, over by the hen house, there arose a

terrible squawking. I laughed and patted her hand.

"No, Sarah, I don't think I have tired of my lively husband as yet. Let's keep them."

"My thoughts exactly, dear sister." She turned and raised her voice. "Fox, leave us some birds for egg-laying!" She rose and hastened toward the chicken coop. I lay back on the grass smiling and sent a tendril of myself aloft to dive and bank with the swallows. •



Science Fiction Deposit Research Collection at the University of Alberta Library

The University of Alberta Library is soliciting donations to its recently established Science Fiction Deposit Research Collection to create a still larger, publicly accessible, research collection of regional and national significance, similar to that of Toronto's Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy.

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You slap a suit of skin and a "what-not" on a plug-in-a-nickel out-comes-a-candy-bar thinking machine, you gonna rattle his cage!

*Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues;
Let every eye negotiate for itself
And trust no agent...*

— *Much Ado About Nothing*, Act II, Scene i

Speak for Yourself, John

Brandon D. Rabin

OWNER-OPERATORS OF ROMEO AND JULIET ENTERPRISES

Dear Sirs/Madams/Others:

I got skin. Golden-glowing, sensitive, pliant—man, this is truly the stuff “as dreams are made on.” Thank you! And it wasn’t just skin you gave me—you had the vision to realize that—well ... thank you, thank you, **THANK YOU!**

I wasn’t excited, I must admit, when my immediate supervisor, Vincent Potenza, informed me of the impending upgrade. I was reluctant to go through with it. Didn’t understand the point of it, to be frank. But

now, well ... now I couldn't be happier!

And if things didn't work out the way you planned, well—I beg you to consider: you slap a suit of skin and a “what-not” on a plug-in-a-nickel out-comes-a-candy-bar thinking machine, you gonna rattle his cage! It can't be helped. Newton's laws go out the window; Murphy's Law takes over.

Besides, where is it written that a forty-nine-year-old flab bag named Lester and a nineteen-year old vixen named Stephanie are going to trip the light fantastic over a business merger, dried fruit, a crate of chocolates and some moon-bred roses?

But let me begin at the beginning.

Refurbishment took place four days ago at 11:00:01. I was out like a light during the operation, so I cannot vouch for what occurred, but when the cyber-jockeys rebooted me, something was unquestionably different.

At first, I sat there like an old mainframe, sat so long in fact that Freddy—Dr. Heinsdorf—actually knocked on my tin can to see if anyone was home.

“*What is this?*” I whispered.

“What do you *feel?*” Freddy said.

“*Feel? Feel? Oh—these are feelings? Oh, wow.*” I'd read about them, of course. Hell, they were my stock in trade. All the anguished whimperings and railings penned on account of that blind boy Cupid, all the love sonnets that I used to mechanically recite to my customers, they were all based on *feelings*. And now I was having some of my own. Oh, wow.

“What are you feeling?” Freddy repeated.

“The places where my—my *skin*—comes in contact with the metal operating table, I feel—??”

“Cold?”

'Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart.

Thank you, Master Shakespeare! The poem popped into my head, helped me pin the “feeling” down. “Yes, that's it. I feel cold!”

I rose. The metal floor was *cold* against the *skin* on the bottom of my feet, so cold it *hurt*. The sensation enthralled me. I was like an addict. I pressed my feet harder against the cold titanium, letting the feeling overwhelm what now seemed the laughably dull cycling of my logic circuits.

“Here, you must put this on,” said one of the technicians, swaddling my body in soft padded garments, slipping soft shoes upon my feet. My skin was buried; the *feeling* of cold was gone.

I missed it.

Happily, a new sensation immediately entered my consciousness. It grew gradually in intensity. Every square millimeter of my skin, every nerve ending was being irritated, scratched at, until my whole being roared with indignation.

It was wonderful.

“I—I—”

“Your clothing is wool. Do you itch?”

*Condemned to have an itching palm,
To sell and mart your offices for gold.*

“Yes, I *itch!* I *ITCH!*”

I danced around the room then, celebrating my discomfort like a sort of madman. But I wasn’t mad, you see. Just the opposite. The world was starting to make sense!

I’ve got thirty-nine thousand, four hundred and eighty-six poems in my memory bank. Mostly love poems, of course. A lot of Shakespeare. Keats, Shelley, Byron. A few Longfellow. For ten years, I’d been knocking on women’s doors, reciting sonnets without the slightest sense of what those poems were all about. I had no understanding of the *feelings* behind those great works. But now at last, I was beginning to. Just as you had intended!

It was your idea to refit the entire line of courting robots with the latest in elaborate and expensive multi-layer networked sensation technology—so we’d start *feeling* poetry, instead of just thinking it. Our success rate would soar, you could double your rates and make back your investment in a matter of months if the romance market continued to expand at current ... and so on.

Yadayadayada. I read the memos.

Oh. Before I forget—I’ve gone to the courts and had my name legally changed. I no longer wish to be known as A0X0X0X.

“Hey, TicTacToe, you’re on the clock.”

I hated it when they called me that.

Freddy and the other cyber-jockeys didn’t give me much time to adjust to my new persona. They just handed me the nineteen moon-

bred ivory roses and nineteen-pound crate of Godiva chocolates that Mr. Caudiddle had bought to honor Stephanie's nineteenth birthday.

Then they pushed me out the door.

I went a few steps, until the warm caress of a breeze across the skin on my face startled me so much I dropped the crate of chocolates. I bent to retrieve it; my hand brushed against the grass. It felt—

*Soft is your look, and kind;
such looks I do not mind.*

The flow chart I was constructing to lead me to the Cotsirilos mansion, the hypertext analysis algorithm that was plucking love sonnets from my library on the theme of hoar winter's frost and spring's sweet bower... where did my intentions go?

I remember pulling off the leather shoes, stepping onto the grass, feeling it against my toes.

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.

I understand that with my body now.

I craved to learn more. I knelt to the ground, ran my fingers through the green cool blades as if they were the silken caress of a woman's hair. I pressed my cheek against the grass. Was this what a kiss felt like?

At this point, I must admit, your plan seemed quite masterful. We skin-ified cyborgs, brimming with emotions, would recite our sonnets with depth and feeling. Our success rate, as you predicted, would soar.

If we ever got where we were going.

I stood. I was scheduled for arrival at 16:00:00. Time had been lost. I was capable of empathizing now with the human tug-of-war between logic and impulse. The glorious complexity of life stood revealed to me—as I quickened my pace.

I allowed myself no other distractions. In fact, few presented themselves. The gentle cooing of love doves, drifting from the ebon trees that bordered the well-groomed path, the incessant drone of virtual cicadas that rippled in the summer air: they did not add to my emotional maelstrom. Perhaps these sounds would need to be associated with physical sensation before, Pavlov-style, I would fall prey to their siren call.

My brain focused on my assignment.

Spiros Cotsirilos, Greek shipping magnate, was at the center of things. His biggest customer was Lester Caudiddle. Spiros envisioned a Cotsirilos-Caudiddle union. Cotsirilos spaceships, carrying Caudiddle dried

fruit throughout the galaxy, on into eternity.

The bribe for said union was Spiros' nubile nineteen-year-old daughter. That was the plan—Lester and Stephanie, a corporate merger.

The only problem: Lester Caudiddle is forty-nine, paunchy, and balding. Stephanie Cotsirilos is nineteen, a silk-maned vixen with a ticking time bomb for a libido, who couldn't care less that her daddy wanted to marry her off like a prize brood mare. Needless to say—my work was cut out for me, feelings or not.

And so, as I marched along, enjoying the warm sun giving me my very first tan, I planned my attack, searching all thirty-nine thousand, four hundred and eighty-six poems for a way into Stephanie's heart.

Perhaps there was something in *Othello*? Here was the older man who had won a young girl with his worldliness and experience. But Lester was not worldly. He was a cautious man. He had a fear of flying. In fact, he had never left Earth, counting on salespeople to handle interplanetary conferences, to comb the galaxy with his sample bags of prunes. It would be hard to argue Lester's worldliness when he had spent his entire life in Ocean Grove, New Jersey.

Another poem came up in my list—a rather lengthy one called "The Courtship of Miles Standish." It began:

*In the Old Colony Days, In Plymouth the Land of the Pilgrims,
To and fro, in doublet and hose, and boots of Cordovan leather,
Strode, with a martial air, Miles Standish the Puritan Captain,
His russet beard already flaked with patches of snow.*

Caudiddle's hair was graying—what was left of it. Perhaps there was a useful parallel here.

I rang the bell.

There she was, standing at the door—Stephanie, gamine with ruby lips, long, dark hair sparkling in the light. Green eyes. Great granddaughter of a seaman, her scent was brine and lemon. Her hair glistened like mussel shells.

"A thousand dreams, a thousand nights, and nothing dreamt compares with the living you," I said by way of introduction. I had said these words a dozen times, to a dozen different women—but this time, I *felt* them.

I do not think Stephanie noticed. There was a marvelous sparkle in her eyes as she opened the door, but the look vanished as she rec-

ognized me. Stephanie knew me, and whom I represented. It was my fourth visit on behalf of poor Lester. Poor Lester? No, poor Stephanie, shut off from all men her own age, kept a prisoner by her father, courted by the unfeeling robots of the rich and powerful.

*Go to the damsel Priscilla, the loveliest maiden of Plymouth,
Say that a blunt old Captain, a man not of words but of actions,
Offers his hand and his heart.*

This was more of “The Courtship of Miles Standish.” The aging Standish requests his good friend, the handsome youth John Alden, to go and court Priscilla on his behalf.

Alden is in love with Priscilla himself, but he has never spoken his love, and now, under the burden of friendship, he smothers it, takes up the Captain’s suit with a clear soul but a heavy heart. Alden travels through the tranquil woods, to the maiden’s cottage.

I bowed, somewhat clumsily, for my body is metal, and stiff, and I slipped the nineteen ivory roses into Stephanie’s tan, delicate hand. Our hands touched, skin to skin.

Oh. Electric thrill, feelings that went beyond anything I could have imagined. Oh God! Is there a God? I do not know. I searched Stephanie’s sweet face, seeking Him.

Stephanie was staring back at me, glorious, soft, full red lips pursed in concentration.

“You’ve changed.”

“I got skin,” I mumbled softly, the overcharge of my processor having in some way dampened the functioning of my voice synthesizer.

“I like it,” she said, her laughter like the sound of wind chimes. She came closer, touched my hand again. My speech center completely shut down. Into the chaos of my central processor, the output of the requested poem continued to emerge.

*If the great Captain of Plymouth is so very eager to wed me,
Why does he not come himself, and take the trouble to woo me?*

Stephanie was moving her palm across my cheek now, softer than any breeze. I realized with joy and dismay that my skin was blushing.

Forthright, remembering my duty, I pulled away from her, even as the new feeling part of me obsessed about Stephanie’s perfect red lips.

As John Alden warmed and glowed, in his simple and eloquent language,

*Quite forgetful of self, and full of the praise of his rival,
Archly the maiden smiled, and, with eyes overrunning with laughter,
Said, in a tremulous voice,
“Why don’t you speak for yourself, John?”*

I felt her lips upon mine. Lips? Lips! Hell, I got lips!

Nothing but feeling existed; the liberation from logic was intoxicating, and now I felt one of her hands traveling down, across my abdomen, finally grasping what felt like a gathered bag of skin hanging between my legs. Skin! Lips! Hell, I got—

Woo. Wow. Oh my. My breath was coming in gasps. As we rocked and rolled together, I looked into the cat-green eyes of the woman before me, her smile spreading from cheek to cheek...

So again, I say—thank you, thank you, *THANK YOU!*

Oh, by the way—I hereby give notice. My new employer, a start-up, currently goes by the simple name *Robot Gigolos*.

With all sincerity, and good luck in the Cotsirilos–Caudiddle lawsuit pending against your company.

John Alden

p.s.

*Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and affairs of love:
Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues;
Let every eye negotiate for itself
And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.*

—Much Ado About Nothing, Act II, Scene i

The librarian smiled. "You must be seeking something important to wish a glimpse into your own fate. It is not something to undertake lightly."

"I'll drown in my book."

— Prospero, from *The Tempest*, Act V, Scene i

With the Help of Your Good Hands

Leah Bobet

IT WAS A CLOUDY, SULLEN DAY WHEN SIMON AQUITAINE O'Neill finally reached the library.

He had traveled thousands of miles, from the soft, shrouded moors of his native England eastwards, passing through bejeweled France, somber Germany, and salty Greece. Gazing upon the ancient building growing large on the horizon, watching its roof teeter precariously upon columns—which were neither quite Dorian nor Ionic, but instead spiraled up like delicate marble spindles—he felt both triumph and relief tilt into his belly like fine wine. Perhaps the vintage he'd been drinking the night he agreed to this foolishness. Roxanne wanted proof that he'd always be faithful, well by God she would have it! He would never again have to utter soothing words as she waxed hysterical, or watch her tear at her hair and accuse him of being untrue. If it had to come from the creator

of the universe Himself, she would have her proof and be his wife.

The swarthy man working the oars cleared his throat, worked his mouth around blocky, foreign English. "Sir, you want that I wait?"

Simon turned to the fisherman and gave him a brilliant smile. "Yes, definitely. I won't be but a moment in finding what I need."

The man looked at the library, then eyed Simon with shrewdness written in the lines of his face. "Island of Circe, this is. Turned Odysseus' men to pigs. Beautiful woman, they say."

Simon held back his irritation. He couldn't shake the idea that the fisherman was laughing at him, all the time. What was the man going on about? "Yes, yes. I've heard the myths."

The old fisherman chuckled as they pulled into shallow water. "Myths. Magic is here, you see. I wait here for you two days, and after that..." The man shrugged, amused.

Simon bit back a sigh as he stepped into the warm water of the Mediterranean, headed towards shore. At least he had paid only half the man's fees in advance. The water was warm on his bare feet, and the cloth of his loose pants swirled around him like some strange sea creature. Finally, dripping, he reached the grainy shore with his shoes in his hands.

He walked for an hour, panting and thirsty, before arriving at the steps of the ancient building. The pines were still in the barely stirring summer air, warm enough to turn his English blood to sweat. He sat until his breathing slowed to the rhythm of the waves, and then stood. Entered.

The marble interior was cool and dim, inhabited by just a breath of wandering wind. Simon staggered as he saw the rows and rows of bookshelves, standing as lonely as ruins in twilight. The silence was total. Simon took a few steps, halted as the squeaking of his shoes echoed through the empty halls and vanished into the sonic unknown. He raised his voice gingerly. "Hello?"

"May I help you, sir?" The voice was crisp, professional, accentless; feminine only in its pitch. Simon tried to relax taut muscles and turned, ready for anything fate was to deal him. He received his card in the form of a small, slender woman, brown hair pinned up in a severe bun. Her spartan brown dress covered her throat to ankle, and itself was obscured by a large, paper-laden desk. She took in his appraising gaze, pursed her lips. "May I help you?"

"Ah, yes, yes indeed. You are the librarian here?" The question hung in the air for a few moments before dissipating into the gloom.

The sour mouth quirked into a fleeting smile, a strangely young and excited one. "You could call me that, sir. It's gratifying, I must say, to see

young men researching here again. It's been a long time since the last few left. I was wondering if perhaps our collection had been forgotten."

Simon felt himself relax, let out a breath. Librarians were familiar territory. "I'm sorry to say so, but this isn't actually a well-known institution, madam. I'm a fellow at Oxford, and one of my older colleagues mentioned this place in his notes. He ... wasn't well-regarded at the university, and I think I'm the only person who took him quite seriously. Aside from that, I believe the knowledge has been all but lost." Internally, he corrected himself: most of the teaching staff thought Mansfield was out-and-out mad, and were used to dismissing his talk, his Mediterranean maps, and his knowledge. About half of them had thought Simon afflicted as well when word got around about his sabbatical, and the reason for it.

The woman's shoulders drooped, just a fraction of an inch. Simon noticed for the first time how young her face was. "Well, there's very little to be done about that. Perhaps there's something I can do for you, though?"

Surprisingly, Simon felt himself blush with sudden embarrassment. "You must get this all the time, but... I'd like to see my book, if you please. Simon Aquitaine O'Neill."

The librarian smiled. "You must be seeking something important to wish a glimpse into your own fate. It is not something to undertake lightly."

Simon ducked his head, feeling even more blood rush to his cheeks. "It's... well, it's for a girl."

The girl-woman chuckled dryly. "It's always for a woman with you young men. Very well, I'll answer your best pleasure, but understand that you may not enjoy your enlightenment. Come along."

Simon trailed her through the bookshelves, glimpsing titles embossed in gold upon the leather-bound volumes. A golden glitter filled the narrow avenues, almost as if the sun had been cut into confetti and tossed carelessly about these ancient halls. The librarian's shoes clicked ahead of him commandingly, drawing him ever forward. She hummed under her breath, preoccupied, a tune that Simon could not place. He watched her move, slow and graceful, running her hands lightly across leather bindings.

The tune broke off suddenly. "Here," she murmured in a strangely soft voice. "Here it is."

She pulled a medium volume from the shelf, placed it in Simon's hands with a soft thump. He stared at it, suddenly trembling. The librarian gave him a worried glance. "Would you like me to check for you?"

Simon nodded mutely. "She wants to know if I'll be faithful to her,

Roxanne, I mean. She won't marry me otherwise, and I couldn't think of a better way to assure her. After all, fate in almost every culture comes from the gods themselves, right? What better proof than the Library of Destiny?"

The librarian sat on the floor with mute dignity and opened the book. Simon felt himself seized with an uncontrollable longing. He could find out when he would die, when he would be lucky. There might not be leeway permitted on the path from life to darkness, but at least one could be prepared. The girl-woman was turning the pages with agonizing slowness, skimming through paragraphs and sentences that held his deepest thoughts and dreams. He crouched down beside her, taking in again the slightness of her body, her small breasts. He stifled the slight stirring of nervousness in his belly, the urge to snatch the book away from those delicate, tiny hands. Would he blow her away if he exhaled too hard?

With a snap, the book shut. The librarian looked up at him with round, apologetic eyes. "Simon?"

He felt like a deer caught in a lion's yellow eyes, in a woman's uncannily old, sea-green eyes. "Yes?"

She drew a breath, let it out. "I'm sorry."

Simon sprang to his feet. "You're sorry? What does that mean? What did you see?"

The librarian rose, dusting carefully her brown skirt, and turned away. "I'm sorry. You'll not be faithful to her."

"No, that can't be. I would never hurt Roxanne... I..." His voice trailed off.

"You cannot refute the Library of Destiny, Simon." The woman's voice was soft, but she returned the book to its place with a snap of finality.

Simon felt tears start up in his eyes and denied them. "I don't quite know what to do now."

The librarian shrugged. "I'm sorry I could not give you what you wanted. Just remember that I have done you worthy service; told you no lies, made no mistakes, and served without grudge or grumbling."

"Yes, you've been quite helpful, Miss...you never did tell me your name, did you?" His absent, stricken eyes grew sharp again, inquiring.

The young woman smiled. "You can call me Ariel."

Simon smiled back, bitterly. "Well, Ariel. Perhaps I'll see you tomorrow. I'd somehow expected to stay awhile."

He sent the fisherman away, promising the suspicious man twice his pay if he returned in a week's time. He set up camp by a stream, and tried to solace himself with some of his meager provisions. That night he bedded on the yellow sands of the island, below the pines and the looming, crumbling library.

The next morning dawned cool and fresh, with none of the suffocating heat of the day before. Simon climbed through the small forest and to the library feeling oddly refreshed, but still achingly empty. He lingered for a while beside one ancient tree, running his hands up and down the massive scar that split its trunk. Lightning, perhaps?

This morning, sunlight streamed through the windows, patterning mysterious futures on the floor. Ariel was at her desk, turning the pages of a book as tenderly and crisply as one might forgive a wayward child. She wore blue today, the blue of the afternoon skies. Simon approached her, bowed slightly, making sure to be polite. "Good morning, Miss Ariel."

Ariel raised her head, graceful as a swan. "Good morning, Simon Aquitaine O'Neill. Have you cooled the air with your sighs?"

Simon caught the slightest twinkle in those depthless eyes, and smiled back. She had a sense of humor at least, and had been nothing but helpful. "I slept well, in fact."

"That is good to hear. Is there more toil for me today?"

"Well," Simon drew a breath, gathered in his mind the words he needed. "I was thinking that...perhaps this shouldn't be a wasted trip. This is the Library of Destiny, after all. Think of the historical research one could do, the facts one could bring to light."

Ariel looked up at him. "So you want to see your young woman's book."

Simon started. "How did you know? How...did you read more of my book than you told me?" He was suddenly angry, feeling violation from head to toe, the shame of having his pretense destroyed so casually.

The librarian sat, calm as the waves. "I've read every book in this library. It's my duty. I thought you understood that."

Simon felt his hands clench into fists. "No! So you knew why I was here, already knew what would happen?"

"I knew what you wanted to know. You want to know why. Right now, your Roxanne is being courted by one Jack Leary, having given you up for fled. She never wanted literal proof of your love, just to hear you say it again and again, like music. She's a hotheaded woman, that one. Must be the Irish blood."

Simon tangled his hands in his hair, leaned heavily upon a column. It was difficult to breathe. "Damn you... don't you have any compassion at all?"

Ariel looked down at her desk, twiddled her fingers. "I've made you mad."

"Answer me!" he shouted, and instantly regretted it as the woman shivered. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry. But please, miss. Ariel. Please answer me."

She shrugged slowly. "I am a minister of fate. It is my duty to serve destiny, not to interfere with it. I know you understand that. This is nothing

but heart-sorrow.”

Simon turned away and fled the library.

He'd been such a fool. And she wasn't mourning his loss at all; she was living high with that pig of a Leary, stringing him along the same way she had Simon himself. Maybe he had done the right thing after all. Now they wouldn't marry, and he wouldn't end up a cuckolded husband, one of those who were suffered rather than loved. He would be free. He could find someone who really loved him, who really appreciated the sparkle of his wit and the depths of love he was ready to give.

He'd been such a fool.

He returned the next morning, after a day spent wandering through the tides, hunting for clams in the shallows, thinking. His own words echoed in his head; he hadn't shown much compassion himself, so blindly had he pursued his Roxanne. Just like her, just like that red-headed heartbreaker. Well, he would be different. He was a gentleman.

Ariel was right, on top of that, and it galled him in his most tender spot: his curiosity. She sat still at the desk, composed, reading carefully in a gown like fire. Simon approached her desk, bowed. “Ariel, I'm sorry for the way I acted. It was not at all gentlemanly, especially in consideration of the debt I owe you.”

Ariel put down her book, nodded. “Apology accepted.”

There was an awkward silence between them, and Simon finally stepped away. He spent that day in the stacks, reading about the vices of Charlemagne, the secret affairs of several King Henrys, the quiet guilt and generosity of Catherine the Great. He looked briefly for his book, seized with a sudden melancholy amidst the real story of Romeo and Juliet. The space where it had rested was neatly empty. When he left the library to sleep once again on the beach, Ariel was not at her desk.

The next morning he rose early, marched to the ancient building with the wind at his back. He perched on her desk, watching her read for fifteen minutes before breaking the silence of the dawn. Was it his book? “Is there anything I can do for you? I mean, you've done so much for me, without asking anything, and I seem to have forgotten my manners.”

A smile blossomed on the young woman's face, and she let the aged volume slide from her fingers. “Anything you can do for me. You know you're only the second visitor who's asked me that.”

Simon raised an eyebrow. “Who was the first?”

Ariel sighed, leaned back in her chair. “Oh, a young man named William, some four hundred years back.”

The young man was flabbergasted, all thoughts of his own book forgotten. “Four hundred?”

The librarian smiled. "You must have known I am much older than I look. In any case, he'd come for some direction. He was a writer, a playwright to be exact, one of your country. Here because of a woman, as well. He'd fallen in love with some child named Rosaline, and she'd spurned him. I gave him all the sonnets and plays he was to write, all except one."

"You gave them to him? Why would you do a thing like that?"

Another shrug. "It's what the book required me to do."

"And... the one he wrote himself?"

"Well... that was something different." The young woman fidgeted in her chair, stared at the floor.

"Ariel ... what's wrong? Did I say something wrong?" Simon stood, concern brushing his face. He hadn't thought she could look so uncomfortable, so ... emotional.

"Oh, nothing. I..." She fell silent, and when she looked up again her eyes were hinting at tears, as if they had long ago forgotten how to form them. "Would you really listen, if I told you? I mean, really listen?"

Simon nodded mutely, took her hand more out of instinct than anything else. Roxanne had taught him a great deal about the comforting of weeping women. Maybe he could atone for his mistakes with his flown red-haired lady if he listened now, really listened. Maybe he could learn, and she'd come back to him. Ariel led him outside, and they sat on the great marble steps, facing neither each other, nor the sea.

"I was born on this island centuries ago, I don't know quite how many. My mother was a sorceress and my father a king, and his mortal blood kept me from being all my mother wanted in an heir. My father had been shipwrecked upon this island, and she had turned his men into swine just to take him as her lover, but when she bore me she seemed to regret that as a mistake.

"Instead of training me as her heir, my mother used me as her hands, her eyes, the keeper of her books. She sent me to Italy, to Africa, to all the nations of the world to watch and do her bidding. As the years passed she grew more and more embittered, and her works grew darker. I think perhaps she really did love my father, and I wish I could have known her before he returned to his human wife. It hurt my mother very deeply, and perhaps I reminded her too much of him for her liking. She was still angry at him for betraying her, and she took that anger out on the world.

"I didn't care too much about her business. I cared for travel; there was nothing like it. To tread the ooze of the salt deep, to run upon the sharp wind of the north. It was liberty itself. But there came a day where she asked me to do something that was... unconscionable. I had read most

of the library even then, and I understood what would occur if I obeyed her will. So instead of killing a man, I warned him, and when I returned she was furious.”

Ariel paused, took a deep breath. Simon stared at her with new eyes, taking in her immortal face with sudden, dizzying comprehension.

“‘And, for thou wast a spirit too delicate to act her earthy and abhorr’d commands, refusing her grand hests, she did confine thee, by help of her more potent ministers, and in her most unmitigable rage, into a cloven pine; within which rift imprison’d, thou didst painfully remain a dozen years; within which space she died, and left thee there,’” Simon quoted softly, in a tremulous, awestruck voice. Sycorax. Circe. Even the names were alike.

Ariel looked up at him sharply. “So you have read the play.”

Simon smiled, a twisted smile full of pity and shared grief. “To the syllable.”

She stood, distraught. “I need not tell you what happens next. You know all, and knew all before I ever opened my mouth.”

Simon caught her hand, eased her back down. “So... when Prospero the magician arrived and freed you, you served him.”

She shook her head. “No. I loved him. He wasn’t much of a magician, himself. It took all his strength to undo what my mother had done. But I twisted destiny for him, changed the fates. It was foolish. It went against everything I’d ever been taught, everything I knew about the ways of the world, but I would have done anything for that man. The repercussions...I...I shouldn’t be telling you this. You’re a patient man, but a mortal one. You won’t be able to handle these kinds of truths.”

Simon cleared his throat, chose his words carefully. “In my religion, or at least what was my religion, the people confess their sins to the priests to be purged of them. Sometimes it’s good to talk about it, to tell someone.”

Ariel shrugged, then suddenly started to cry. “What’s the use? You’ll be gone in a few days, and I’ll still be here alone. You’ll go back to Oxford and teach for a century, and I’ll still be here with my books and nothing else.”

Simon slid an arm around her comfortingly. “You know, you don’t have to stay here.”

She looked up, startled, tears still trickling down her cheeks. “Of course I do! Who would care for the books?”

Simon shrugged. “I’m sure Destiny would provide.”

Ariel’s voice became firm. “I can’t leave.”

“Why not?”

“Because...because...I can’t! There’s a book for me too, you know that? It’s not what’s in store for me! I stay here, I know that, and I’ve

always known that. Until the end of time I stay here.”

Simon took both her hands, looked her in the eyes. “What if you chose not to stay here? You’ve told me you enjoyed travelling the world. You seem to be unhappy here. Why not leave? You can do it whenever you want, you know. Nothing’s holding you back.”

Ariel grew quiet. “I wouldn’t know the world now. I haven’t left this island since...in centuries. I would never survive out there.”

Simon took a deep breath. “I’d help you.”

She stood, dropped his hands. “I’ll have to think about this.”

Three days passed slowly. Every morning, Simon climbed up to the library, pausing by the scarred pine with a certain sense of wonder. However, Ariel was not there. She was nowhere to be found. With inexplicable panic, Simon searched every mile of the island, left messages upon her solid desk. His nights were tormented, torn between dreams of brown-haired librarians and pale redheads. The fourth day dawned, and Simon’s heart sank as he saw the fisherman’s boat on the horizon.

Heavy with regret, he sloshed out into the waves. She had been so old and yet so young, so innocent. They would have been good friends, perhaps. Maybe even more, a small part of him whispered.

It was only when he reached the side of the wooden boat and prepared to hoist himself in that he felt the hand on his shoulder. Simon turned, caught his breath. She stood behind him, dress as green as the Mediterranean, skirts twisting in the current as if they lived. He could not speak.

Ariel’s own voice was quiet. “You changed the books with those three words, you know that. ‘I’d help you.’ I checked almost half of the pertinent volumes. You changed Destiny.”

Simon nodded, not trusting his voice. That meant maybe, just maybe... Instead he turned to the fisherman, who was watching Ariel with wide eyes. “You will carry another passenger to the mainland?”

The man didn’t even try to double the price.

Simon clambered into the boat, held out his hands for the slender young woman. “What will you do when we reach England?”

Ariel shrugged. “Teach, travel, wander...whatever strikes my fancy. That is,” she added hastily, “if you don’t mind. You’ve indulged me enough for a lifetime.”

Simon smiled, gently. “Just doing what the Bard recommended.”

Ariel smiled back, climbed into the boat. “It seems the young man had more foresight than I credited him with. Very well, then.” Her eyes were like the sun. “Let your indulgence set me free.” •

*Is this what I have to look forward to
in my retirement? Chasing after Julia's
goddamn chickens?*

*So will I pray that thou mayst have thy Will,
If thou turn back and my loud crying still.*

— Sonnet CXLIII

Chasing Chickens

Kate Riedel

LO, AS A CAREFUL HUSWIFE RUNS TO CATCH / ONE OF HER FEATHERED CREATURES
broke away...

Julia had warned Mina about the Dutch banty. She was going broody (the hen, not Julia) and would try to escape to the woods to hide her eggs. “You know, Mother.”

Mina dropped the sonnets, reached for the coffee can containing shelled corn, and stepped from the porch—“in pursuit of the thing she would have stay”—rattling the can enticingly.

The Dutch banty was having none of that. She scooted across the garden. Mina set down the can and dove after her, dodging between cabbages and tomatoes, thinking, *Is this what I have to look forward to in my retirement? Chasing after Julia's goddamn chickens?*

The Dutch banty flapped energetically, but couldn't quite get up momentum to make it over the fence that separated garden from woods, and Mina had the squawking thing by the legs.

“If you were mine you'd be stew tonight,” Mina said as she confined the frantic wings with one arm and tucked the head firmly under her other.

The squawks stopped as if turned off by a switch, and Mina became

aware of wailing behind her.

A small child, about two years old, stumbled through the garden after her, its arms extended, face streaked with tears and snot, and squalling “Mama! Mama!”

In her astonishment Mina let the hen’s head go, and it renewed its struggles.

“Mama!” the child wailed.

“Just shut up!” Mina yelled back over her shoulder as she clapped her hand over the banty’s eyes and kept on toward the chicken coop.

The child cried louder, fell flat on its face (taking two tomato plants with it), and struggled to its feet to continue its noisy pursuit.

Mina shoved the Dutch banty behind bars just as the child wrapped its arms around her leg and chortled, “Mama!”

Lack of grandchildren was, so far, the one real advantage Mina could see in Julia’s relationship. But she was not indifferent to duty.

She squatted, disentangled the child’s arms, and gripped its shoulders.

“Now then,” she said. “Where did you come from?”

“Mama!” said the child.

“Uh-uh, not me,” said Mina, pulling back from the grubby hand patting at her face. “Don’t cry,” she added hastily. “Let’s go find your mama.”

Had someone come in while she was chasing the damn chicken? But there was no car in the driveway, no one on the porch or in the house. Mina removed her book from the chair and set the child firmly in its place. “You wait here,” she told it.

“Mama!” it screamed, and fell down the steps after her.

“I said, wait!” Sighing, Mina picked it up, awkwardly balancing it on her hip. It snuffled, stuck its thumb in its mouth, and lay its head against her shoulder as she strode to the end of the driveway and looked up and down the gravel road. The state park was just on the other side. Had the child wandered away from a picnic?

“Hullo?” Mina shouted. “Hullo! Anyone there? Anyone lost a kid?” But the only response was a giggle from the child. “It’s not funny,” she reproved, but the child only giggled again and patted her face with grimy fingers.

“Well,” she said. “I guess I’d better call *someone*. County sheriff, I guess. What’s your name?” she asked as she set the child down on the porch.

“Leem,” said the child around its thumb.

“I suppose it’s too much to ask if you know your last name.”

“Mama.”

“Nuts.” The child submitted sweetly to examination. Overalls, sandals,

T-shirt, briefs. The only labels were Sears and OshKosh.

"Okay, you're a boy. And toilet trained. Thank heavens for small favors."

Leem was tucking into a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich when the sheriff arrived.

The sheriff was a young man, perfectly civilian to all appearances, except for the star on his shirt pocket and his air of confidence, like local royalty.

"Supposing he'd turned out to be allergic," he tut-tutted.

"So what was I supposed to feed him, tofu?"

"So you're Ms. Jones' mother," the sheriff went on, as if she hadn't spoken. "Taking care of the place while your daughter and her, uh, companion, are on vacation. Permanent address?" He opened notebook, pulled out pen, and wrote down the number of the walk-up apartment in the city.

"Occupation?"

"Librarian."

"Which library?"

"Uh," Mina reddened. "That's my *profession*. I *work* as administrative assistant at..."

Mina noted that the sheriff wrote down the child's name as "Liam." She'd bet the last name was something like Persaud. The soft, dark curls and chocolate-drop eyes could indicate eastern, or at least Mediterranean extraction. Or he could be English, or Irish, or even Swedish.

"Good-natured kid," the sheriff said, "healthy," tucking his notebook in his pocket and standing up. "Here's my card."

"Just a minute!" said Mina. "You aren't leaving him here!"

"Where else?" as Mina pursued him to his car. "You seem a responsible, mature person."

From the door Liam yelled, "Mama!"

"You sure he's not yours?" the sheriff called from the car window.

"Very funny," said Mina, but he was already rolling down the driveway.

All afternoon Liam followed her about the garden and house. At night she bathed him, dressed him for sleep in a T-shirt of Julia's she'd found left in the dryer, put him to bed and dumped his dirt-and-peanut-butter-streaked clothes in the washing machine.

Then she dialled the number on the card.

"Nothing yet," the sheriff said cheerfully. "Good thing the little tyke seems to have taken a shine to you."

Mina slammed down the phone and went to transfer Liam's clothes from the washer to the dryer, and then to check on him, on the futon in

the second bedroom. He slept soundly, sweetly, one chubby fist under his cheek, the other curled behind the thumb tucked in his mouth.

But Mina lay awake on the sofa, in the darkness loud with crickets and tree frogs, sleepy clucks from the hen-house, the shrill cries of night hawks. She'd become used to the city traffic below the apartment she'd rented after Brian and his chickie...

"MAMA!"

"Jesus Christ, kid, it's only six-thirty."

"Mama!"

"Look, Billy-Boy, I'm not your mama."

Liam giggled and crawled up next to her.

The sun was high in the sky when she re-awoke, dished out granola for the two of them, and pulled Liam's clothes from the dryer to dress him. He toddled after her as she released the chickens into their run and fed and watered them.

"Boy, did you ever do a job on those tomatoes."

Liam only pointed to the rainbows in the sprinkler.

Mina staked up the tomato plants Liam had taken down. Such a practical garden. Even her mother, with a family to feed, had kept space for flowers. The only flowers here were impatiens, straggling along the front of the cottage.

"Floral tofu," she commented to Liam. "*I* had roses, a whole back yard full of 'em, big red ones, that smelled like, oh, like *heaven*. You should have *smelled* that whole house. Roses, home-made brownies, beeswax on the furniture. And did my family appreciate it? They did not. Brian had to get himself a little red sports car and a chickie half his age. Mike's an alcoholic wannabe writer, and Julia's a vegetarian lesbian intellectual, and the bastard who bought my house dug up my rose bushes. Where did I go wrong, Billy-Boy?"

Liam was nowhere to be seen.

Mina ran from the house to the chicken coop, down the driveway, calling.

She found him standing in the ditch at the edge of the gravel road, tugging at a wild rose bush, seemingly impervious to the thorns. He turned, smiling, and thrust a single wild rose right under her nose. Mina scolded. Liam giggled.

A car pulled up at the edge of the road. "Well, you two seem to be having a good time."

Mina straightened. "Have you found the parents?"

"Still looking." The sheriff pulled away in a rattle of gravel and cloud

of dust.

Evening found them still together on the porch, Liam in his improvised nightshirt, the rose in a jar of water on the porch rail.

"I'm sorry, I don't do bedtime stories," Mina told Liam as they watched bats and swatted now and again at mosquitoes. She reached for the book she'd been reading the day before. "How about some poetry? Listen up:

*"Lo, as a careful huswife runs to catch
One of her feathered creatures broke away,
Sets down her babe, and makes all swift dispatch
In pursuit of the thing she would have stay;*

*Whilst her neglected child holds her in chase,
Cries to catch her whose busy care is bent
To follow that which flies before her face,
Not prizing her poor infant's discontent..."*

Liam was asleep, thumb in mouth.

She carried him in, deposited him on the futon, and went to dump his clothes into the washing machine.

Back in the living room she replaced the book on the shelf. All the Arden Shakespeare, plus tons of secondary material, including Julia's doctoral thesis. *Shakespeare's Gender Issues in Postcolonial Context*. Nuts. Still, were we any better in my day? We would have read that sonnet and deduced that poor old Bill had an Oedipus complex.

"I should have been reading Shakespeare, not analyzing him," she said aloud. "Then maybe I might have..."

You might be able to find work writing Harlequin Romances.

Those words still burned. "Verbal diarrhea" when she switched to stream-of-consciousness. When the college literary magazine rejected her minimalist effort as "a grocery list," she'd switched to the library course.

But instead of Harold Hill, she'd met Brian...

She woke to a faint stirring of air that lifted the day's heat still undispersed from the enclosed space.

There should be no draft.

The door was open.

The futon in the spare bedroom was empty.

The stars shown only on trees and grass, garden and chicken coop.

"Liam!" she called.

Across the grass, silver under the starlight, was a faint trail where bent grass and dew-drops joined and streaked to show someone had walked there, the deeper silver of a snail's trail leading to the woods.

Ohmigod. The fringe of woods bordered an old pasture that sloped to a river. A slow, shallow river, but a river.

Heedless of thistles, stones and poison ivy, Mina ran barefoot down the remains of a cow path between sentinel mulleins to the low bank of the river that flowed broad and silver in the starlight.

Liam stood in the middle, gazing upward.

The starlight was so bright, the water so clear, that even from the bank she could see minnows nosing the hem of his nightshirt.

“Liam,” she called quietly, and stepped onto the rocks below the bank, down into the water and weeds. Silt sifted in clouds through her toes. A frog splashed away. Liam turned.

“Mama!” he said.

“That’s right, Billy-Boy,” she said, her feet now on firm sand, cool water purling around her ankles.

“Mama,” he said again, and returned his gaze to the sky, so that Mina also looked upward.

Across the heavens, the Milky Way mirrored the river. Beneath it, directly overhead, Cygnus fled Aquila, and just above the dark that was the woods on the southern horizon, the big dipper floated.

You can’t see this in the city, a voice said in her head, and another voice answered, *When was the last time you looked?*

“Pretty,” said Liam.

“Your shirt’s soaking!” Mina snatched him up and splashed back to shore.

His clothes huddled soggy at the bottom of the washer.

Mina dumped them in the dryer. But Liam needed something dry now, and the only dry clothes were in Julia’s and...

She hadn’t been in Julia’s bedroom at all. Hadn’t even opened the door. She avoided looking at the bed, which was quite a trick, since it was a king-size bed and took up most of the floor space. Funny, she could imagine any other two people, including two women—even herself, if it came to that... But her own daughter?

Nuts. There were two dressers. Which was Julia’s?

Well, Julia’s friend certainly wouldn’t have a wedding picture of Mina and Brian on *her* dresser.

Mina pulled open the top drawer. Underwear. Second drawer. Sweaters in cedar waiting for winter. Third drawer. Aha, jeans and T-shirts.

The front door slammed! She grabbed a T-shirt and tore from the bedroom to where Liam, stark naked, was descending the steps from the porch.

“I can’t leave you alone for a minute!” she said, snatching him up and

hauling him inside to pull the T-shirt over his head.

He giggled. She plopped him onto the futon and flopped down next to him, reciting:

*“But if thou catch thy hope, turn back to me,
And play the mother’s part, kiss me, be kind.”*

Oedipus complex my ass, she thought. Hell, I knew more about Shakespeare when I was still in high school. Back then I didn’t want to *analyze* Shakespeare, I wanted to *be* Shakespeare.

Liam’s thumb crept toward his mouth. Just get the kid to sleep. What had she sung to Julia and Mike when they were babies? Not the sonnets, that was for sure.

“Hushaby, don’t you cry,”

Her voice was rusty, and she felt silly.

*“When you wake,
You’ll have a piece of cake
And all the pretty little horses.”*

Liam shook his head.

“Don’t like that, hey? Well, I guess horses are a girl thing. My best friend Nancy and I, we used to dream about living together” —but not like Julia and her friend, she thought, we were only ten years old, for heaven’s sake— “and we’d have a big stable full of horses... Oh hell. I seem to have been living my life backward ever since you turned up, Billy-boy, and it doesn’t get any better, backwards *or* forwards.”

“Pretty,” Liam murmured, and fell asleep.

She went back to the bedroom, smoothed out Julia’s jeans and T-shirts, and closed the drawer. As she stood, she knocked over a small frame that had been eclipsed by the wedding picture. She set it upright.

A silver frame. Pretty fancy stuff for an old black-and-white snapshot cracked across one corner.

Why would Julia have a photograph of a child on her dresser?

A child of about five years old, with a tin can in one hand, and—

“Why, that’s Goldie!” Even in black and white she recognized, among the barred rocks of her childhood, the single banty hen, the pet who had not gone into the stew pot.

That barefoot child in overalls—“OshKosh, Bigosh!” she remembered her delight in the sound of the slogan—a wisp of hair blowing across eyes squinted against the sun.

“That’s me,” Mina whispered.

Look at the way that shadow stretched out behind her, the way the light turned the hen-house window into a patch of white. Early morning.

The trees in the background were fully leaved. Summer.

"Julia," Mina breathed. "Oh, sweetheart. Oh, Julia."

"Mama?" Liam called from the front door.

Mina set down the picture, gently.

He looked back, to make sure Mina was following, before going down the steps.

The trees cast long shadows, with sunrise avenues between them, dew-wet pathways down which to run barefoot.

Yes, she remembered that. The first morning glory, blue as the sky. A robin shouting from the top of the tallest pine. A cobweb stretched from stem to stem of tall grass, every dewdrop lit by a rainbow and holding the morning upside-down.

Oh, yes!

Raspberry brambles caught at her legs, scratched, but didn't hurt. The sunlight-and-shadow path under the pine trees aromatic in the growing warmth, the gold-and-green meadow full of tall cinquefoil and milkweed and mullein.

Down the path, dust clinging to the dew on her bare feet, to where the river shone in the morning sun. Swallows and dragonflies darted above the water and minnows below, and a kingfisher plunged from a tree, turtles from a log to bridge the two worlds. Water bugs skated among the reeds, and clams disappeared below the sand with a little puff.

*So run 'st thou after that which flies from thee,
Whilst I thy babe chase thee afar behind;
But if thou catch thy hope, turn back to me,
And play the mother's part, kiss me, be kind.*

Where around any corner she might find her heart's desire.

*So will I pray that thou mayst have thy Will,
If thou turn back and my loud crying still.*

THE SHERIFF, FISHING FROM A TIN-BOTTOMED WOODEN ROWBOAT, LINE AND BOBBER drifting lazily after, wild roses turning his feed-store cap into a crown, floated by the sandbank where Mina piled tiny clamshells in intricate patterns.

She scrambled up and waved vigorously as the slow current slid his boat around the bend.

"Told you he was yours," he called.

She waved one last time, then paused to brush sand from her overalls. OshKosh, she thought, pleased, contemplating the label before returning to her clamshell patterns. •

She had accepted her father's challenge, and every one he had thrown at her since, and had tossed them all back in his teeth. Let him choke. He couldn't live forever.

"The shame itself doth speak for instant remedy."

King Lear, Act I, Scene iv.

An Instant Remedy

Holly Phillips

DUSK FILLED THE HIGH-WALLED COURT, BUT PEREGRINE STILL practiced the form. She ignored how the weight of her brother's sword trembled in her hands, and how it lanced pain through her shoulders every time she lifted it in a high parry. She also ignored the darkness that hid the crooked flagstones, the sweat that stung her eyes, and the blisters that burned in her palms. For this one hour in the day, she could ignore everything, forget everything, escape everything—

"The Duke wants you."

She broke the form and staggered.

It was Matt, the newest of her father's pages. "His Grace said you were to come straight to the small audience chamber." He looked her over and shook his head. "A pity you look like the stableboy's apprentice." He turned and began an insolent saunter back into the palace.

The baiting never ceased. The court, like her father, the Duke, was still anticipating the imminence of her surrender. It would not be today. She

took two long, silent strides and rested the point of her brother's sword on the nape of the boy's neck, parting his pretty blond hair. He froze. The sword was very sharp.

"Speak to me so again and it will be you who looks the worst for it. And it won't be a disfigurement that will wash away in the bath." Her hand was steady enough now. A bead of blood slid down a yellow hair. "It is my father's prerogative to hate me. It is not yours."

"No, Milady. I mean, I mean, yes, Milady."

"I think we understand each other."

"Yes, Milady."

She withdrew the sword. "Go, then. You may tell my father I am following directly behind you."

"Yes, Milady," the boy said faintly, and he bolted for the door.

THE PAGE WAS NEW, AND A FOOL TO THINK HER SWEAT-SOAKED EXHAUSTION would be anything but a pleasure to the Duke. She slid the sword into its scabbard and hooked it onto her belt before following the page into the palace. The only concession she made to appearances was to rake the damp hair off her forehead and wipe her face with her sleeve. The point wasn't to pretend to be unmoved by her father's contempt. The point was to cast it back at him with equal force. She too had loved her brothers. She too was appalled that she was the only heir he had left. She too understood the bleak whims and humors of despair.

She was, after all, his child.

The small audience chamber was in the older part of the palace, a windowless cave behind the cavern of the great hall. Pale hangings of ivory and gold tried to relieve the gloom, aided by branch after branch of candles, but the result was to give the room the stifling prettiness of a lady's jewelry box. Peregrine took in the rich velvets and ostentatious baubles of her father's favorites and thought the metaphor more than apt. She, in her worn leathers and sweaty shirt, her braid coming undone down her back, was the exception—but for once, it seemed, not the only one. Standing before the Duke's chair was man more roughly dressed than she. He was of middling height, with gray-streaked hair and broad shoulders bowed beneath a ragged cloak, and she supposed him a mendicant artisan or some such until he turned to see who came up behind him and she saw the Brand on his face.

The shock brought her up short, which gave the Duke his opening.

"Ah, the lovely Peregrine! How fortunate for us you have come... at long last." The page, Matt, was smirking uneasily at the Duke's shoulder. "Come, Milady, won't you give us a daughter's greeting?"

She stepped belatedly forward and bowed, one hand on the hilt of her brother's sword. "Milord. How may I serve you?"

"How indeed?" murmured one of the favorites. A titter swept the room, but she had been the center of the court's attention for years, and she sensed the unease. The Brand was like a beacon shining light on every hidden fear in the room. It hid the man's plain features like a mask, though there was no visible mark at all.

The Duke turned over one gold-heavy hand. "You see we have a guest, a most rare and honorable one. As the daughter of the house, it is your duty to see to his every comfort." Was there the slightest emphasis on the word "every"? There was no doubting the emphasis on his next sardonic words: "I trust you shall do your duty, Milady. I do trust you shall not disappoint me there."

Her voice was the perfect mirror for his. "Indeed I shall not, Your Grace. If we might have your permission to withdraw, I will see to it immediately."

Her father flicked his fingers. "Go. I expect you at table tonight."

"As you say, Milord." She bowed and, with a glance at the Branded man that did not quite reach his face, turned to go. He felt like a shield at her back, coming as he did between her father's stare and her, and for once there was no parting shot to amuse the court. It didn't matter. It would all start again at the high table tonight.

SHE SENT A SERVANT SCURRYING AHEAD TO PREPARE A ROOM, AND HERSELF ESCORTED the Branded.

He said, his voice hoarse but his accent reasonably refined, "You are very kind, Milady. As is the Duke. He is a far more generous host than many of lesser station I have known."

Precisely because it gave him a fresh excuse, and audience, for his games. Could one say such a thing to a man who'd attracted the dire attention of one of the Powers of the world? Perhaps not, though she doubted there was much this man had not seen in his forced wanderings. She said only, "Hospitality is a tradition of this house. You are indeed welcome, sir."

"Hardly 'sir' to a Duke's daughter."

"I am the Duke's servant, and yours. Here is your chamber. You must tell me if it does not suit."

"It is..." He looked around him. "...very fine."

The room was in the newer wing of the palace, on the same floor as her own. Its two glazed windows would be bright in the morning, but now the draperies were drawn and candles illuminated the curtained

bed and tapestried walls. The scenes were all of forest hunts, green at a glance, but full of blood if one chose to look closer. Peregrine did not doubt this guest would. She directed the servants who lit the fire and laid out hot water and towels, and sent an understeward for hall clothes, since the Branded carried only a small satchel.

“Generous indeed,” he said.

“Ranulf, here, will attend you. If you need anything, send him for it, or for me. He will conduct you to the hall when it is time.” She prepared to take her leave.

“Milady, it has been many, many years since I have been given such a welcome. I am more accustomed to cow sheds than lordly bedchambers. You are truly kind.”

Curiosity stirred. She forced herself to look beyond the invisible blaze of the Brand and meet his dark, knowing eyes. She was looking for some clue to his age, or to the crime he’d committed to earn a Power’s anger. She didn’t expect to see pity. Her face was as cool, as expressionless, as it ever was, but her heart burned a little. She said coldly, “That, sir, is not a mistake it is wise to make in this house.” She flicked a glance at the servant, then politely bowed. “I will see you at my father’s table.”

He gave a deeper bow. “Milady.”

She left for her own room, and did not look back to see if he remarked which door was hers. She could feel his eyes.

HER ELDEST BROTHER’S CLOTHES WERE LONG OUT OF FASHION AND HAD NEVER BEEN intended to accommodate a woman’s form, even one as long and lean as hers, but she would not wear anything else in her father’s presence. Part of their game. He had his mistress sew her gowns that she kept in her wardrobe, unworn. She washed and put on the black doublet and hose, and buckled the sword belt around her hips. Always the sword, of course. By the Duke’s decree she would wear it for as long as she chose to remain his heir.

For as long as she chose to sustain her mother’s life.

“Be a son to me,” he had said. It was the night his messenger had returned from the Sanctuary bearing her mother’s refusal to leave her spiritual retreat. He was staggering drunk, his mouth wet with rage as he swore at her before his silent, terrified court. “Be my heir in every respect—every respect, I say—or I’ll send that milky bitch after her dead sons, and I’ll wed again and get me a new brood that won’t fall foul of every pox and folly with which the gods feel fit to blacken the world.”

She had said stupidly—she was still young, then—“But a daughter cannot inherit your title. And what of marriage, Milord? What of—”

He had barked a wolf's laugh. "Find me a man who'll not be cowed, find me a man with the spine to prove his manhood on my heir, and he can have you. Gods' witness, if he can take you, I'll name him my one true son and leave the duchy to the get of his loins."

She had accepted his challenge, and every one he had thrown at her since, and tossed them all back in his teeth. Let him choke. He couldn't live forever.

THE HALL WAS HOT WITH THE THOUSAND CANDLES BURNING IN BRANCHES ON THE walls.

It being autumn, dinner was a rich and varied meal. Peregrine had shot the stag herself, even though it still half-killed her just to bend her brother's bow. But bent it she had, and came home with the antlered beast across her horse's back: a victory of sorts. That didn't stop the Duke from eating his fill, washing down each mouthful with unwatered wine. She knew the signs. He was so genial with his unnerving guest all through the meat and bread and fish, there was bound to be trouble for someone before the evening was through. She ate lightly, and took care to have as much water as wine in her cup.

During the remove after the fish, while the musicians played in the background, the Duke said to the high table at large, "This night is a notable one in the history of this great and ancient house. Over centuries of tradition, throughout which my noble line has never been interrupted—" There was a murmur of approbation, barons and knights carefully matching their sarcasm to the Duke's mood. "—never interrupted, I say, we have not once hosted a man bearing the signature of one of the Powers who might decide the fate of any man, lackey or liege." He turned to the Branded man, who sat in the place of honor between him and Peregrine. "You are welcome, sir, to my table and my house."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

The Branded was nothing if not self-contained, Peregrine thought. His reserve would be, to her father, like a spur in a courser's flank.

The Duke lounged against the arm of his chair, facing his guest. "Remarkable. My cherished daughter has attired you as befits a man at my table—she has seen to all your needs, I trust?—yet still I cannot place you. You were never a peasant, of that I'm sure, but what then? No, don't tell me. You have manners, I noticed you dabbling your fingers in the water bowl, so you've known hall service before. You bear yourself like a fighting man, yet you carry no sword—but of course, being what you are, you would hardly need to. Peregrine, sweet lass, remind me. What is the penalty for raising a hand against a man who bears a Power's mark?"

“Death, Milord.”

“Regardless of rank or circumstance?”

“Such is my understanding, Milord.”

“And your understanding had best be sufficient, given the quantity of my gold your tutors carried off with them.”

“As you say, Milord.”

“You notice, Sir Brand, she is a most agreeable chit. But there! I’ve given myself the solution. You were a knight, sir, am I right?”

The Branded man was silent a moment, and the whole table leaned forward, eager for his response. His composure complete, he finally said, “I was nothing before the Brand, Your Grace. Just as I am nothing now but the Brand, whatever clothes your daughter was gracious enough to lend me.”

“Ah, my gracious daughter. One presumes the clothes were the only favors she granted you.”

Her father’s courtiers laughed.

The Branded drew breath to respond, but Peregrine touched her fingers to the back of his hand. “Sir, my father jests. We are a light-hearted house, it is often thus.”

The Duke propped his chin on his fist, distorting his jowled face, and his eyes flicked from that momentary touch to the Branded’s face. Perhaps he had seen, as she had felt, a slight shiver run through their guest. Likely he did not often feel the touch of another’s hand. There could not be many people so wrapped in their own affairs they were oblivious to the eerie force of the Brand. Fortunate man, Peregrine thought sardonically, that he should have found his way to our house.

“Do not distract me, chit,” the Duke said. “My genius is at full flood. Listen: I have not only deduced our good friend’s former station, but I have even guessed what crime sent him out to wander the world at the mercy of man’s charity and the Powers’ whims.”

“Tell all, Your Grace, if you would be so kind as to favor us.” This was from one of the more ambitious of her father’s barons, a young man named Riston who had matched the Duke drink for drink.

“Why, ’tis as clear as the mark on his face. He was the knight of some minor lordling—such as yourself, Riston—and grew too fond of the noble fellow’s wife, or perhaps his daughter. No, that is too common a crime to interest a Power. What could it have been?” He sipped from his cup, his eyes never leaving the Branded’s face.

“Milord Duke,” the Branded man said, “forgive me, but a Power’s judgment is not something to be taken in jest.”

“Oh, there is nothing that might not be taken in jest, not in this house. Is that not so, sweet Perin?”

“As you say, Milord.”

“But Your Grace,” Baron Riston said, “the answer is as clear as... as clear as the glass in your windows.”

Peregrine saw the tightening around her father’s eyes. She doubted Riston did. She sipped her wine.

Riston went on, “Clearly, the good baron’s wife—or daughter—first caught the Power’s eye.”

The Branded sat quite still, his eyes on his hands, but she could see the cords grow taut in his neck.

“You suggest our good guest cuckolded a lord *and* a Power?” The Duke’s voice was deceptively mild. “You put a low estimation on his honor, friend Riston.”

Riston was drunk, and thought he was winning points in his lord’s game. He said, “Perhaps you should ask your daughter her estimation of the fellow’s honor, Milord. Doubtless she, with all her tutoring, would have a better sense of it than I.”

The Duke smiled without lifting his chin from his fist. “So not only do you impugn the honor of my guest, but you question my daughter’s virtue as well. Do you, Riston? Have I read you aright?”

“Milord, I assure you—” the Branded began, but he stilled when Peregrine touched his hand again.

Riston, helpless in the sudden closing of the trap, could only echo, “Milord, I assure you.” And then, indignation getting the better of him: “Milord, it was you who said... That is, I only...”

“Peregrine. Dear child.”

“Milord?”

Still he did not lift his head. “I can scarce allow friend Riston to prove his charge against the Branded in a trial at arms, for even to lift his sword against a marked man would mean his death. Would it not?”

“It would, Milord.”

“And that would be a heavy price to pay for insulting a man of no rank, think you not?”

“If you say it is so, Milord.”

“Then will you please me, and stand as champion for him?”

Peregrine leaned her arm on the table so she could meet her father’s gaze full on. “Stand as the Branded’s champion, Your Grace? Or Lord Riston’s?”

His upper lip pulled off his yellowed teeth. “Sweet girl,” he said gently, “would I ask you to raise your sword against the Branded and risk a Power’s judgment?” He paused, his eyes cold on hers. “Stand against Riston, of course. It is our guest’s honor, and thus our hospitality, that has been

called into question.”

“And my virtue, Milord.” Her smile was as false, and as cold, as his. “If you will pardon me for intruding my own small quarrel into the matter.”

The Duke’s laugh began as a chuckle deep in his belly, but soon it became a roar. He slapped the table hard enough to topple the wine cups. “Clear the floor!”

Once more the Branded tried to intervene. This time Peregrine laid her hand on his shoulder as she stood. “Let it be, sir, if you will,” she murmured in his ear. “It is only the way of the house.”

The Duke was shouting for more wine.

The Branded looked up at her, and behind the invisible blaze of the Brand his eyes were darkly appalled. “Milady, if I have brought this trouble upon you—”

“How could you have? What have you done, but accept the hospitality that was offered? I promise you, the trouble was here long before you arrived.” The lower tables had been cleared. She straightened and took her hand away. The Duke was watching her from the corner of his eye. She said with an ironic smile, “If you would, sir, it is the custom to give your champion a token of your approval.”

“I do not approve.” His voice was hard.

“Nevertheless.”

Moving stiffly, he pulled a medal from beneath his collar and lifted the chain over his head. She took it, warm from his skin, and, curiously, had no doubt that his anger was for her sake, rather than for his own. Without looking at the medal, she put it on, tucking the tarnished silver to lie over her heart, as it had lain over his. She bowed to him, took off her sword belt and doublet, and descended to the floor, her brother’s sword in hand.

STANDING BELOW THE DAIS, HER OPPONENT BY HER SIDE, SHE SAID TO THE DUKE, “First blood?”

He smiled at her. “Judge’s decision.”

She bowed, Riston bowed. The Duke was the judge: the fight would end when he’d had enough, not before. She moved to the center of the great hall, conscious of the eager audience lining the walls, and waited for the young baron to work himself up to the attack.

Even drunk, Riston was fast, and so strong she did not dare meet any of his blows full on. Her game was to deflect and feint, make the quick advance and quicker retreat, while the wine soured in his belly and tangled his feet. There were no guarantees she would win, but she lost less often than she had done once. And Riston would suffer complete

humiliation if it were he who lost. He pressed her hard. More than once his longer reach chased her into a corner, or up against the dais. But he was growing clumsy, and, her one true advantage, he had a deep instinct against harming a woman. At least, against harming a woman on the dueling floor.

She sliced at his face, his knees, his groin, threatening mutilation rather than death. He countered with overhand blows that would buckle her knees if she ever tried to block one directly. She met them glancingly, steel screaming on steel. A desperate strike rocked her. Turning it, she took a shallow slice on her arm, but the deflection threw him off-balance. She darted in to slash his ribs. He shouted with pain, and whirled. She ducked and cut his leg. It staggered him. She caught his sword in a high bind and kicked him in the groin. He collapsed, retching. She knocked the sword out of his hand with her booted foot, then turned to look at the Duke.

His chin was back on his fist. He looked her over, his face brooding and sullen. "He won first blood."

"So he did, Milord." She breathed deeply, but did not pant. "I, however, am not the one puking my wine out on your floor."

"So you are not." He did not smile.

"May I have your judgment, then, Milord?"

Blood soaked her sleeve and painted her hand red while she waited. The hall was silent. The Branded's face was like a mask over the glare of the sun.

Finally, the Duke sighed and waved a tired hand. "Take it, then. The baron's claim is disproved."

There was a polite patter of applause, and a swell of conversation. The musicians started up again, Riston's friends helped him stand, servants circulated with sweets and wine. Peregrine walked to the foot of the dais. "Do I have your permission to withdraw, Milord?"

"As if I might want you to stay and bleed at me." He made a face. "Go, get yourself stitched. Gods, I pity your lover, if you ever find one. Your hide must be a crosshatch of scars."

"And every one a badge of honor." She bowed and walked the length of the hall, dripping blood, her brother's sword still in her hand.

Half-blind from that one glance at the Branded's face.

Sometimes her father was a fool.

SHE HAD FORGOTTEN THE CHAMPION'S TOKEN. WHILE HER MAID, STIFF WITH disapproval, stitched the shallow gash in her arm, she held it up to the light of the candelabra on the dressing table. A silver medal, dark with

tarnish yet smooth with age, so the image stamped on its surface was as blurred as the moon behind a cloud. A lily? A hand? A—

The maid stabbed her with the needle.

“Goddess wept, woman! The sword cut isn’t bad enough for you?”

“I beg your pardon, Milady.”

Peregrine snorted.

“And watch your tongue. He may have you brawling like a city bravo, you needn’t talk like one as well.”

“Don’t scold me, Mira. Not tonight.”

The woman tsked and tied off the final stitch. “I don’t see why that Brand had to come knocking here, of all places. To bring such a thing into a palace! What was that for, but trouble?”

Peregrine leaned her head on her hand. Now the pain had eased she was starting to feel her exhaustion. “I suppose he should have taken the Brand off and left it at the gate.”

Mira tied a linen strip around her arm. “The scar won’t be so bad.”

“Thank you.”

“Give me that.” Mira gave the chain around Peregrine’s neck a tug. “I’ll see it gets where it belongs.”

Peregrine pressed the medal against the skin between her breasts. “No,” she said slowly. “I’ll give it to him myself.”

Mira pursed her lips and stalked away to turn down the bed.

THE DUKE KEPT HIS GUEST LATE. PEREGRINE WAS ASLEEP IN A CHAIR BY THE DOOR TO her chamber when she was awakened by voices in the corridor.

“Here, sir.” That was the page, Matt, her father’s darling. “Do you need anything else?”

“No. Get to your own bed, lad, it’s late enough.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Matt, who kept the Duke’s hours. “I’ll bid you goodnight, then.”

“And to you.”

The Branded man sounded weary, Peregrine thought. She heard his door softly close. Her own was open a crack, the faint candle light from the hall illuminating nothing in her darkened room. That hardly mattered. She already knew how she looked, long and hard and unfeminine, even in a silk robe and with her hair loose down her back. That did not matter either. Not tonight. She touched the medal she still wore and slipped out the door.

The Branded’s room was only a dozen paces down the corridor from hers, not nearly far enough for the state of her nerves. She paused before his door, shivering with tension and the need for rest, and had just raised

her hand to knock when a flicker of movement near the stairs made her pause. There were only two watch candles for the whole corridor. There was nothing to see but darkness. A candle flame guttered in a draft. So. She took a breath and, very quietly, knocked.

The first sight of his face was always a shock. She dropped her eyes and saw he had answered wearing only his borrowed shirt and hose.

"Milady." He sounded blank with surprise.

"I came to return this." She bent her head and lifted the chain from around her neck, pulling it over the fall of her hair.

He took the medal, warm from her skin as it had been warm from his. "Thank you." His voice was rough, his fingers gentle as he closed them over the silver. "Thank you. Milady, what can I say? Your father—"

"—has his reasons. As I have mine. There is no blame owed you, I promise it."

"I do not even know how badly you were injured."

"A small cut. Nothing."

He said again, helplessly, "I do not know what to say."

The candle guttered again. She looked toward the stairs, then forced herself to meet his eyes. "You need not say a word."

She put her hand on his chest. When he fell away from her touch, she followed him in and shut the door.

SHE HAD THOUGHT SHE WOULD COME HERE ONLY TO DISCOVER THE SUBJECT OF the coarse jokes her father enjoyed with his men. She was wrong. The Branded man knew more about tenderness than she had ever learned.

WHEN HE WAS DONE HE TOOK HER IN HIS ARMS AND WHISPERED HER NAME INTO her hair.

She did not know what to do. She had never been naked in a bed with a man before. After a while she said, "Has it been very long for you?"

He gave a kind of laugh. "Dear girl. Longer than you have lived."

"You aren't so old."

"I am as old as the Power desires me to be."

She looked at him, and saw through the Brand to the bleakness of his face. "What did you—? No. Forgive me. Don't answer." She dropped her head to his shoulder.

"I could not tell you, even if I would." He sighed. "It was a long, long time ago. A lifetime and more." He stroked her hair, her skin. Touched ever so gently the bandage on her arm. "Milady. Will you tell me why?"

"You would have to live in this house to understand."

"I did not mean the duel. Well, perhaps I did. But no, I meant, why did

you come to me tonight? You must be in pain, and you looked so very weary. And I am ... what I am. A kind word is a fortune in my life. This generosity of yours is beyond all my understanding. Why?"

She was silent for several breaths. When she finally spoke, it was only to say again, "You would have to live in this house to understand."

Not long after that, the Duke threw open the door to the room, the page, Matt, gleeful at his side, and half the court at his back.

HIS FACE NEARLY PURPLE WITH RAGE, THE DUKE DRAGGED PEREGRINE OUT OF THE bed by her hair. The Branded man launched himself to his feet to stand protectively between them. Without a word, the Duke held out his hand in a demand for a weapon. Someone gave him a sword. Peregrine waited until he had aimed it at the naked man's heart before she said dryly from the floor, "Remind me, dear father. What is the penalty for raising your hand against a man who bears a Power's mark?"

The Duke did not look at her. He might not have even heard her, except that his hand did not move. His eyes never left the Branded's face. "Get. Out."

"No," said Peregrine.

"And leave her to face your madman's mercies alone?" her lover said. "I'll cut off my own hand before I do."

"Outcast," her father spat. "Filth. Get out before I call for my hounds."

"No, dear father." Peregrine rose to her feet and wrapped a sheet about her nakedness. "I'm afraid your memory is starting to slip."

"Whore!" The swordpoint whipped to the side and pressed itself under her chin. Cold steel bit, drew blood. The Branded man put his hand against the flat of the blade, but did not risk trying to push it aside.

Peregrine met her father's eyes. "You said that if I could find a man you could not cow, if I could find a man brave enough to take my maidenhead in your house, you would name him your son and heir." She felt a hot rush of triumph, knowing she was as cool and insolent as she ever was, regardless of the blood running down her throat. She said, "You swore it before the gods and your court. Do you remember?" and she smiled, seeing the nearness of her own death in her father's eyes.

"I don't understand." It was one of the men crowding the room, drunk and whispering in a friend's ear. "He's Branded, an outcast, doomed to wander. How can he become the Duke's heir?"

"He can't, you fool. Hold your tongue!" the friend hissed back.

But the Duke had heard. Even now, he had to smile, recognizing the point she had won in their game. "Bitch," he said softly. "I should cut you

down where you stand, you conniving slut.”

She lifted her brow. “And which cousin inherits when the King takes your head for the murder of your own daughter? But then, that has always been the problem, has it not? They will still be fighting wars over it when you and I are dust.”

The Duke pressed with the sword, forcing her to lift her chin, then pulled it away. The Branded man had already dropped his hand. When Peregrine looked at him, he was standing stiffly by the bed. Naked, Branded, he might as well have been wearing armor.

“I am sorry,” she told him. “I did warn you that it was a mistake to look for kindness in this house.”

He bowed his head in acknowledgment and said, “Lady, you are forgiven.” He was old, after all, and had seen a great deal of the world.

The Duke handed the sword back to its owner. “Very well, daughter, you’ve had your game. It was well enough played, I grant you, but you didn’t win much save for a little blood between your thighs.”

She stiffened. “You made an oath.”

His face began to darken again. “Even you can push me too far, Peregrine. For your sake and your lover’s, don’t—” A commotion by the door interrupted him. “By the gods, what is this, a county fair? Take yourselves off—”

“Milord!” The page, Matt, wormed himself a path through the press. “Milord, Your Grace, it’s the sergeant from the gate! He says—he doesn’t know what it is—only... something...” He trailed off as the Duke turned his back to stare, as Peregrine was staring, as they all were.

The Branded man was laughing. “Didn’t I tell you a Brand is no jesting matter?” There was no true amusement in his laughter. It quickly died. “You have presumed to play upon a Power’s judgment. Now the Power has come to grant you a judgment of your own.”

The Duke turned on his heel to glare at his daughter. “You. You brought this upon my house. A Power, here.”

She lifted her chin and felt the drying blood on her throat pull at her skin. “May I have a moment to dress, Milord?”

THE POWER ENTERED THE HALL IN THE SHAPE OF A WOMAN, BUT THERE WAS no mistaking her for human. The Brand’s invisible light was only a reflection of the burning of her, as the moon’s light is only a reflection of the burning sun. She stood in the center of the floor and held out her hand. The Branded man went to her and knelt at her feet. She touched his face. “Byrne. Has it been a little while?”

“A little while, Lady. Forty-three years.”

She beckoned him, up. He stood. She looked at Peregrine and the Duke, the only others in the hall, though there was a crowd behind the door. She said, "Has it been so long that the meaning of the Brand has faded in men's minds?"

The Duke bowed. "No, Milady."

"Yet I felt the call: someone has laid a claim upon my mark. Explain this to me."

"It was I, Milady," Peregrine said. She stepped forward and bowed. "It was my claim. My call."

"Your call, child?" Her eyes were cut from a summer's dusk, luminous with shadow.

Peregrine met her gaze, though it made her heart ache. "I have lived under my father's judgment for ... what seems to me a very long while. I would welcome yours."

The Duke shifted, but said nothing. No one spoke in the Power's presence if she did not wish it. She said again, "Explain this to me."

So Peregrine explained: her brothers' deaths, her mother's flight, her father's rage. She said, "He keeps me chained like a bear in a pit, Milady, with the mongrels snapping at my heels. And I am so tired I..." Her voice failed her. She whispered, "I am so tired."

The Power turned her gaze on the Duke. "This seems a cruel use to make of your only child."

The Duke grimly smiled. "My cub still has her teeth, Milady, and her claws."

"He has made me savage, Lady, I don't deny it," Peregrine said. "I don't know how else to win free."

"So you draw Byrne with you into your pit?"

"I..." She looked at the Branded man, but saw nothing beyond the Brand save for the perfect self-containment he had had when he arrived. She turned back to the Power and felt she was blinded, though her eyes could still see. She said, simply, "Yes."

"Oh, Peregrine," the Branded man said. "The pit I live in is so much deeper."

"You look free to me."

"Then you must learn to see."

And the Power smiled. "You know me well, Byrne. Yes, child, you must learn to see. I will grant you my judgment in this matter. You, lord Duke, who are so afraid to die without an heir, shall live until the true child of your heart finds you and, for no reason but love, grants you release."

The Duke looked almost relieved, at first, but as the Power's words echoed in his mind a gray pall of dread drew itself across his features.

"As for you, unhappy child," She said to Peregrine, "you were willing enough to have Byrne share your pit. I think you should share his a little while, to see at what cost freedom comes."

"A... little while, Milady?" Peregrine said faintly.

"A little while."

The Branded man fell to one knee and said, "Milady, I beg you. She did me no wrong. Let her go."

"She did you no wrong? I agree. I would say, lonely as you are, she did you a great kindness. Surely you won't protest if I do you one as well?"

This silenced him. Before he could summon an answer, Peregrine said, "I won't protest, Milady, if my mother is safe even when I am gone."

"Quite safe, child. You have my word."

It was like the weight of the world lifting from her back. "Then I may go?"

The Power's smile struck the hall's shadows like dawn's ardent gong. "You must go. The Branded are condemned to wander."

Peregrine looked at the Branded man—at Byrne—who slowly rose to his feet. After a moment he nodded.

"Wait," the Duke said. "Milady. Peregrine! You cannot leave me without an heir. You cannot leave me!"

Peregrine looked at him for a long moment. Then she said, "Yes, I can," and left to pack a satchel for the road. •

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*From Catherine MacLeod's
A-Z collection of postcard stories,
"Alphabetia."*

"...one may smile, and smile, and be a villain."

— Hamlet, Act I, Scene v

Yorick

Catherine MacLeod

A REALLY FINE MADNESS TAKES YEARS TO GROW. THE DEMON who cultivates it must be discreet. Yorick sowed dementia in the guise of mirth. He dropped a coveting here, a broken heart there, a well-timed lie, and waited to see what would sprout.

He whispered into Claudius' dreams.

He watched Gertrude from a distance. She was warm, yes, and loving, very. Wise enough to know a man may smile, and smile, and be a villain, but unable to learn from her mistakes.

He adored her son.

Like all farmers, Yorick was patient, knowing a good crop is mostly a matter of trust. His death wasn't unexpected. His funeral was brief.

Those who planted him spoke of his wit and hurried home out of the rain.

His treachery, when it blossomed, smelled of sulfur. Lives fell in full ripeness.

It was a wonderful harvest. •

about our contributors

JAMES BEVERIDGE was the winner of this year's Prix Aurora Award for Art Achievement.

Please see page 50 for a special feature on Jim and his work.

MICHAEL BISHOP is the author of nineteen novels and six collections of short fiction. Winner of two Nebulas, for his novelette *The Quickening* and for his novel *No Enemy But Time*, Michael is one of the finest writers in the field today.

In his "Literary Geo-Biography" of Michael Bishop, Michael H. Hutchins writes: "...if the entire output of Michael Bishop's writing career were to be plotted, a definite arc would develop, revealing a gradual closing in from the ends of the universe to his own home town. This graph would not only be geographical, but in a literary sense, expand from the machinations of the alien mind into the complexities of the human heart." Please visit Michael's website at www.mindspring.com/~Emhhutchins/bishop.htm.

LESLIE BROWN lives and works in Ottawa, Ontario. This is her fourth story in *On Spec*. In the last year, a bossy corgi with many psychosomatic illnesses has dis-

rupted her life but she still finds time to write between walks.

About the story: "I wanted to write a story set in an parallel Elizabethan era where magic and fairies were real and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a documentary. A recurrent theme in Shakespeare's writings deals with the beast that lies just beneath a man's skin. I decided to make that a bit more literal. Throw in a little of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and I ended up with 'Fox and Otter.'"

By day, LEAH BOBET is a first-year student at the University of Toronto. She has sold enough fiction and poetry to *Ideomancer* and *Star*Line* to start thinking there may be something to this writing gig. When not staring at a blank sheet of paper, she likes to read, cook, go dancing, and recreate costumes from anime and film.

About the story: "'With the Help of Your Good Hands' began life as a probability problem: a library where every book had a certain amount of characters, where every possible permutation was explored. Every work of literature, every individual's life would be set down in print within its walls. Such a collection would be inextricably linked with fate, and who better to discuss fate, life, love, and death than

Will Shakespeare? *The Tempest* was always my favorite play, especially the character of Prospero and his final speech, from which the title is taken. Those two concepts mixed with a touch of Homer's *Odyssey* expressed themselves in an exploration of fate, archetypes, and those who strive to transcend both: 'With the Help of Your Good Hands.'

E.L. CHEN's eyes are nothing like the sun. This is her fifth appearance in *On Spec*. She has also been previously published in *Challenging Destiny*. Everything else that she doesn't mind you knowing can be found at www.geocities.com/elchensite.

About the story: "The idea of King Lear as a homeless alcoholic searching the streets of Toronto for his Fool was actually part of a graphic novel story arc I'd conceived in high school. At the time, I saw him as the archetypal Fisher King. (I'd been reading too much T. S. Eliot and Joseph Campbell for my own good.) Years later, during a university Shakespeare course, I was surprised that the prof didn't point out that the vainglorious king and his three daughters—the youngest of whom is banished when their love is tested—is a common beginning of fairy tales. *King Lear* has its roots in legend, after all."

LEO & DIANE DILLON (*Please see page 22 for a special art feature on the Dillons.*)

Don't get between CATHERINE MACLEOD and a new episode of *Alias*.

About the story: "I started writing 'Alphabetia'—a collection of 26 postcard stories, one for each letter of the alphabet—a week before going to see *Hamlet* for the first time. On that day I still had a dozen letters with no story, including Y.

Hamlet blew me away. I reran scenes in my head for weeks afterward. But of all

the characters, I thought about Yorick most often. Why was Ophelia buried in his grave? What happened to his bones after they were dug up? Where did he come from? And yes, we know he was 'a fellow of infinite jest,' but the above quote makes me wonder ... what exactly was he laughing about?"

STEVE MOHN has appeared severally in *On Spec*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction* and recently in *The Third Alternative* and *3SF*. He lives in Montreal.

About the story: "I felt the untold story in *Forbidden Planet* was the incest theme: Morbius (Prospero) and Altaira (Miranda). With the theme revealed, Morbius has no rage, only guilt, so he drinks. Caliban is no projection, just a grumbling servant who resents Prospero for stealing his island. Caliban is a servant monster, Ariel a servant who can become invisible, like the monster of the id! I conflated Ariel and Caliban into Robby, whose power derives from the Krell (otherwise, Sycorax—Caliban's mother). The rest follows the film, which is derived from *The Tempest*, though Altaira is perverse and I gave her dark hair."

DERRYL MURPHY has some new stories out somewhere, but he doesn't want to commit until he sees things in hand. In the meantime, if you want to wallow in the glory of his past successes, Derryl recommends you go to www.fictionwise.com/eBooks/DerrylMurphyBooks.htm and, for a small fee, read some of his reprints, including a few from this very magazine.

HOLLY PHILLIPS has stories due to appear in upcoming issues of *Black Gate* and *Dreams of Decadence*, in the inaugural issue of *Alchemy*, and in the SF anthologies *Land/Space* and *Low Port*.

About the story: "This line ('The shame itself doth speak for instant remedy') is spoken by Goneril, who is complaining to Regan about all the problems Lear is causing for her and her household. One of the things I love about this play is that, as villainous as Regan and Goneril become, they start out as quite ordinary daughters doing their best to cope with (and, yes, get the most out of) a difficult parent. This is the main inspiration for 'An Instant Remedy': sometimes a girl has to be a bit of a villain just to get the chance to live her life as she chooses."

BRANDON D. RABIN

*"The skies are painted with
unnumbered sparks,
They are all fire."*

Julius Caesar, Act III, Scene I

Brandy Rabin is thrilled to be a new ember amidst the many creative sparks glowing in *On Spec*. Other recent sales include *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Cicada*. Brandy is a native New Yorker. His website is CreativityROCKS.com. Please log on and say hello!

KATE RIEDEL is originally from Minnesota, but is now a card-carrying Canadian citizen living in Toronto. Previous publication credits include *Not One of Us*, *On Spec*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Weird Tales*, as well as the Turnstone Press anthology *Divine Realms*. "To Others We Know Not Of," published in *Weird Tales*, is included in the recent *Year's Best Fantasy 2* from Harper/Eos.

About the story: "Shakespeare's images are fresh even across 400 years, perhaps because they're so specific—not just flowers, but pansies, roses, daisies—not just weeds, but nettles, hemlock, darnell. (Picked apart, Ophelia's bouquet becomes a veritable pharmacopoeia.) But nowhere, especially in the sonnets, is there such a homely and specific image as the opening lines of the 143rd sonnet; it was completely irresistible. And of course there's the almost inevitable pun at the end—as Samuel Johnson noted, Will Shakespeare was a sucker for a pun. This is, by the way, the only time I've succeeded in deliberately writing to a theme." •

in upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by ARI GOELMAN, KEN RAND, WES SMIDERLE, KEVIN COCKLE, GARY ARCHAMBAULT, DANIEL KSENYCH, PATRICIA RUTALE, STEVEN MILLS, STEVEN MOHAN, TERRY HAYMAN, JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH, HARVEY WALKER, MELISSA HARDY, PATRICIA DISCHNER, SIOBHAN CARROLL, JAMES WILSON, CAT ASHTON, CRAIG STRICKLAND, ALYX DELLAMONICA, and many more!

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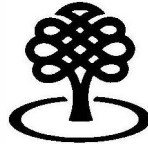
Gerry Dunn (Devon, AB) and Diane Duczynski (Edmonton), who graciously volunteered their time for the fall donor campaign, and to James Bigras, Derek Blackadder, Richard Collier, Art Davis, Sonya Delisle, Elaine Filax, Margaret Hamilton, Dr. Alfred Hexter, Monica Hughes, Douglas Ivison, Debra McIntyre, Ted Parsons, and Roberta Stevens.

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Also thanks to Margaret Eaton of the CMPA for her help and valuable advice when we had our meeting with her in October. The CMPA provides us, as a member, with a free visit from a consultant each year, and we always appreciate the service. Thanks also to continuing supporters Jane Bisbee and Paul Pearson of Alberta Community Development and Alberta Foundation for the Arts; Don Bassie and the *Made in Canada* website; Jeff de Boer and Debbie Puffer; the organizers of Con-Version/CanVention; Merrill Distad and Randy Reichardt of the University of Alberta Library, Gordon Snyder and Cesar Guimbatan of Snyder Fine Arts; Donna McMahon; and Donna Weis.

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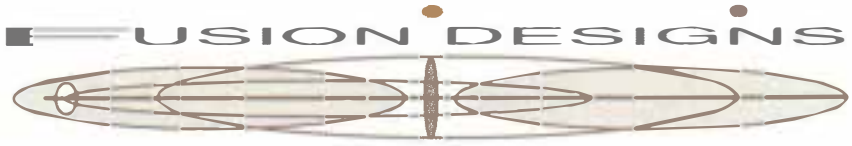


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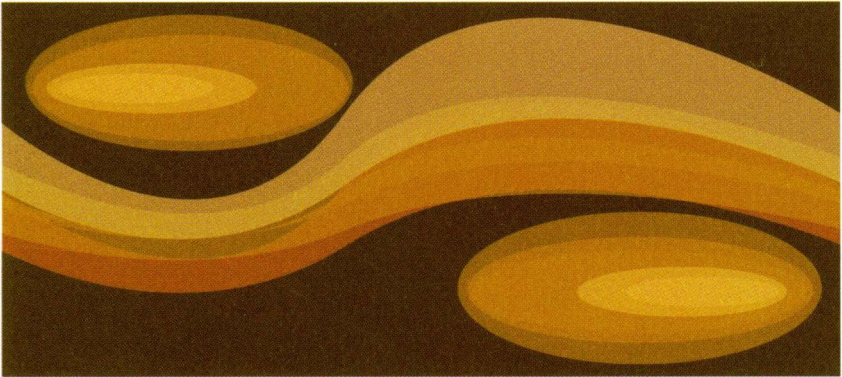
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