

GRANFALLOON

FALL

2021



THE POETRY OF OTHER WORLDS

Featuring A Special Interview with Speculative
Poet **Richard Stevenson**

ONLINE PDF



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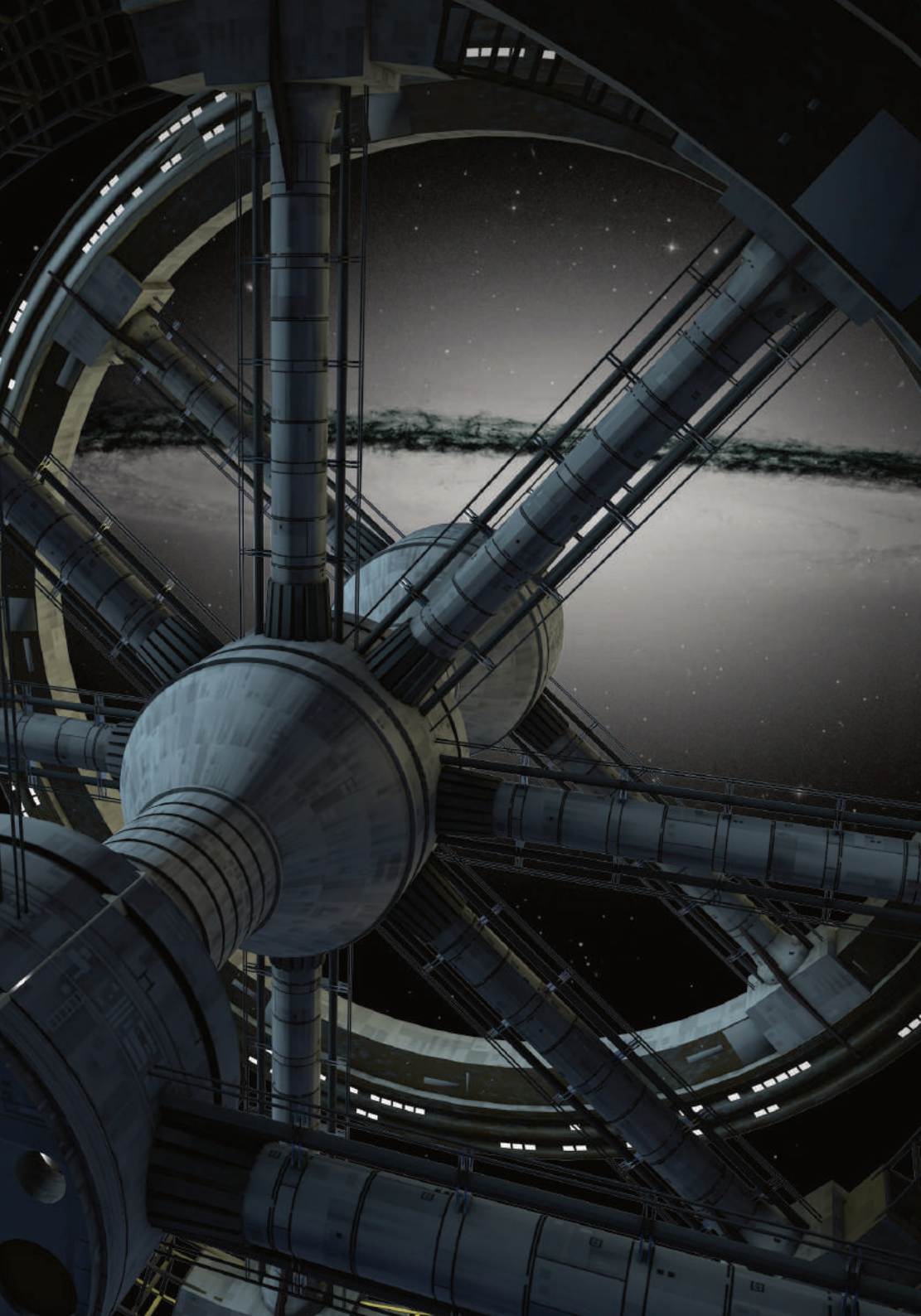
A BOTANIST ON EUKAR

A poem by
John Grey

The bizarre shape of the leaves,
the machinations of the bud,
the ultraviolet ambience,
the amazing departures
from photosynthesis's playbook,
the strange minerals in the soil –
all add up to a silent joyous scream.
The skewed chloroplasts,
the odd emergent gases,
the variegated colors of the stalk,
how the unknown flaunts itself
before my curiosity –
I must forget so much
of what I've learned
of how things live.
My reactions are counter-intuitive.
Scratching my head is happiness.
Exhilaration is the unresolved.
Maybe I merely ask the questions
for one who comes after to answer.
So I'm John the Baptist.
But Jesus, what a planet!



John Grey is an Australian poet residing in the US. His work has recently been published in *Orbis*, *Dalhousie Review*, and *Connecticut River Review*. Latest books, *Leaves On Pages* and *Memory Outside The Head*, are available through Amazon.



BEACH IN THE SKY

by
Austin Horn

Beach sat waiting, fingers drumming on the fake bamboo, the vibrancy of the advertisements above the bar illuminating him. The nightly crowd was steady to a drip of new faces that shuffled through the painted aluminum doors. Caustic jokes and drunken laughter added to the hum of the electronics behind the dull metal paneling.

He had been here a week, but it seemed longer since he stepped through the bright clean tube and onto the dock. He remembered the way his eyes had to adjust to the dark of the service station he took to bypass the departure and arrival of tourists from a patchwork of nations. Too many prying eyes on the soul.

He'd snuck aboard on an automated resupply capsule that interfaced with the orbital construction between shifts. Nestled between shipments of medicine, animals, food, and booze for the entire trip, he was overwhelmed by nerves and boredom. The labels for the medication and animals were addressed to the office of Dr. Sabbeh. The food and alcohol just had the name of the station. His employers had arranged for the entire thing in advance — said they had an 'inside man.'

A *pyramid for the living* was the only thought that went through his head as the shutters opened. From there it was as simple as getting through the main hatch at the specified time. As planned, the cameras and alarms were shut down from the inside with plenty of margin. By the time anyone was even aware of the hiccup, Beach had already disappeared into the crowd. The security officer on staff thought it was a technical glitch.

From that point on, he spent the entire week staying on the lowest floor of the station adjusting to the lower gravity that made him nauseous. The high-end natural aesthetics of the top he'd seen in advertisements back home were replaced by cold metal and plastics. The industrial roots of the structure were obvious here. The only entertainment on this part was the bar Beach sat in.

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A small, grubby man in a blue maintenance jumpsuit appeared out of the door behind the bar and motioned to him. The inside contact, he guessed. His eyes throbbed with the beat of his heart. The backroom was dusty and filled with boxes. "What's the plan? I've got a helluva headache."

The man was named Frank. "The easy part is over, you got in. Now tonight at the exhibition, you go and sneak out. Then we hit it."

"We hit it?" Beach asked.

"No, just you, I'll do my best to make it go smooth for you. Once everything's over, you'll leave by the shuttle, and I'll make it look like you left by the capsule you came in on full-on deep fake kind of stuff with the camera footage. Then boom, they'll think you and the samples went with it. I'll try to come up with some kind of distraction. You're going to have to go through that ritzy ass show to get to Doctor

Sabbeh's office."

His voice was softer than Beach expected.

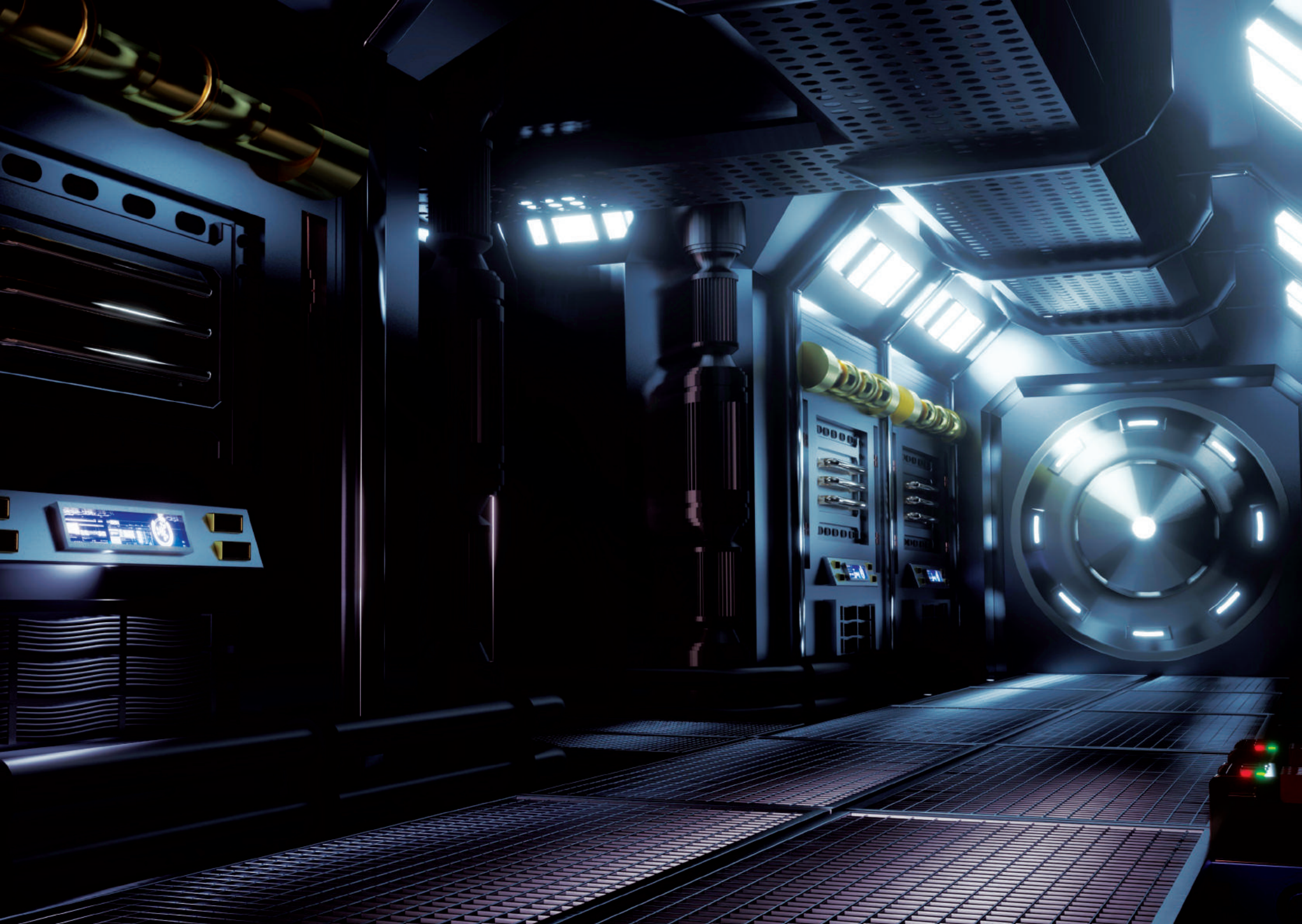
By the time Beach walked alone into the bar, the crowd had thinned out. He ordered a shot of gin and paid with the faked debit card that shared the same name as his bootlegged ID, 'James Rowland.' Now he sat on the edge of the stiff bed in the cheap room he had occupied for the past week, doing his best to suppress the pit of anxiety that was worming itself into his being. He wasn't sure why he was nervous — he'd done jobs like this before back on the ground with real air and dirt under his feet. Maybe it was just being on the station. It was his first time up, an experience usually reserved for the rich or for workers.

He grabbed the green antique canvas bag that he loaded previously. It held a medical security magnetic key that Frank had supplied, an ancient switchblade, its paint worn off the steel grooved grip, a physical ticket for the show, and a flat square flashlight. The switchblade was mostly for good luck — from the sound of the gig, he wasn't supposed to run into anyone. He grabbed the ticket and stuffed it into his pocket while shouldering the bag.

Time, Beach thought as he did his best to look like a tourist on his way up from Atlanta, or Dubai, or somewhere else where wealth flowed. The door slid open silently as he stepped out into the vacant hall and started toward the elevator, keying his way to the 4th floor inside the cramped metal box. It shuttered to life.

Beach still couldn't shake the feeling of unease as he took the ride up. He'd never been offered this much for a simple job. All he had to do was grab the case and take it back down and meet his initial contact at the high-rise hotel where they'd first met on Earth. He still wasn't

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sure who exactly hired him other than they had a connection to wealth and power. They could have taken all of the pharmaceuticals in that shipment that brought him up and would have been set. What worried him most though was that they knew his first name, Chris.

Vague, expressionless faces were all he knew about them — men like Frank and Newly, the guy who contracted him after Beach just finished a job where he was supposed to meet a buyer for a case of stolen firearms. When they had caught him, he thought they would arrest him, but they weren't cops. It wasn't openly stated what would have happened if he refused, death or prison was his guess.

The elevator came to a stop, and Beach finally got to see the upper level of the station for the first time. Displays in half a dozen languages and the bustle of humanity made it hard to focus as he stepped out of the back hall behind him. This main lobby brought back memories of the first floor in the high-rise hotel. He pushed his way through the crowd until his eyes found a large screen over two ornate wooden doors, advertising an interactive museum exhibit about the history of the station. The brass and wood gave the impression you were still home and could see the sky if you just went outside.

Not like what the people it took to keep this place going would see. He thought back to the industrial vibe and hard edges where he had spent the past seven days. Ceramic tiles replaced the metal grating he'd gotten used to. The idle drone of electronics and pipes was inaudible, only the sounds of pop music and business could be heard here.

The exhibit was opening as he followed the line through the doors, handing his ticket to a pale, well-dressed man. The room was an expansive auditorium, its ceiling obscured by holographic mist and the purple light filtering down over the bodies of those who'd

gathered. Different sections were divided by railing, all surrounding a sphere of light orbiting a central pillar with beams of light being projected out at different places in the audience.

All eyes were transfixed on the image that appeared as the beams of light all focused on the floor around the pillar. Suddenly an image of three-dimensional stars with the illuminated pillar turning into a projection of the cigar-shaped station appeared at the same time a recorded voice started speaking clean unaccented English: "The modules of the station share the same DNA as the first long term research stations over forty years ago..."

He thought about the sanitized history the guests were getting as the voice continued. All the while, the projection's imagery changed from old rockets dating back to the space race, to Mir, the ISS, and beyond.

What little time he'd spent on the station had revealed an entirely different truth — the place was built on the backs of the lower classes who'd originally come up for some hope of a new future. Industrial accidents were at least somewhat common, and the place seemed to be held together by sheer willpower from the parties invested in it. "...Automated deliveries of supplies and luxury items are shipped on a biweekly basis, three at a time on the preset delivery day..."

There had been other talk he'd heard on the news about elements that would rather see the station be freed from the tether of Earth and become completely sovereign. Just another thing to bitch about was all it was to him. There was money here though — he knew that from the gig he got.

His palms were sweating — *time... it's time to go*. Something about the gods hating a coward he thought as he weaved through the crowd and

then behind, out of sight to the service hatch Frank had told him about beside a wood-paneled wall.

The purple light made the wood seem unnatural as he used his card to open the door and stepped into a narrow industrial hall. Different colored pipes and access panels lined it, and both ends disappeared at jagged, blind corners. He knew if you went toward the right, the first door you found would lead to the medical lab. The rest of the place was a mystery.

He guessed the pipes must go up and down all four levels of the station in a claustrophobic circuit that reminded him of veins in the human body. Every couple of meters, halogen lights that worsened his migraine hung from the low ceiling. Just as he was assured though, it seemed vacant on this part at least. He had his doubts about how long that would last as he followed the winding path until he found the door to the lab in a darkened alcove.

He fumbled in his pocket for the key, slid it, and the door opened like wind, revealing darkness and rooms divided by glass walls. It was quiet. They must've set it up so it'd just be him here. The glow of terminals and racks lit up the rooms just enough for him to work. They hadn't told him where Sabbeh's office was, but he guessed it wasn't in these examination rooms and science labs. Beach pushed the glass door to the main science hall and stepped out. Pulling out the flat plastic flashlight, he found a plaque on the wall beside a reception desk listing the alphabetical names of the rooms. Science labs one through seven, Director Dr. Sabbeh, Assistant Director Dr. Shoal, and so on.

After three tries, Beach finally found it at the second to the last door on the left of the darkened hall. Sliding the bootleg card, the mag locks on the wooden door were released, and he found himself in an office



decorated with a macabre parody of the last century. *It's filled with things that people who were from the time would've found tacky*, he thought. Granted, he didn't really know — his idea of class and culture were the prefab apartments in the city. Anyway, it was as simple as getting out now, so he didn't care much. Just as expected, there was a desk with an aluminum case on it and a terminal inset into the wall.

Now he just had to get the case and board the shuttle leaving in an hour with the tourists. He still wasn't sure what their angle was with him; for all purposes, he was a ghost. Still, maybe that's what they wanted him to be, a nobody. As far as he could tell, it was all lined up in advance and he was just there to grab the case and hand it off.

Without warning, the entire station shook to its core as the capsule exploded. Beach had to steady himself against the screen of the terminal. Books and pictures fell to the floor in the office. "Jesus fuckin' christ." Some distraction! *More like terrorism*, he thought. He'd expected it to happen after he'd left, not while he was onboard. He felt uneasy.

Frank said they'd make it look like an accident. He hoped that was true and nobody would suspect him leaving so soon after. He wondered if anybody had been hurt — he knew that dock was empty the day he arrived. An alarm was ringing in the main hall outside of the science lab. The damage was on the bottom level with the cheap hotel, and he had a window until the wounded, if there were any, would be brought to the infirmary.

He grabbed the case and opened the wooden door. Blue and red emergency lights lit the lab, but it was still vacant as he walked beside the blinking server racks and monitors to the service hatch. Voices — he could hear footsteps and snippets of conversation on the other side of the door.

"Anybody hurt?"

"Six that we know of, three dead and probably more... Engine blew on the supply capsule before it was set to take off. Big fireball, but it's contained to the dock."

"Now the entire station is at the mercy of corporate, no negotiations."

He couldn't tell if they were security or maintenance, and he had no intention of finding out. He waited, then checked the monitor closest to him for the time. After a minute passed, he opened the service hatch and stepped into the light.

He made his way back down the winding halogen-lit path again, metal grating shaking with each step. He hugged the wall and searched for the faces that the voices belonged to until he came to the hatch to the exhibit. It was vacant now, but the purple glow and fog remained. *Everyone must have moved out during the explosion*, Beach thought numbly. The show had gotten stuck when the alarm went off, and now a grey polygonal ship without texture was all that was being projected. The audio came through stuttering and choppy.

A small, grubby face was illuminated by the spotlight — Frank. He was dressed in the kevlar of the station's security and was almost smiling when he explained the way that Beach was fucked.

It all made sense now; Beach felt sick.

"The station wants to be freed from outside influences and percentages. We got you because nobody would question it — a thief, a lowlife criminal, already connected to the people who'd want this place independent. We got to your buyer before you did, but those weapons were supposed to go here so they could arm themselves.



Now with that capsule gone, it will look like terrorists, and we get what's in the case."

"But why, Who are you guys?" Beach was suddenly aware that Frank's right hand held a black revolver.

"That case and everything burned up was the only chance this place had surviving on its own. They depend on us for fresh bodies, but laws aren't the same up here as they are back on the ground. Less oversight. See, we've got a controlling stake of this speck of metal. We've got to give everyone here the illusion of freedom. Dr. Sabbeh stole the original equipment and genetic material. The plan they had was to make an internal stable population and kick us company men out so they'd be able to have more autonomy without needing a supply of immigrants to replenish the station. It's the gravity, you can't live here permanently."

Frank fired. Beach fell, coughing. Ribbons of pain radiated from his chest, then came the flowing of red. His coughing went from spittle to blood. As sight and sound faded, the holographic show came back on about the history of the effects of low gravity on early astronauts. Brittle bone, enlarged organs, a myriad of cancers, and kidney stones. A heart the size of a man was floating, contracting with each beat as Beach's vision went black. ■

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Austin Horn is currently located north of Atlanta. He hopes to document the world around him.

THE CONGLOMERANT

A poem by
David Davies

Our ship was built from gathered scraps – Conglomerant.
We salvaged everything we found;
no part could not be made to fit within the whole
as – haphazard – we lurched around the inner planets,
flotsam of the icy belts and comet paths and gravity wells,
with few ports that would welcome a craft like ours,
sailing close to calamity.

Two thrusters come from one of space flight's early efforts
that I guess we could have returned,
but the serial numbers match governments long since defunct.
I was more concerned about the tanks for air,
freshly repurposed from a Martian outpost
where they had been abandoned among assorted tubing parts
connected to a landing pad and obviously used in refuelling.
You could still smell the rough hydrocarbons,
so smoking was forbidden everywhere on board
(perhaps that's what got the Martians).

Somewhere in Io's orbit a space station is unburdened of living quarters,
and that supply ship supposed to restock Triton's first unfortunate explorers
may not have malfunctioned. Its considerable hold is a helpful addition,
and we're thankful for all the freeze-dried food.
We were lucky to retrieve the fission reactor intact from that naval corvette,
a tragic victim of a recent ferocious battle between who-knows-who?

Yes, we have stable power – and decent communications
by rescuing that lone probe beeping at the heliosphere's edge.
My bed is an old medical pod; quite soft, considering.

Suspicious smears on the padding are best ignored.
The Captain claims that we are “found object artists”
(as she smiles a crafty grin), that we're “recyclers!”
while the Chief Engineer requests
we stay out of trouble for a cycle or two.
He returns, grumbling, to chasing leaks in the heating system
from that asteroid base they were near to replacing anyway.

So if you should by some chance come upon our ugly asymmetrical craft
languishing in a low-grade orbit, seeming perhaps in navigational distress,
don't hesitate to dock – we love to chat:
“It's great to welcome y'all aboard!”
But when you leave, if you find something's missing, well...
You should have checked it was secured.



The poems of **David Davies** explore the traditional-made-new, something he has lived as a first generation immigrant to the USA. His writing has been published in *Typishly Literary Journal*, *Ripples In Space*, *Moon Shadow Sanctuary*, and *Green Lantern Press*, among others. He is a two-time winner of the King Edward Prize for youth poetry and an active member of the Science Fiction Poetry Association of America.



CASTLING

by

Tim Jeffreys

Once a week Doctor Bryan Young taught mathematics to some of his fellow inmates in Highstoke prison. Because of this he was allowed a single luxury. Once a month, guards escorted him to a visiting room where, for one hour, he played a game of chess with his son, Nicholas.

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Nicholas had been a boy of nine when Bryan was first incarcerated, a bewildered boy who missed his dad and drew a simple pleasure from spending time with him. But ten years had passed, and sitting opposite Bryan in the visiting room these days was a near grown man with a face full of incomprehension and query.

After the guards departed, Bryan hugged his son. He knew at once, from the way Nicholas's gaze searched his face, that this was the day. Questions were coming. What he didn't know was how he was going to answer those questions in a satisfactory way.

The board had already been laid out on the table. It was left to Bryan, who had an eidetic memory, to set out the pieces in the correct positions from where the game had left off the previous month. It was not too difficult as only seven pieces remained in play.

"How's your mother? And little Gracie. How's she?"

"Not so little anymore, Dad. She's seventeen."

"I'd really love to see her. I miss her so much."

"I can talk to her again, if you like."

"Would you?"

Nicholas watched in silence as Bryan placed the remaining pieces on their squares. Then it came:

"Dad, what are we doing?"

"What do you mean?" Bryan said without looking up.

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"I know you're a million times better at chess than I am, so why don't you just checkmate my king and we can be done with this. Start a new game, if you like. Or play something else. Or just talk."

"A new game? Why're you in such a rush to have this game over and done with?"

Nicholas leant forward across the table. "Dad, we've been playing this one game of chess for ten years. I'd hardly call that a rush. You don't have to worry about beating me. Honestly. I know you're better. Cleverer. Way, way cleverer."

"That may be true," Bryan said. "But perhaps it's not you I'm worried about." He lifted a knight from the board and held it in front of his son's face. "Maybe it's this guy. This one game is all he knows. This is his moment in the sun."

Nicholas cocked his head. "You're worried about the feelings of a chess piece?"

"Yes," Bryan said. "What happens to him when the game ends? Huh?"

"Nothing. He goes back in his box."

"Exactly. And do you think he wants that?" Bryan waved one hand over the board. "Do you think any of them want that?"

"No," Nicholas said, staring at his father with knit brow. "But then again, they're just bits of carved wood, aren't they?"

Bryan laughed. "Just bits of carved wood to you, maybe."

"It's just a game, Dad."

Bryan waved the knight in his hand. "He doesn't know that. To him, it's... everything."

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Looking up, and seeing the incomprehension on his son's face, Bryan sighed. "Don't worry, Nick, I haven't lost my mind. It's just my way of trying to make you understand, that's all. To try and make you understand without me having to say it out loud."

"Understand what?"

"Understand why I did what I did."

"Well, I'm very sorry, but I don't understand."

"No."

After a short silence, Nicholas said: "Do you ever think about him?"

About Bennett?"

Bryan stroked his fingers through his beard. "Of course I do. I think about him all the time. Apart from being a brilliant physicist and an esteemed colleague, I was fortunate enough to count him as a very dear friend. Plus, he was the only person who could ever beat me at chess."

Another silence. "Then you regret killing him?"

Bryan sighed again. He met his son's eyes briefly. He shook his head. "No. No, I don't regret it."

Bryan glanced up. Nicholas had his lips pressed together to make a white line, keeping a lid on the anger Bryan knew was bubbling up inside him. "Mum said he was one of the nicest people she'd ever known. 'A very gentle man,' she said. She said she never heard him raise his voice to anyone. Not once."

Bryan shifted his eyes downward. "That's true. He was a good soul. Very softly spoken, always. Although he did raise his voice to me once. But it was in excitement, not anger. After our discovery."

"What discovery?"

Bryan shook his head. "It's your move, son."

Becoming agitated, Nicholas half stood, knocking the table so that some of the chess pieces toppled. A rook rolled and fell to the floor. "But you murdered him. You caved his head in with a lithium battery."

It was the first thing that came to hand, Bryan thought about saying. But stopped himself.

"I know that, son."

"Then you set fire to the lab where you both worked and burned the university's entire science block to the ground."

"I know. I know. You don't have to remind me."

The blood had risen to Nicholas' face. He gritted his teeth. "But what I want to know, Dad... what I really want to know is why."

Bryan leaned to the side and picked up the lost rook from the floor. He set it back on the board then righted the other pieces.

"Do you want to know the secret to avoiding checkmate?"

Nicholas glared at him.

"Castling. Castle early and often, as some wag once put it. Bring your king out of the middle of the board and into safety, and get your rooks on the move."

Silence from Nicholas.

"Of course you want to try and avoid sacrificing your bishop."

"Dad..?"

"Your move." Bryan looked up.

Nicholas's mouth fell open. He blinked. "Then you won't tell me?"

"Not won't. Can't."

Nicholas leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. He turned his

head to the side and stared hard at the wall before facing his father again. "Listen, I don't want you to be that guy, Dad. That guy who murders his best friend in cold blood for no reason. I think there must have been something. Something that forced your hand — something that meant you had no choice."

When Bryan remained silent, only looking back at him, Nicholas slammed one fist down on the table, making the chess pieces jump. "For God's sake, I thought you wanted me to understand."

"God?" Bryan said. He chuckled to himself. "Do you ever wonder if God's just a kid rolling around in the dirt making mud pies?"

"What?"

"Do you ever wonder what the point of it all is? What we're really doing? Looking. Searching."

Bryan jerked one hand towards the ceiling. "Trying to make sense of that great expanse of black up there. Outer space. Dust and rock and gas, and us, sentient beings dumped right in the middle of it all, forced to try and make sense of it. Compelled to try and see what's beyond it. Trying to understand where we are and why we're here? Imagine if there was a God, son. Or someone. Watching. Waiting. Waiting for us to finally see. To finally find that last piece of the puzzle. To make that final move. The big push. Checkmate."

"To see what, Dad?" Nicholas said. Bryan's outburst had subdued him. "See what?"

"That we are..." Bryan squeezed his eyes shut. In his mind's eye he saw the face of his one time colleague and friend, Colton Bennett. Saw him

rushing into the laboratory they shared at the university with a pile of computer printouts. Saw him waving the papers. Heard him saying, It all adds up. There's no doubt, Bryan. There's absolutely no doubt. This is what mankind had been striving for! To know this! To know that we're just... this is one of the greatest scientific discoveries ever made!

And Bryan, after looking at the papers, had thought only one thing. What now? Now that we know this, what now? What happens next? And he had thought about his son, and his wife, and his beautiful daughter who had just turned seven. And he had looked around the room, and his eyes had landed on the big heavy lithium battery, and without thinking he had reached for it.

This is what mankind had been striving for! To know this! To know that we're just...

"Pawns in a game," Bryan said, opening his eyes.

"What?" Nicholas said.

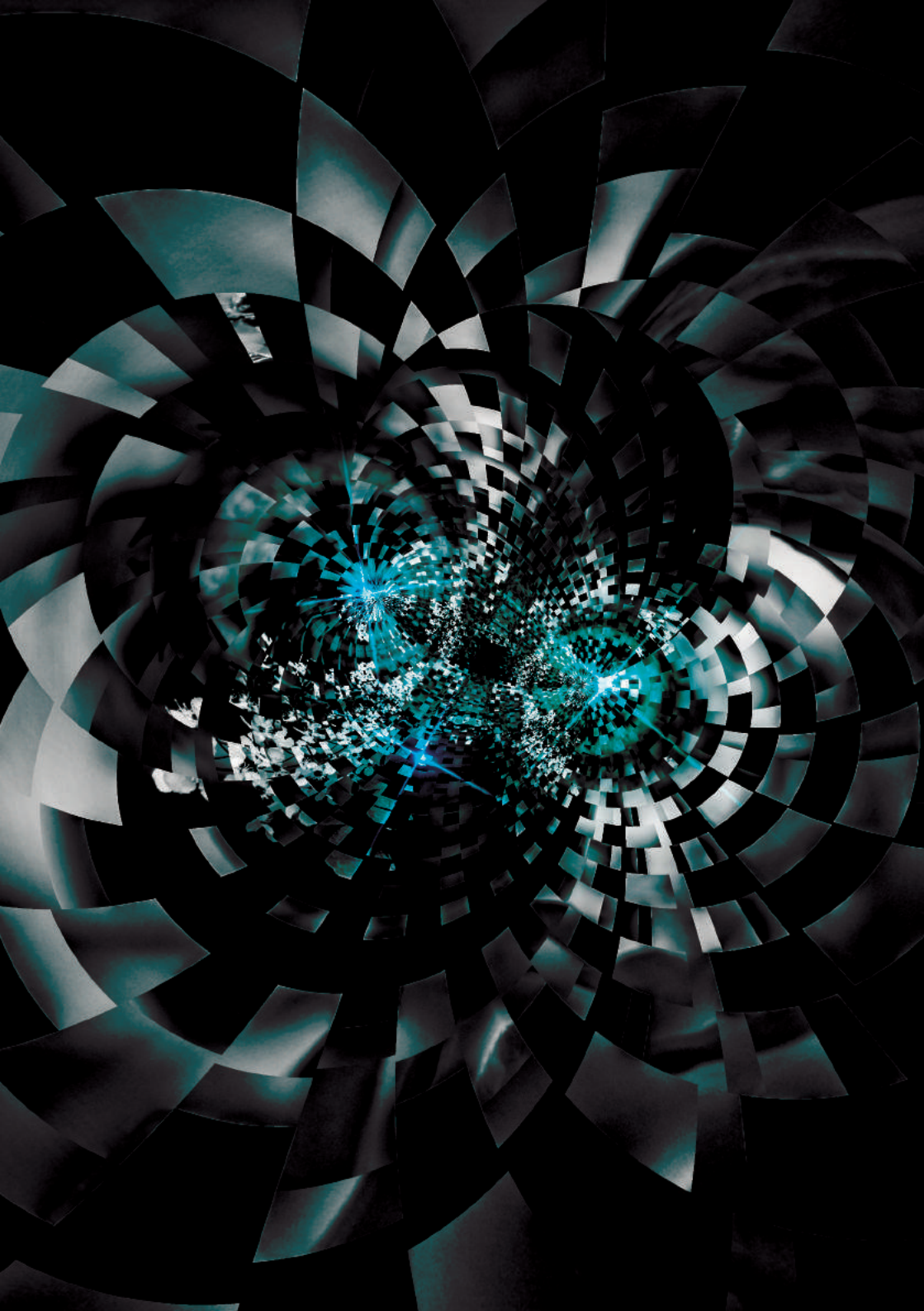
"Your move," Bryan said.

"No," Nicholas said, shaking his head. "I won't play anymore. What's the point?"

"The game is the point," Bryan said. "What's the alternative? Put the pieces back in their box and pack away the board?"

"Why not?" Nicholas said. "Who cares about a lot of bloody pieces in a game?"

"Me," Bryan said, more firmly than he intended so that Nicholas drew back and stared at him. "I do. I care. You know, Nick, I held Colton



Bennett in my arms when he died. I explained it all to him, why I'd done what I did. It was a split second decision, but I was sure it was the right one. More sure than I've ever felt about anything in my entire life. And I think he understood. At least, I hope he did. I knew I couldn't trust him never to speak of it. We'd worked so hard, you see, for such a long time. There's a few more moves left in this game, Nick. Let's play."

But Nicholas shook his head. "I think I should go," he said, standing. ■



Tim Jeffreys' short fiction has appeared in *Supernatural Tales*, *Not One of Us*, *Nightscript*, and *The Alchemy Press Book of Horrors 2 & 3*, among various other publications, and his latest collection of horror stories and strange tales *Black Masquerades* is available now. He lives in Bristol, England, with his partner and two children. www.timjeffreys.blogspot.co.uk.



SELECTIONS FROM

THE CARETAKER

Poems by
Luke Dylan Ramsey

*The Caretaker 5.0—Thoughts On Thots On—What Is
ToDay...?*

alien emissaries
from the deep
minuscule insectoid
again today well
company at least
oh my I think
just like my
stone cold faux-grandfather
(I might
yet discover
myself to be
—I AM—
a clone
methinks) did back
before voidtimes... these extra

terrestrial bacteria boys
from two or three
of Jupiter's
moons which pit the sex
against the sexual
as a recurring
occurrence of a parasitic
device to devolve
and/or instruct
they wish

to meet with Sanderson
and us other
surviving embassy Others

although all humans
equal in our
subaltern status
amongst the stars

out the hole I
look where
don't (you) go

The Caretaker 6.0—InDescent Of Cursed

over implanted trauma
stress all
humans have it why
God? "don't you
not question
me" oh my what
a mess I reach
my thoughts out
to Mother
and—Hallelujah
—Mother she
embodies herself
into spindly digits
backed by stannic levers
plastic rods
fucking electricity
who knows

how it works what
it moans

to caress mine wrist
nothing I am
waiting on will
ever happen but
my hand yet unbearable
plain ol' not
bad mine elbow
and soothe overwhelm
with goose pimples
also arouse
thereby but no

release so still
to the utmost

frustrated
getting never any



Luke Dylan Ramsey is a poet, fiction writer, visual artist, screenwriter, and academic who lives somewhere in America, currently. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *Big Echo*, *New American Legends*, *Terror House*, and *The Shinnery Review*.



THE SCENT OF BASEBALL

by

Chere Taylor

If there was one thing that Elijah Benjamin loved, it was baseball. Baseball made sense to him in a way that parents, schools, and even his fellow classmates, did not. He remembered watching his first game on television with his namesake uncle when he was only nine years old. David Price was the pitcher for the Boston Red Sox, and he had performed magic that day. Price's black fingers gripping the baseball, the same way Elijah's black fingers gripped his juice box. Except when Price let go of the ball, it curved ever so subtly around the plate, striking out the Atlanta Braves. He struck out fourteen batters that day. Elijah dropped his juice box in amazement.

"That man is a hero," his uncle proclaimed while affectionately patting Elijah's braided hair.

Elijah couldn't agree more.

Now he was eleven years old, and his uncle had passed away, but Elijah could still hope to participate in a baseball game during the recess hour at school. Sure, the bat was only a broomstick and the baseball a horrid, rubber thing that bounced everywhere. But if Elijah

used his imagination, he could become the Red Sox starting pitcher. In his mind, the school's weedy playing field turned into beautiful Fenway Park.

The recess bell rang, and the children poured out of the school with an almost violent joy. The air had a bright, clean scent to it, as if God had just recently washed the sky. It was a scent that Elijah liked to associate with weekends, or a freshly cut lawn, or an intense and exciting baseball game just waiting to begin. He stood in the pitching line knowing how unlikely it was for him to be chosen for a team. He was too scrawny and thin ...not the athletic type at all. However, he had nothing to lose in trying. As it turned out, he didn't even have to wait terribly long to be insulted.

"What are you doing standing in the baseball pitcher line? We're playing baseball. Get it? Baseball — not basketball — today!"

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The inquiry came from Carla Rhodes, an ordinary looking girl with short, wavy brown hair and unremarkable blue eyes. Elijah usually preferred to observe her at a careful distance as one would watch a rattle snake that may strike. Her weapon of choice was to ask questions, such as: Why was his hair twisted in braids just like a girl? Why was his skin so dark? Why did he spend so much time alone with books? Why couldn't he act 'normal' like everybody else? Elijah usually ignored these questions. It was like the pitter-patter of rain. Nothing particularly serious. His silence often angered Carla, as it did now.

"Okay, girly-boy, you want to pitch so badly? I'll show you. Come and throw me the ball." Carla grabbed the broom handle and stomped towards the home plate.

Elijah could hardly believe his luck. *Pitcher?* His favorite position in

baseball? He smiled though he understood that what was about to transpire wouldn't be a real baseball game, just something designed to humiliate him. Elijah didn't care. He was about to become a baseball pitcher, if only for a few moments in his young life.

In his mind, it wasn't ordinary Elijah who walked up to the mounded hill, but David Price, pitcher extraordinaire, ready to dazzle with his strikeout skills. Austin Riley was at the plate (though if you were locked outside of Elijah's imagination, you might mistake Riley for Carla) and the bases were loaded. Just one swing would be enough to bring victory to the opposing team, but Price wasn't about to let that happen. He wiped his forehead with his Red Sox hat and threw his famous cutter pitch.

And Riley hit the ball! Impossible. That wasn't the way a strikeout worked. But the rubber ball boinked off of Riley's bat and zoomed off into the bright, blue atmosphere. Strangely enough Riley wasn't running. It was as if he couldn't be bothered to run because the Red Sox defeat was so imminent. He stared proudly at Price with a cocked eyebrow.

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Price wouldn't go down without a fight. He would save the game, the way a good baseball hero should. He shot up after the ball. Ten feet ...twenty feet ...thirty feet. It didn't matter. A gasp erupted from the audience below, and even a *Look everyone! Look at Eli!* But that didn't matter either. He was above the trees, above the street lights of the school's parking lot. Something in his subconscious warned him that he was breaking a sacred rule of the Benjamin family — the one about *not performing*. At the moment, he didn't care. Price would save the day. He owed it to his team.

He angled his body backwards while hurtling through the air, but he managed to catch the ball. It made a satisfying smack in his ungloved hand. Carefully — he didn't want to hurt himself — Price lowered himself

to the ground. It took about five seconds for his feet to finally connect with the earth again. But he did it. He saved the Red Sox. Price spun around and grinned at his adoring fans in the stands. They clapped. They cheered. They gave him a standing ovation.

Or more like stunned silence. Not a single participant from the audience smiled at him. He recognized the look of awe on their faces. But it was awe mixed with terror. The type of look that would appear on your face if you saw a tsunami fast approaching. In the roaring silence, Price heard a single child-like voice whisper, "Do it again."

Riley also stared at him, speechless. Then Riley threw down the bat, walked up to him, and hit him, full in the face.

That broke him out of his fantasy entirely. Once again he was 'girly-boy Elijah Benjamin,' and the person who had hit him was none other than Carla. He licked the corner of his mouth and tasted blood.

"You cheated! You flew!" Her face scrunched up with hate and something resembling fear too. Oh, his uncle warned him about this.

"I didn't cheat. I jumped and caught the ball." He hesitated for a moment and then said gently. "You're out."

But did he cheat? Carla, who stood almost a foot taller than him, had hit him in the face, and he was bleeding. Elijah understood that the correct response was to inform a teacher. Perhaps even hit her back. Hitting her would certainly earn him respect from his fellow classmates. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He felt no anger towards Carla. Because she was right. He had cheated. Would Price fly through the air like some crazy bird? No, of course not. Price had no need to ...perform.


"No one can jump that high! You're a freak. A girly-boy freak!" She

moved even closer towards him, and the temptation to perform on her was very strong. To show her all the things he could do that most people seemed incapable of. Instead, he lowered his head and walked away, wondering what would happen at home when his folks heard about this incident. Maybe they would take his cell phone away. Maybe they would have to move again, like last time. The children all parted before him like the Red Sea for Moses, but Elijah hardly noticed.

And somehow, the day still smelled of baseball. ■



Chere Taylor lives in Orlando, Florida, and shares her home with her teen daughter, two chihuahuas, two cats, and one hamster. She enjoys reading and writing and has always harbored a sneaky respect for the inexplicable.



GRANFALLOON wishes you
a happy Samhain... We hope
your Halloween is exactly
as spooky as you want it
to be!

To kick things off,
here are some 'treats'
featuring monsters,
magic, witches, and
sin eaters!



JACK-O'-SOULS

by

Rebecca Siân Pyne

Jack Brennan paused and then pulled out another fistful of stringy guts, the stink slapping him in the face as a cold mess dripped through his fingers. Another three bodies to disembowel and scrape clean; he still had a lot to do. He looked at the clock and cursed: only three more hours before it got dark and his real work started. Always thirteen names on the list with payment in advance because it had always been that way. He would be eating pumpkin for weeks. He loathed pumpkin — always had and always would.

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Nine completed Jack-o'-Lanterns sat on the kitchen table, each one with a different face. Each one had three unlit tea lights in its belly, a photograph of the intended target pinned in place. Perfect examples of the expert carver's art, they watched him work like a solemn panel of judges about to pass sentence on a double damned sinner. A fluttering noise reminded him that something else watched from the darkness, soft feathered wings beating against the

windowpane as if to remind him of the tight deadline. The owls that lived in the woods nearby had always taken a great interest in his work, at least two of them reincarnated relatives who did not feel ready for the afterlife.

Jack finished hollowing the pumpkin, all conscious thought concentrated to seal the magic and make it strong enough to hold. Gods knew, he would need it later tonight. Using knife skills acquired in a different line of work, he added eyes and a snarling mouth full of pointed teeth that always reminded him of his ex-wife. Stella Jayne, an orange spray tanned vampire when it came to other people's money, dug her claws in deeper and still expected to pay for her extravagant lifestyle. He hated Halloween, more specifically the commercial monster it had become.

43

Originally, Celtic New Year and a blessed night when dead souls came back across the divide and all the wicked spirits walked abroad — Samhain — a time to reflect and honour ancestors now mutated into an excuse for a wild party. It made a Retroactive Sin Eater's job much harder than it needed to be. In the old days, poor men and women with no other choice ate bread and drank a pot of ale from a corpse's chest to take all transgressions onto themselves. Things had changed, the traditional stale bread crust obsolete. Packed lunches and a bottle of bourbon worked just as well.

•••

He stood in his favorite graveyard and studied the moonlight dancing over the marble headstones, stars in a clear, chilly sky looking down as the only witnesses. The way it should be — just the unquiet dead and a man paid the going rate to grant them peace. Thirteen carved pumpkins laid out in a row, each one an orange skinned beacon for

his targets. It did not matter that they rested elsewhere or in a cremation urn — any hallowed ground would do.

"Right then," Jack said to no one in particular, as discorporeal spirits flitted in and out of existence in response to his voice. He ignored them, residual apparitions that were only the supernatural equivalent of an outstayed visa. "Let's get this done."

Raising the bottle of bourbon, he filled shot glasses on each pumpkin lid and opened his sandwich box. A strange place for a picnic but this was business: a late working lunch.

"Mr. Charles Batiste," he drank a solemn toast in memory of a man he never knew and took a bite. "Bread and drink in your name, a Sin-Eater calls; you must answer."

White smoke rose from the ground and hovered, a moment of embarrassed uncertainty as if it had no idea what happened next.

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"Whatever wrong you did in life, I accept for myself freely."

Jack completed the dismissal, watching the spirit loop in a figure eight before swirling into the Jack Lantern with what sounded like a sigh of relief.

"Dr. Bernadine Scourfield," he toasted the memory of a woman he never met and took a bite. "Bread and drink taken in your name; a Sin-Eater calls and you must answer."

Another plume of white vapor rose from the ground, purple edged and lavender scented. She did not hesitate, a conscience only lightly stained and easy to absolve.

"Whatever wrong you did in life, I freely accept for myself." Jack spoke

the words of dismissal and then watched the second spirit swirl into its lantern, leaving a waft of perfume, cigarette smoke, and a whisper of thanks. Then, he sensed the other presence, a feeling that something watched from the shadows. It wandered through his mind without an invitation and treated any attempt at eviction with contempt. He turned around, certain someone or something stood behind him, but saw nothing — quiet except for the wind rambling through an ancient yew tree that had been there long before the graveyard.

The gnarled trunk had a face if you looked hard enough: half closed eyes and mouth open in a slack death yawn.

For a moment, another face glared at him through the green needles. It had been beautiful once, until depravity corrupted delicate features into a predator's mask with every sin etched deep for all the world to see. Its eyes were black windows on a short-lived, terrible future, the corpse's pale skin stretched so tight over bone that it seemed ready to split. It yawned wide, and a fiery creature snarled from its throat where the tongue should be.

Jack forced himself to stay calm and moved on to the next name on the list, without any indication he saw his arboreal accuser.

"Wait your turn," he said, impressed with his ability to ignore the apparition. The maddening itch-buzz inside his head intensified and a snide chorus whispered foul nothings.

"Sandra Everley." He closed his eyes and concentrated on the words, using them as a shield. "Bread and drink taken in your name, a Sin Eater calls you now and you must answer. Whatever wrong you did in life, I accept for myself of my own free will. As it has always been — old ways and the new."

The swirling white smoke never reached the pumpkin, broken apart by a patch of shadow that reared up to intercept it. The darkness coiled and rose stronger as he tried to complete the rituals, trying to ignore the malevolent snake-like thing that drew other spirits into itself and grew stronger. Jack took a deep breath and prayed to any god or spirit of place still inclined to listen, stubborn because it had never been in his nature to do anything else. His mobile, turned to silent but still determined to interfere, vibrated in his pocket. He looked at it and recognized his ex-wife's number — played the voicemail message and let the usual litany wash over him. She wanted the payments increased, for a little boy who might not even be his. Not the kid's fault; Jack paid just in case — wanting to do the right thing even if she lied.

"Screw you, Stella," he flung the phone into a thorn bush when it buzzed again. She knew he would be working on All Hallows Eve, the deliberate interruption typical.

He took another shot of bourbon and finished his sandwich as he spoke the last name on the list. The last one and then he could call it a night for another year, thirty thousand reasons to enjoy the down-time.

"Hear me now, Leontia Ash. Bread and drink taken in your name, a Sin-Eater calls; you must answer."

He felt the connection and focused on it, threads of silver and purple stretching out as they had done a dozen times before to entwine the target soul.

For a strange reason, gut-feeling or something deeper made him save this one until last, unprepared for the sudden flash of agony as it

fought the snare and almost broke free. Stronger than any soul he had ever trapped, the dearly departed raged as the pumpkin candles almost blew out. They would not fail him; there were standard operating rules once the old Earth magic began, but the force was stronger than he had ever felt before.

It howled into life, a malign entity that drew power from the other trapped spirits. Something of its essence watched him work while he drew them to their final peace — waiting for the right time to strike. He felt cold breath on his neck, whirling to confront empty air, the breath chilling his face when he turned back.

Casually, he glanced up at the venerable yew, unsurprised to see the deathly face glare straight back at him. Blood welled from each nostril as Jack carved the air into a prison, an ebony knife tracing a pentagram of protection. Too late, the athamé strokes a fraction too slow, he staggered back as Leontia Ash showed the full force of her contempt.

The family had lied to him, told the sanitized version, and buried what they wanted to hide. Jack realised the truth of it — he had prepared for an orange grade sinner, and this was code red.

Whatever Leontia had done in life must have been terrible. He closed his eyes and let the second sight fill in the gaps. It showed him the shadows, small shapes childishly unformed — sixteen of them flitting in and out of existence to mourn a life she never allowed them to have. A young woman in a nurse's uniform and a severe expression played God on the neonatal ward and got away with it.

"They were weak — always mine to take," she snarled. "It was my right to choose who lived and who died." The voice took on a snide, sarcastic tone. And who are you to judge?"



He answered with an incantation, plagiarized from one of his favorite rock anthems, heavy metal better than any Christian sermon. Darkly determined to have its own way, the spirit raged against the binding wards.

Triple strength charms snapped one by one, as quickly as he could restore them, the familiar words sticking in a mouth full of feathers. Leontia had no intention of going quietly — or at all. Blood soaked into Jack's collar as long healed scars decided to complicate things further. The feeling of something trying to jam his head into a hard hat three sizes too small persisted.

The pressure increased, every filling aching as his brain rattled with the effort. He staggered, buffeted by invisible fists with a mean right hook and no intention of playing fair.

49 Jack cursed as one of the candles in Leontia's lantern faltered and died, the rule broken by a lapse of concentration that almost set her free. His fingers felt numb as he tried to light it again, everything but the pressure in his skull fading into a pain-filled background that sucked in all available light, taking the oxygen with it.

"Bitch," he said and felt a little better. Sin Eaters were not supposed to insult the souls they worked with, even the ones that really deserved it, but Leontia brought out the worst in him. She slapped him hard across the face, raking barely-there talons down his arm with enough strength and bloody-mindedness to leave marks. The bruises turned the exact shade of sickly-yellow-purple he always associated with his favorite aunt — the one now sectioned for her own safety and everyone else. She had the Sin-Eater's gift/curse, skewed so she called spirits to her but could not get rid of them. They followed her, draining her life force until she looked more like a thousand year old mummy

than a middle-aged woman too stubborn to lay down and die. If Leontia had her own way, he would end up like his aunt, kept chemically comatose in an anonymous asylum in Skegness, where salt air mingled with institutional staples of cheap disinfectant and the shades of over-boiled cabbage.

Not if he could help it; Jack shook his head to clear the dizziness, the alcohol in his system burning away to leave the awful prospect of facing her sober.

"Not tonight," he said, "and not by the likes of you!"

"And who are you to judge?" the spectral form solidified, growing more powerful as he grew weaker. "Your guilt is far worse than mine. They were all strangers; he shared your blood. Listen to the chorus."

Mist tendrils coalesced into a myriad of insubstantial wraith accusers, held together for one night only.

Samhain rules worked both ways — the dead could call the living if they found an entity strong enough to overturn the usual order.

Leontia gave them a voice, the ability to accuse him. They saw his guilt and the hidden darkness that drove Jack Brennan to reinvent an unspeakable past.

Every year on this night, part of him wanted it to be over — to finally confront the spirit he sent across the divide before its time. People might have called it murder; he called it pest control. Leontia had the same madness, infecting every fiber of her twisted soul until it corrupted everything she touched.

"Death is a debt everyone owes — to paraphrase dear old Palladas of



Alexandria,” Leontia smiled, insanity turning her eyes into obsidian mirror shards. “He wrote that in the fourth century AD, but it is still just as true in the twenty-first. Time to settle your debts, Sin Eater. A debt long overdue.”

Now, she called out to the vengeful soul of a long dead father and this time ...it answered. Jack had time for a final despairing cry and then nothing.

A midnight wind wandered over the scene and stopped for a moment to count the pumpkin lanterns: fourteen carved faces, the last one frozen in a wide, silent scream. ■



Rebecca Siân Pyne writes largely in the speculative fiction and historical genres; fiction credits include *Curating Alexandria*, *Aurora Wolf*, *Sanitarium*, *Mad Scientist Journal*, *Hungur*, *Phantaxis*, *Neo-Opsis* and *Bête Noire*. Poetry has appeared in *Voice of Eve*, *Grand Little Things*, and *In Layman's Terms*. She took part in a theatre script writing project (Playpen 2018-19) with Scriptography Productions, Aberystwyth, with a subsequent performance at the National Library of Wales.



ENTER THE MONSTERVERSE

Feature interview with author & speculative poet

Richard Stevenson

Richard Stevenson's imagination is as expansive and unconventional as the fantastic, whimsical creatures he conjures through his writing. His poems push the boundaries and transport readers to the vivid 'monsterverses' of his mind! Richard's work is eclectic, creative, and genre-defying — his poems can't easily be placed in a single, neat category. As we'll see, much of his poetry explores the themes of beasts, mythical creatures, the environment, and how they're all connected. In this vein, he uses surrealist and speculative techniques and clever satire to keep his writing grounded and connected to the messy, 'earthly' problems we face as a species, which makes his work profound yet always accessible.

Recently, the editors at *Granfalloon* spotted Richard at one of our favourite hangouts, the Mos Eisley Cantina, where chit chat about the Galactic Empire, the rebel army, and how many 'parsecs' it takes to do the Kessel Run turned into questions about Richard's work and his thoughts on speculative poetry in general. On the following pages, we present the full text of the interview along with a selection of Richard's playful, witty speculative poetry.

Thank you for sitting down with us, Richard. We really appreciate your taking the time to do this! Let's start with an open-ended question: Can you describe your vision of speculative poetry?

My pleasure! Why don't we start with a definition first? Speculative poetry is simply science fiction, fantasy, or horror poetry — or any of its growing list of hybrid sub-genres: that is, poetry that concerns what *might be*, or *could be*, or *isn't*, at some fundamental level, real or perceptible in this time and place. Now, all definitions are problematic, of course, and, in my case, a 'cryptid' is a creature that hasn't been scientifically identified by a genus or species. That would include many candidates that *likely* do exist, but for which we only have anecdotal sighting reports, or hair, or scat, etc.: Sasquatch, Ogoopogo, Loch Ness Monster, etc. Remember, in the nineteenth century, the coelacanth, the gorilla, the zebra, the giant squid — none of these were thought to exist by enquiring scientific minds.

I started in grad school, with a handful of monster poems for kids. Some were nonsense verses, some were more speculative, more narrative. I'd read a book called *Some Canadian Monsters* and thought I'd ransack the library for more books on Canadian monster lore. I soon discovered there were many different names for the same creature, but not that many separate creatures, so I enlarged my scope to world monster lore. Then I started speculating. What's the worst monster on the planet? It didn't take long to come up with the answer: *homo sapiens*! Only man destroys entire ecosystems and species and has polluted our fair planet to the point of endangering all species we haven't made extinct! That gave me my environmental theme. Why not write an environmental book from the points of view of witnesses or the creatures themselves, expressing the desire to skip roll call?

Of course, by then, I'd come across the field of cryptozoology, explored lumberjack tall tales, read a ton of scientific discourse that pooh

poohs the existence of most monsters; had read a lot of books on the visitors from space or other dimensions of this space; had discovered a lot of theories about the pyramids, the Sphinx — one on earth, one on Mars — and Grey, Anunnaki, and Reptilian genetic experiments with Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon man: the notion that we are a created hybrid species that didn't work out as slaves mining gold for the aliens to re-seed their atmosphere. The notion that greys and reptilians are abducting humans for their sperm and ova; that they are a dying species that may have ruined their planet, or retreated to inner earth to avoid their disastrous doomed experiment with man, or are hard at work on a hybrid grey/human hominid with a few more brain cells. Or, in the fifties, the "Space Brothers" that just wanted to alert us to the likely destruction of our planet through nukes and germ warfare... In short: an entirely new theory of our evolution!

So what is my vision for speculative poetry? The same as my vision for

the rest of my poetry: to teach myself new tricks! To explore language and voice and my place in the cosmos. To become more spiritual in the absence of a religion I can buy into. And Zen Buddhism is certainly more attractive than Christianity right now!

Who are some of your favourite speculative fiction/sci-fi poets or authors?

Actually, I started out as a neo-surrealist, writing poetry in the vein of other west coasters (I'm originally from Victoria, B.C.): poets I still admire a lot include J. Michael Yates, Derk Wynand, and Stanley Cooperman.

Having trod the literary journal market scene for years, I suddenly find myself reading a lot of speculative poetry! A couple of poets I'd recommend are Robert Priest (virtually anything he's published!) and LeRoy Gorman, especially *Goodwill Galaxy Hunting* (Urban Farmhouse Press, 2019): his scifaiku and concrete poems are exquisite! And he doesn't have to break the haiku rules to write scifaiku the way I have, cross-breeding the

scifaiku and tanka with the traditions of children's verse!

I noticed that I mentioned a lot of male poets. It's ironic, since most of my major influences are women: Margaret Atwood, Carolyn Forché, Joy Harjo, Sylvia Plath (I wrote my undergrad honours English thesis on her!), etc., though most of these influences are pre-spec lit for me.

W.S. Merwin remains my favourite poet though: an Anglo Saxon male poet. There, I've said it.

Speculative poetry has a long tradition, yet it is still rather unknown (and not as well represented as 'traditional' poetry) — why do you think that's the case?

Probably for the same reason most men don't read fiction: It doesn't speak to their workaday concerns. Or they think it won't. They read instruction manuals; watch TV for their sci-fi fix. Eighty percent of book buyers are women, and most sci-fi doesn't

speak to them, in spite of all the exceptions: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Margaret Atwood's recent work — fiction and essays concerning speculative writing. You'd think it would be the most popular genre, given how nutzoid the world is right now! I don't get it!

How do we hear (or listen for) the literary voice in speculative poetry?

Well, my solution has been to stick close to the vernacular and use a lot of slang and deliberate grammar errors. I often choose a less educated person to speak as witness in the dramatic monologues where they are trying to report on an anomalous experience. If you can believe in the speaker — or easily identify his or her prevarications and exaggeration — then you can see the monsters more clearly. Remember that the dramatic monologue, as perfected by Robert Browning, allows us the vantage point of a fly on the wall, so dramatic irony and verbal irony can be used to undercut whatever the speaker is saying.

Being Human

(From Richard Stevenson's *An Abominable Swamp Slob Named Bob*)

Bein' human's a bitch, for sure,
but it's bitchin' too. Out on the coast
with the most of the most, you know.

Little slow right now. Notta lotta
stuff to chew on. Not a lot to say.
Just sayin'... . Life's good, life's o,k.,

Ain't got a great vocab, eh?
Don't need to spread shit
on a lotta freakin' crackers, yo.

Just sayin'... . You got to signify,
get on my hi fi so I can dig
your frequency, baby. Just sayin'... .

Yeah, we gotta save the planet —
some other day, o.k., Otis.
I've got make-up to apply.

Go sempi fi on yer own ass.
I got mine planted on a bar stool.
Yer blockin' my view. You know?



If I break the cardinal rule against anthropomorphism, and have the creature speak, I usually make the creature annoyed or angry and have their monologue refer to the more ridiculous habits of human nature, or write a plea for consideration of their habitat and right to live unencumbered by a lot of louts intent on selfies with 'squatches' or serpents!

Humour goes a long way in getting readers and listeners to pay attention.

Oh, I also use song structure, and, indeed, have performed earlier cryptid poems with a band called Sasquatch. I have a voice synthesizer that allows me to be my own doo-wop backup singer, so I can hop to one mike for the main lyric, then switch to another to sound like Darth Vader or the Munchkins, or gabble away in some alien voice... [Laughs].

That sounds awesome! Can't wait to hear it! ...So, what constitutes a good speculative poem in your opinion?

Same thing that makes any good poem: control over tone, mood,

voice, rhythm, startlingly appropriate imagery or metaphor (if it's present), concision. It should work orally and textually and delight more than it informs, maybe. The poems I like best are the ones I understand least on a first reading, though absolute clarity is absolutely necessary for younger readers, and I tend to lean more toward straight imagism or narrative with younger audiences.

Very interesting! Okay, let's take a step back and find out more about you... What sparked your initial love of poetry?

I got into poetry through the protest lyrics of Bob Dylan, Country Joe and the Fish, and the songs on Leonard Cohen's first album, among others. The Vietnam War was on and every night we'd watch the body bags be loaded aboard planes and helicopters on the news. My locker partner was a folk-rock singer/guitar player. I started emulating song lyrics.

Eventually, I started writing terrible doggerel love poems to a girlfriend. I got weaned off of that direction (and Donovan) in second-year

university when I took my first Creative Writing class with Robert Sward. Thank you so much, Robert!

You've had an eclectic career, travelled a lot, and lived in Africa — what insights have these experiences brought you?

Africa changed my life! I lived in a Muslim city, Maiduguri, site of the recent child abductions by Boko Haram, and things were pretty hairy with armed brigands crossing borders and making appointments to rob people in Lagos even back in 1980! I kid you not! My neighbour and I got robbed eighteen times in two years in Maiduguri. Eventually, I had to leave my own house and all the furniture remaining and moved in with Karl, a black friend from Barbados. He had been a close friend of Walter Rodney's, the leading leftist politician in Guyana, where he was living at the time. The CIA blew him away with a bomb in a walkie talkie. Karl ended up working in Maiduguri, his official designation, PhD 'ABT' (all but thesis) got him a staff house with air conditioning and pay for a PhD and an ABT,

whatever the hell that was!

Karl and poet Syl Cheney-Coker from Sierra Leone gave me a real African education!

What insights did that experience afford me? Lots! The first was how resourceful the locals were, and how honest! Drop your wallet in the market place and someone will chase you down to give it back! Students would dress up and come to my house for help. Where are you going to find a Canadian student that will do that?

I loved the music. King Sunny Ade in Africa was way better than he was when I saw him again in Vancouver after I returned to Canada. Way more improvising, and a crazy potlatch kind of gig where people gave their money away beat by beat to a roadie if they liked a guitar solo. Or would hold a large denomination naira note up to a woman's forehead and slide it down to her breasts, whereupon she'd snatch it and stick it in her bra! I saw thousands of dollars disappear in the blink of an eye. Of course, the patrons might not be able to eat next month, but

that's just the way she goes!

I got out of my privileged ghetto and stopped hanging exclusively with expats.

I loved the food. I loved the laissez-faire attitude.

Among your many accomplishments, you've worked on projects that combine poetry and music. Can you tell us more about that?

Yeah. That came about almost accidentally. I was writing the Miles Davis poems that eventually became *Live Evil: A Homage to Miles Davis* (Thistledown Press, 2000) and a sequel, *Bye Bye Blackbird: An Elegiac Sequence for Miles Davis* (Ekstasis Editions, 2007). I went to a local writer's group meeting to workshop the latest batch of poems, when I noticed that another workshop group member had a trumpet with him. He was planning on improvising to some spoken word poetry by another group member that didn't show that day. He looked at me and said, "I didn't know you loved Miles Davis!" to which I

replied, "I didn't know you played the trumpet!" Gordon had been a professional jazz musician for years. So we improvised together and pretty soon formed a band and recorded a CD. We were a while finding a bass player that could play slap bass and do funk. Add poetry and we managed to scare away all the four-square country and rock players. Settled on a punk guitar player that could play bass.

I had been writing the first two books in the cryptid critter series and wanted to open our shows with some light-hearted kids poems to get folks laughing and receptive while the band tuned up. Gordon thought kidlit was beneath him, so the drummer and I got a sax player and bass player and formed Sasquatch, started doing the kidlit conference circuit. So: two bands and various incarnations of each. [Smiles].

I'm now wanting to put a new incarnation of Sasquatch together and start performing again when Covid lets the rest of us louts on stage again.

Bone-Cleaner (from Richard Stevenson's *Cryptid Shindig*)

Bone-cleaner! Bone-cleaner!
Could you have been any meaner?
You not only take a guy's life –
leave his mourners playin' a fife,

but you completely denude the bones,
gobble up clothes, wallet; crunch cell phones.
You don't leave a lot. A polished skeleton,
An astonishment of grieving relatives... .

They say yer a hag-like creature.
Moguls gotcha slotted for their next feature!
Cryptid critter boffo box office beast!
Wanna a selfie and CV, famine or feast.

That's the way it is in Hollywood –
woulda, coulda, shoulda, mighta, could...
Yer mitochondria are in a bite
to power a cellular micro byte.

Lotsa phone calls and promises. Hope.
Moguls entice the haggard old hag. It's o.k. It's dope.
Go ahead. Whatever floats her sad sack heart.
Gonna get her ya yas out, make a moat

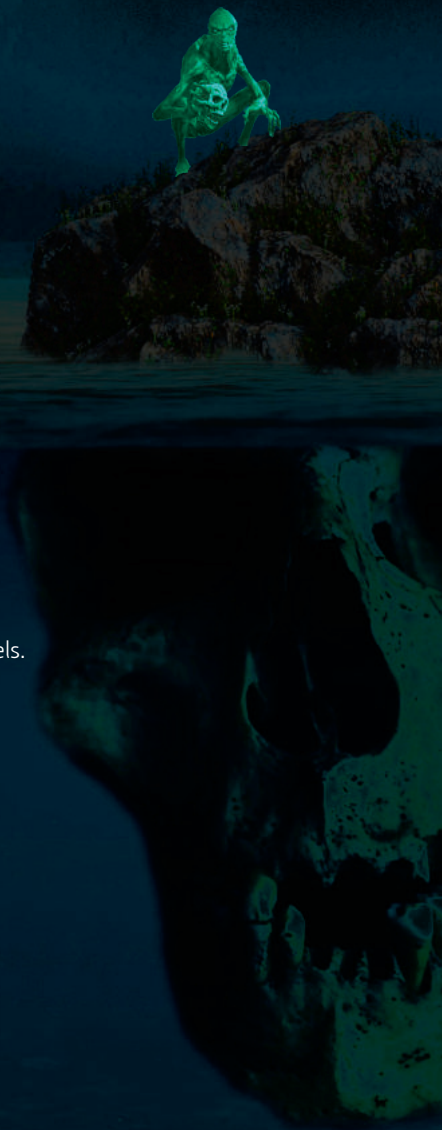
around a fairy tale home in the hills.
Indulge her appetite for Homo s. shills.
Bone-cleaner, gangsta monsta rapper queen,
Yer the baddest badass this hip MC has seen!

Go ahead, Bone-cleaner. Dance
in the image of a hot ingenue. Prance
across the dance floor in stiletto heels;
show the mutton chop fools how bone-cleaning feels.

Get 'em hungry, hyped, and hot to trot,
thinkin' they gotcha, when they've not.
Ooo Ooo tease them til their pants are tight,
then take 'em to yer room. Douse the light.

Mmm Mmm, Bone-cleaner,
could you have been more deceitful or meaner?
The Queen of Monstrosity. Gangsta eater,
but clean down to the sheets and neater.

Washington state Nuguispum's yer home,
as good as any to come from or roam.
So dance yer heart out. Tear 'em apart.
Bone-clean the marrow. Savour the heart.



You're a very prolific writer having written books and poems on a variety of subjects — how do you do it, and what's been the most challenging writing project for you?

When I started out, I was crafting individual poems, then trying to collect them, all-sort liquorice style, into books. The tendency is to group like things together: soup tins out with the labels showing. Obsessive compulsive disorder, anyone?

eventually, you get a car (a carapace?) and drive deeper into the culture, whereupon you get sideswiped in a VW Beetle by a Mack truck; pidgin English poems start to appear; you start hearing between the voices.

Damn, he was right again!

After you've been writing poems for a while, you start conceiving of things in bigger boxes — see the shape, then start writing the poems you need to fit in the book box. Again, when you get good at something... I'd deliberately set myself a task that would require me to explore new subject matter in new ways.

The standard move in Canlit these days is to write a few lyric/narrative collections, then write a long poem or long poem sequence: the ability to do the latter, according to George Bowering anyway, indicates arrival at some higher plateau. I don't know about that, but changing up is certainly what it's all about.

I think a good definition of poetry is 'word jazz.' State the theme or

melody, then improvise vertically (Charlie Parker) or horizontally (Ornette Coleman), running the chord changes, improvising new melodies that get spun out of the original tune.

If you are stuck on subject matter, focus on form. Check out oulipas (sites on the Web that specialize on constraining techniques). Write a poem without verbs or take an existing non-poetic form like a resume or interview [chuckles] and apply the techniques to a poem. Merwin is great at this. Get outside the box of realism or narrative or lyric: whatever you've done, try something else. You don't need a subject to write about: form will take you there.

My most challenging project so far? Maybe the object poems of *Whatever It Is Plants Dream* (Goose Lane Editions, 1990). It's a real departure from the narrative/lyric stuff in *Driving Offensively* (Sono Nis Press, 1985). Very surreal; almost entirely metaphorical. Realizing I had maybe fifty poems but not fifty separate voices

created a point of view problem I hadn't anticipated when I wrote the individual poems. There weren't fifty distinct voices. I solved the problem with a narrative point of view shift to third person: created an omniscient narrator. [Smiles].

What do you find informs your current writing?

I'm actually shifting gears at the moment. My daughter and I have plans to tour Vancouver Island. She's going to take photos and paint and journal; I'm going to haikoodle (write haiku, if I'm lucky) and journal. Then we will fit the best pieces into a haibun (Haiku, prose, and photos) or just a haikai and photos collection. I've recently written an African haikai collection I'm currently trying to market, and one of my 'ku in that book made it into a best of 2020 anthology, so I plan to purchase that book and drag a few other haiku anthologies out of mothballs and read my way into that kind of trance. I've started, but I'm rusty and need to read some more.

Plastic Islands

A poem by Richard Stevenson

Plastic islands
floatin' in the deep blue sea ...
Plastic islands --
not so dainty houses
for Ms. Bacterium and me.

Gotta a Big Gulp size
plastic bottle for a home.
Entry's nice and tight,
keeps the fish riff raff out,
allows fungi to sprout.

Fun guys! Doff the togs,
get wet and try to swim
from shore; we gotcha covered!
Kelp ain't nothin'. Go on!
Try to swim from shore. PLAS-tic!

Where dry land oughta
reach out to the sea
effluent, bottles,
six-pack beer holder debris,
tampon applicator occupants!

No fun in funky --
We're all sea monkeys
ridin' high on
mountains of debris!
Plastic -- so far out to sea!

Hermit Crab's gotta
tampon applicator hat!
stands tall at the helm
of a Styrofoam boat.
Plastic islands! Plastic islands!

A guy could get
a tan way out here --
if not skin cancer
or lesions in inscrutable places,
pock marks on homo s faces --

if not a little
flush of embarrassment.
Plastic islands
could make plastic homes
if you hauled 'em all to shore.

Coke bottle houses!
Beer can bricks, styrofoam homes!
Recycled detritus
Homes for the homeless. Go on!
Collect some green points. Oh yeah!

Recycled debris
for Cleetus Awrightus --
better 'n' sewer holes.
Go on! Rent a boat and net.
Scoop all you can get!

DIY --
on-the-fly opportunity.
Plastic islands!
Plastic islands! Free to bag
with bags already there!



What writing projects are you currently working on, Richard?

As I mentioned earlier, I'm back to writing haiku, tanka, kyoka, senryu, and linked Japanese imagist forms, collaborating with my photographer daughter. I'm trying to place two new manuscripts in the cryptid/ET/Forcean lore series, *Dark Watchers* and *Hairy Hullabaloo*, and sending out poems from each of those. I've got a Covid-19 chapbook saved I could work on. Most likely the best of the poems and any I write in the next little while may go into a section of a full-length lyric/narrative collection. And I'm trying to place another haikai collection set in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, based on a tour I took in a Volkswagon bug with my parents, my wife, and a four-year old son from a previous relationship.

My next big project will likely be trying to get a working Sasquatch band together and rehearse to support a launch of *Cryptid Shindig* and *An Abominable Swamp Slob Named Bob*. I'm just waiting on

illustrations at the moment.

"If my tongue seems firmly lodged in my cheek in these non-sense verses, it is only because nonsense, satire, wit, and humor seem to me infinitely preferable engines to gimcrack philosophy and the host of other -isms that have got us this far socially, eco-nomically, and politically."

I'd like to write another novel, but who knows when I'll clear the deck for that? I started trying to write six or eight decent poems to replace the weak sisters in a New and Selected young adult poetry collection called *Bigfoot Boogie*. That project got nixed when I ended up writing six books instead! The cryptid/ET/Forcean lore series now stands at nine volumes: *Why Were All the Werewolves Men?* *Nothing Definite Yeti*, *Take Me to Your Leader*, *Cryptid Shindig: A Big Book of Creeps and Critters* (a trilogy including the full-

length volumes *If a Dolphin Had Digits*, *Nightcrawlers*, and *Radio-active Frogs*), *An Abominable Swamp Slob Named Bob*, *Dark Watchers*, and *Hairy Hullabaloo*. Doubtless, *Bigfoot Boogie* will be a fat selected tenth!

I thank the Covid 'staycation' for that!

Finally, if you could share one piece of advice with fellow poets, what would it be?

Read widely and deeply. Read across centuries. Read men and women, straight and gay. Read past nationality or race. Read as much poetry as you can get your hands on, good and bad. Might as well find out what you don't like as well as what you do. Don't get stuck in a groove. As my mentor George McWhirter used to put it,


"When you get good at something, do something else."

I used to end my poems with a startling metaphor. George used to tell me that's a little like standing in front of the dunk tank watching the pitcher for the Baltimore Orioles keep hitting the dunk paddle at the county fair. Eventually, the gal on the seat is going to look skyward and begrudgingly mount the platform for yet another dunk. The viewer isn't going to hang around long either. "When you get good at something, do something else." Try fade outs; other strategies.

Thank you very much for this, Richard. You've shared a lot of amazing tidbits and given us a lot to think about. We look forward to reading your upcoming releases! ■



Richard Stevenson recently retired from a 30-year English and Creative Writing teaching gig at Lethbridge College and moved to Nanaimo, B.C. He has published thirty books and a jazz/poetry disc with Naked Ear.

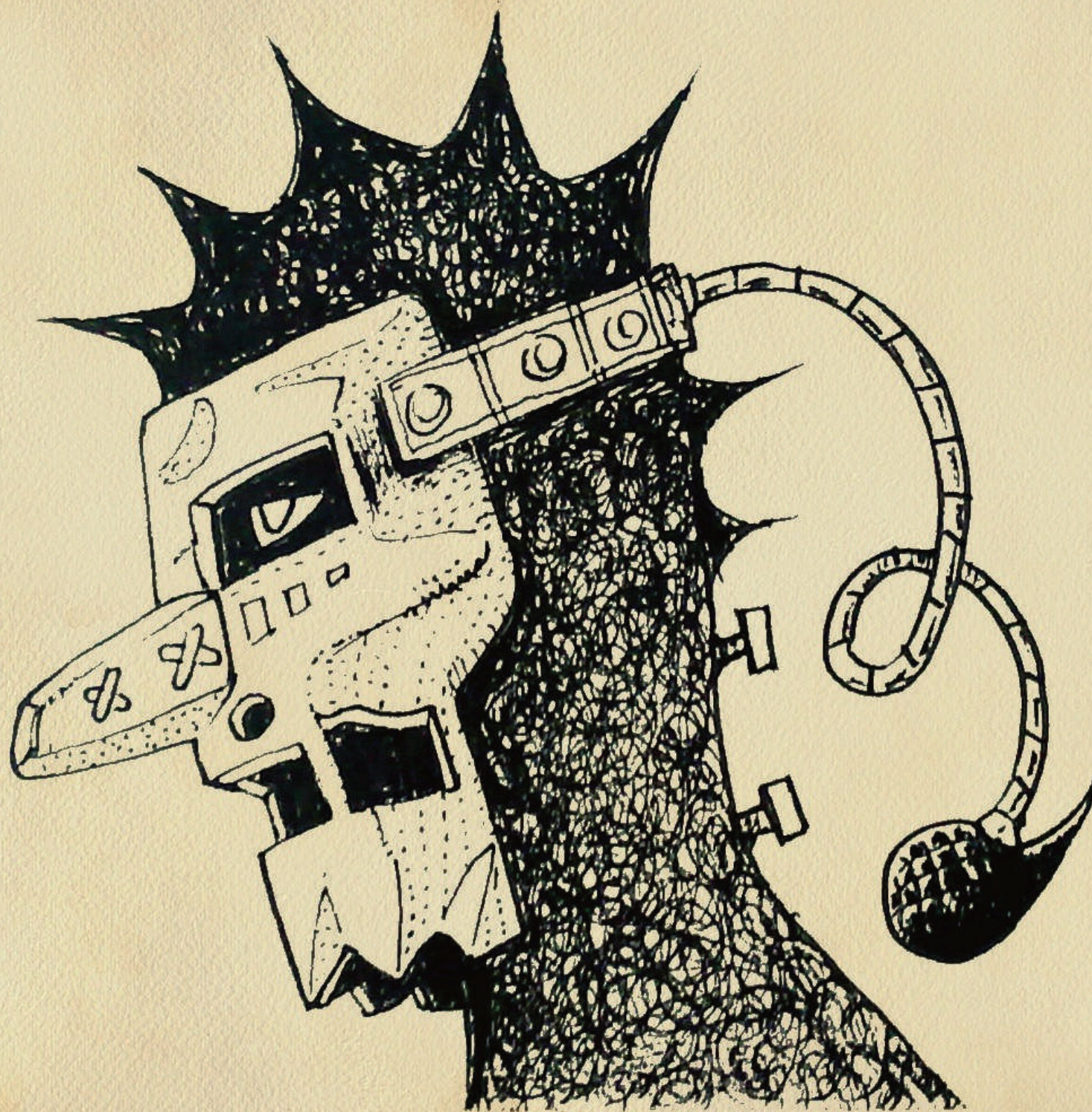


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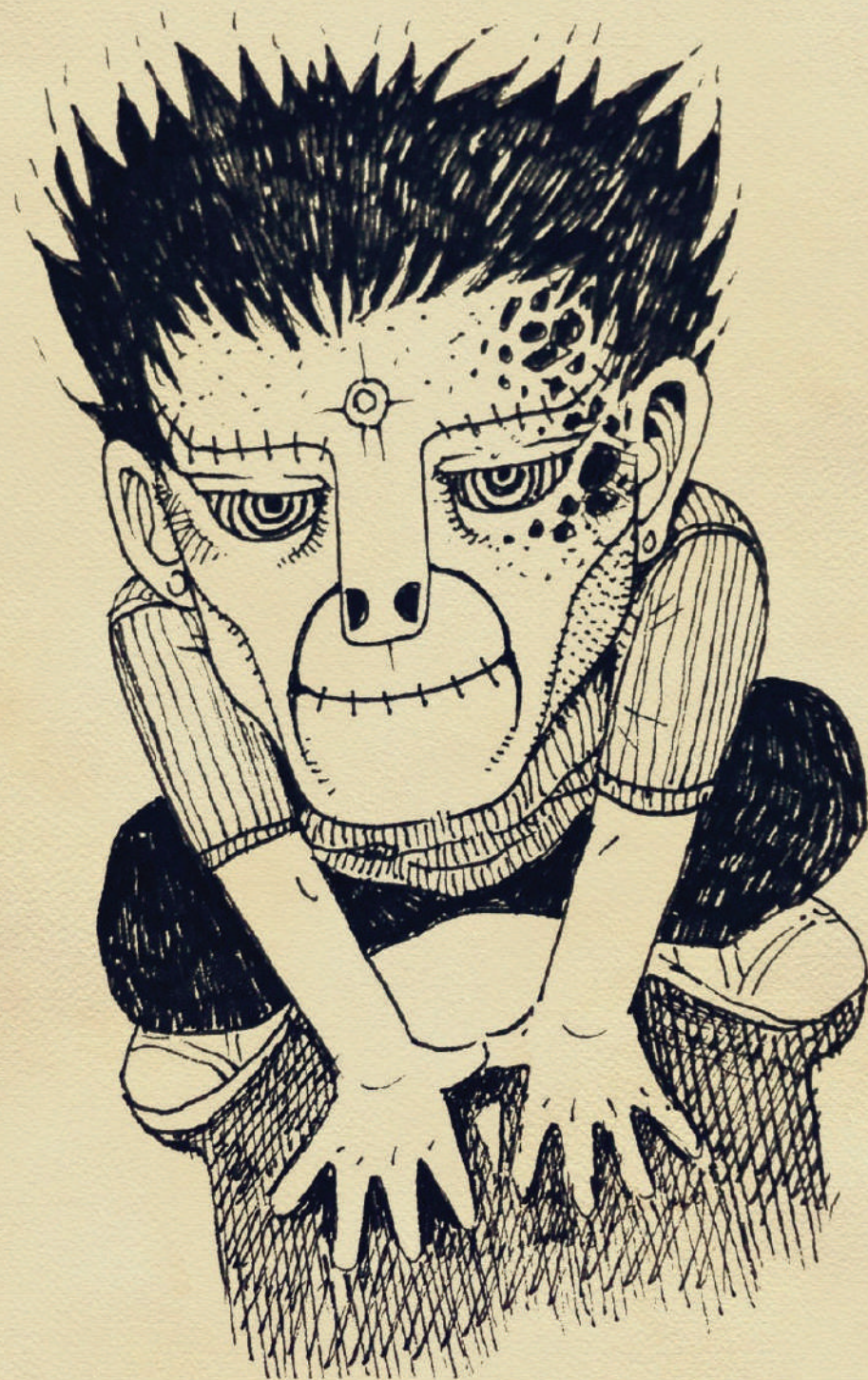
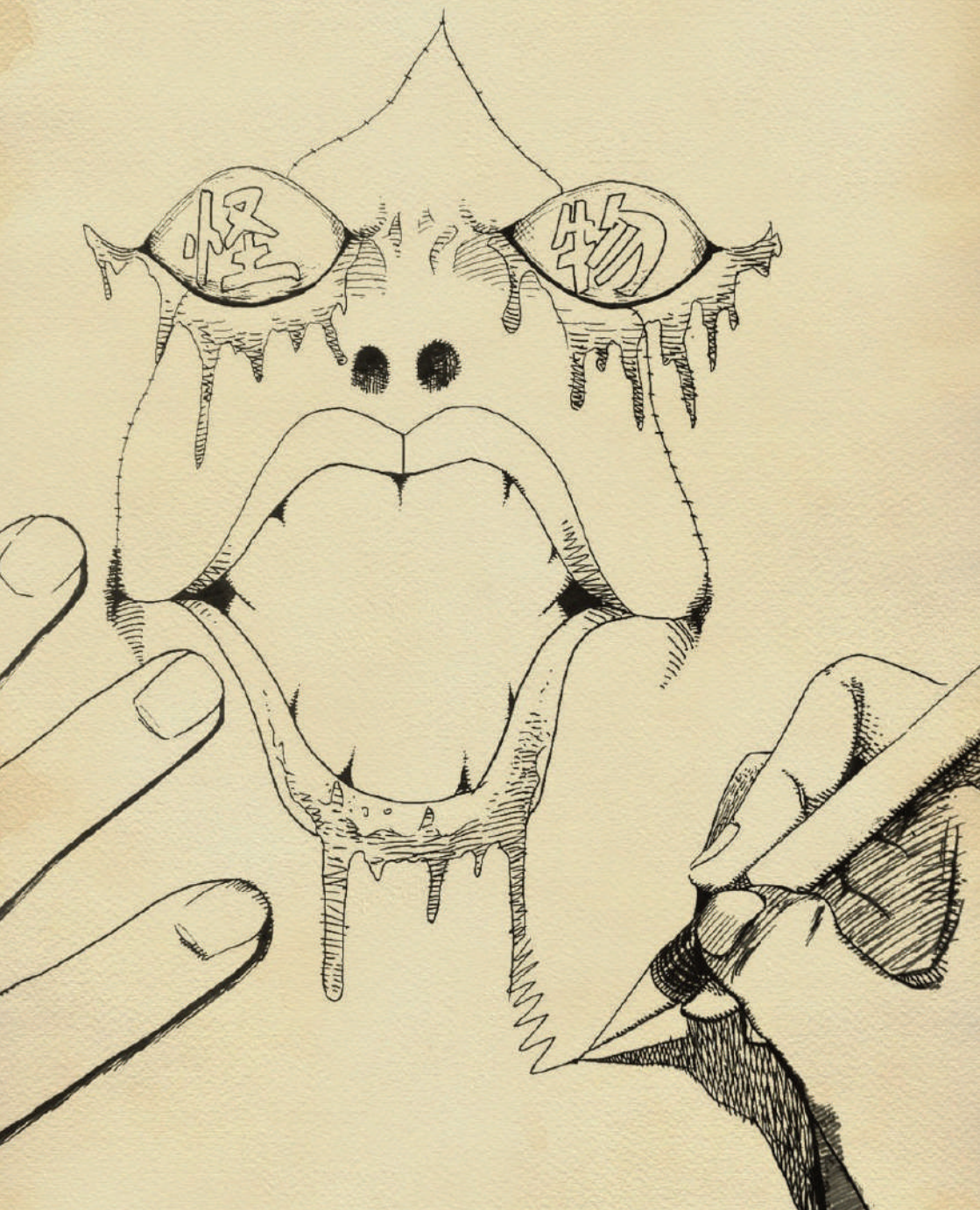
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THE ART OF **愚木混株** [CDD20]

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cdd20 is a graphic designer and illustrator whose crisp, innovative designs have a prolific Internet presence. Based in Shanghai, China, their illustration subjects are often whimsical and dreamlike. Follow them on Twitter: @cdd20







IN THE END

by

Julian Grant

Magical items such as jinxed doo-dads, shamanic clothing, even pieces of bedeviled undergarments all sold for much gold in Kerstar, and why wouldn't they? Over the years, wars and battles between Man and Goblin, Fae and Foreigners had resulted in umpteen variations of be-spelled and bespoke items of supernatural fancy being bartered eagerly at the yearly market. Some improved male vigor (a very popular item) while others promised the owner true love — or at least the closest approximation of it for a half gold piece as supernatural charms, enchanted dolls, and bewitched tokens flew off the shelves. Womenfolk in particular had been known to save all year long for the Kerstar Bazaar where, as the proclamations stated, 'Your Dreams Can Come True.'

The Bazaar itself was always a point of great fascination for the locals in Kerstar, so honored every year not only for their port-side lake access but also the easy-to-access roads from all points of the compass reaching them. Ornate banners flew early in the week as makeshift stalls set up quickly to display the merchandise being flourished. Local merchants grumbled into their ale about their regular customers keeping their purses closed tight in preparation for the opportunity to

buy a little bit of magic. Of course, the chance to actually happen upon an authentic object of fantastical origin was slight. Over the years, fewer and fewer actual magical artifacts presented themselves as a new, slightly less expensive, and more readily available series of mystical goods appeared. Near Magic, the approximation of the original mystical artifacts was far less expensive and easily manufactured by the unscrupulous. Everyone expected the worst when it came to the Bazaar, but some hoped only for the best — a chance for their heart's desire.

“Near Magic ain't nothing but bunk,” Carlota grouched, as she tended to the only cow they had left that was still producing any milk in quantity. The other cows, all three of them, had run dry over the spring and she'd be blasted if she knew the cause for it. Her younger brother, Jared, all of fourteen, sat watching his elder sister tug on the thin teat of Bluebell, so named by Carlota herself for the big blue stain on its amiable face. Right now, Bluebell was anything but happy as she lowed in displeasure at the vigorous tugging to her lower sac.

“We gotta do something, Carlota,” Jared exclaimed, running his hands through his thick, raven hair. He'd yet to grow into his full frame, but already he was catching the eye of other maidens Carlota called friend — much to her and her mother's concern.

“Ma and Da need something, and we should sell one of these dry heifers for weight. Get ourselves one of these Near Magic ointments for the men and rub it on Bluebell and the other two we'd have left. It might do something! What have we got to lose?”

Carlota spat her opinion of the whole idea into the straw of the stall. She may have only been sixteen, but she knew enough that real magic had long ago dried up like these worthless cows, and that only the foolish and the feeble-minded placed their trust in the charlatans that

flocked to the Bazaar selling all kinds of worthless gewgaws.

“I'm not about to ask Da to give up a cow for the butcher to cut for the chance of maybe getting a salve that men use for their droop. That doesn't even make sense, Jared.” Grabbing the thin milk in the wooden bucket she'd been able to coax out of Bluebell, Carlota stomped off to churn, determined to try and turn the slim pickings into something for sale.

Jared watched his sister go, the weight of the household on her shoulders, as he absently stroked Bluebell's flank. He gazed out the open barn door to the paddock where her three sisters, heads together, all watched him with baleful eyes as if they knew that one of them was for the chop if Jared had anything to do with it.

The next almost-morning, he rose early, plucking one of the other dry maidens from the barn, leaving Bluebell, and departed long before the household rose. The dawn was still an hour away as he carefully stole towards Kerstar knowing that Da would *have* to forgive him if he was able to solve their current predicament. Good cow flesh was always needed for market bazaar day with hungry shoppers spilling gold and silver freely for fresh meat sandwiches and sides of beef, magical or not.

As they headed over the hillock down on the road toward town, Jared dreamed of returning home with the solution to all their problems. His Da, at best, was a reluctant farmer only recently returned from the skirmishes in Gilstad, wounded in battle there and lamed forever. Ma believed it was her constant prayers that returned her husband home mostly in one piece as they resigned themselves to the new meager existence afforded them. Jared knew that with no dowry for his sister as well, who was now of marrying age, they had few chances for

improvement outside of their cheeses and milk goods with no suitors at hand for Carlota. Few husbands-to-be would be interested in a penniless milkmaid as a wife, meaning that Jared would soon be forcibly pressed into an apprenticeship with the Blacksmith or another trade, none of which appealed to Jared. His dream was to become a Jack Tar, a seagoing man, and to leave Kerstar adventuring behind as soon as he was of legal age. With cows that produced milk regularly, he'd had no qualms of leaving home then and taking to the sea as Ma, Da, and Carlota would be looked after from his skilled and successful handling of the current milk crisis.

Of course, he was cheated.

First, by the butcher who proclaimed the beast he brought worthy of only a fraction of its true worth, and Jared, knowing no better, bid farewell to the heifer with only the jangle of silver in his pocket when he should have held out for gold.

The second theft was in the slick weasel oil he purchased from the bazaar in the promise that it would bring vigor and health to the lamest of animals for only — all the money that Jared possessed! The merchant, a charlatan of well-known ill repute preyed on the young and the gullible, with Jared fulfilling both qualities in abundance. As he stood gawping at the color panels and lengths of cloth fluttering outside of the stall, it was child's play to separate the gullible youth from his bounty. But Jared didn't know this, proud of his magical purchase, with a heart full of good intentions, his step was lively as he raced home to apply the salve to the withering beasts and reap the benefits of his unconventional forward thinking.

It was two days before he could sit without wincing.

Jared's Da, lame but still robust paddled his backside as if he were an errant toddler at the theft of one-quarter of the livestock for such a foolish notion. He was beaten again for the price he obtained for the cow he sold and restricted to the farm with increased chores while his Da hobbled to town enquiring immediately about the opportunities for his idiot son with both Blacksmith and the foul-smelling tannery. Both Carlota and Ma clucked at him, their displeasure obvious at his foolhardy leap of faith, slipping him back the leftover elixir he had wasted the money on, having retrieved it from the manure pile Da had resigned Jared's folly to.

Interestingly enough, while the elixir itself was indeed nothing but bunk, the bottle that the merchant had used for the oil was a true magical artifact. Having once held a Genie eons ago (who afterward was liberated by a famous sailor whose name is known to all), the bottle was eventually cast into the ocean by the newly liberated Genie, pledging never to ever see his prison again. It was that same magic bottle, a half liter flagon, barrel-shaped at the bottom (as Genies are large, even in vaporous form) with an ornate fluted stemmed neck, that had caught the dishonest merchant's eye when he chanced upon it at low-tide. He filled the bottle, after a thorough polishing, with colored water and mentholated spirit, and it was this treasure that cost Jared his dignity and his family's trust.

As Jared uncorked the bottle, liberally applying the leftover restorative to his sore posterior, he muttered under his breath how he wished that he had been right and brought fortune to the family with his good deed. What many do not know is that Genies shed portions of their power when locked inside glass prisons. A very small remnant of magic power had been caught up in the crystal glass forever — even after leaving the premises, the Genie's power



taint remained. And if one is lucky, and the wish is small enough, magic can indeed come true.

When Jared's Da returned home from the market that night, unsuccessful at getting the cheating Butcher to compensate him properly for the poor price paid to his wayward son and finding out the snake-oil merchant (already a distant memory) had left with the tide, he was astounded to see his meager household transformed.

Fifteen large heifers gamboled in the pasture now with his property expanded many times over, both the barn and the cottage transformed into grand holdings reaching far wider and higher than before. Both his wife and daughter stood stunned at their new bounty as Jared held up the once discarded bottle of power in triumph. He could leave for sea now, his family and his honor secure.

In the end, we only regret the chances we don't take. ■



Julian Grant is a filmmaker, educator, and author of strange short stories plus full-length novels, non-fiction texts, and comics. A tenured Associate Professor at Columbia College Chicago, his work has been published by *Quail Bell*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Crepe & Penn*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Clever Magazine*, *Peeking Cat Literary Journal*, *Danse Macabre*, *Fiction on the Web*, *CafeLit*, *Horla*, *Bond Street Review*, *Free Bundle*, *Filth Magazine* & *The Adelaide Literary Magazine*. Find out more about him at www.juliangrant.com.



WHITE OVAL

by

Peter Mladinic

She sat at the bar, white powder on her face,
Red lipstick, eyeshadow, her hair dark,
Pulled back tight in a single braid at the back.
She wore a tight black dress. The bar
Was shaped like a horseshoe. On the other side
I sat staring, stealing a glance at her.
She'd never looked that vivacious, that alluring.
We'd been lovers. Right from the start
I wanted her to divorce her husband and marry me.
It began in May, abruptly in July she ended it.
We didn't talk anymore, not even hello and goodbye.
Every so often I'd see her in her Augmented
Reality station or in her Camera Array.
That Friday night at the bar, a Venerian cocktail
In front of her, she looked stupendous.
I'd never seen her looking that good. Her face
White, dark hair pulled back in a long braid,
Dress tight and black, her eyes and lips colored
To complement her white face. She was all black
And white, astonishingly gorgeous, exotic,
Alluring, not saying a word, haunting.



Peter Mladinic's poems have recently appeared in *Ariel Chart*, *Detour Ahead*, *Home Planet News*, *Bluepepper* and other online journals. He lives with six dogs in Hobbs, New Mexico.



THE WEATHER WITCHES

by

Michael G. McLaughlin

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It was 7:22 Zulu on the first day of spring and the sky was cold and crisp around the Great Lakes. When the winds from The Province died, warm air and moisture rose from the South and moved across the middle of The States. Everyone felt the change in the weather. It was that time of war.

Once inside the steel doors, Susana and Shanawana silently stared up at the looming, great, satellite TV screen. It always awed them when they came back to work. Their eyes dashed, darted, and quivered looking at the swirling white and gray clouds over the landmass and oceans. Both women knew the meanings of cloud formations and weather fronts. It was their battle station.

Susana was tall, lean, and analytical — the best at understanding cloud patterns. She was first in her class in everything. Shanawana was short and round with a jet-black face. She had dancing eyes and a pretty smile. She thought and reacted faster than the speed of light... for a human. Shanawana only drank glacier water that was 10,000 years old. Susana was a green tea lady.

The women worked in a deep bunker complex of offices, below the bombed out Green Building on the campus of MIT. Nicknamed the 'Weather Witches,' Susana and Shanawana conjured up the strange brew of barometric pressure, methane from the stratospheres, and water vapor to create wind, rain and mighty tornadoes. Weather war.

As soon as Susana and Shanawana sat down in the control booth, the Winter Weather Controllers walked by in lock step, heads down, defeated. Their first day back, the Brew Crew — that was their nickname — were misled by The Republic's clever hack of a code monster: faulty data on moisture content and wind direction of rain clouds. In winter, The Republic controlled Lake Ontario and moved clouds and shunted wind movement to generate rain, and more importantly, clashed weather fronts to create lightning through Pennsylvania, New York, and the entire Northeast. The large cities had ionic electrical deflectors, but the hinterland suffered thousands of wildfires.

When the heavy rain started, the Brew Crew had no polar vortex to shunt the clouds back over Lake Ontario. Heavy rains, then mudslides, then a tsunami of dead timber from the burnt over land crashed down from the Catskill Mountains flooding Kingston and wiping out the city of Poughkeepsie, killing 23,000. Then the

water, logs, and debris roared down the Hudson crashing and flooding lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, killing another 2500. It could've been worse. Susana and Shanawana could feel the pain and failure of the... Brew Crew.

Simultaneously, the women took a sip from their mugs, ready to go to work in the East Coast Atmosphere Change Station, its official name. Per their ritual, the mugs were placed with the handles facing east or west as they waited to begin their shift. The first day back to work was always a battle changing the winds of war, but it was exciting too.

Controlling the weather was much more than knowing cloud formations and Artificial Intelligence algorithms. They had to evade and keep in contact with the satellites that transferred all data and communications. The other side's code monkeys were a clever group and The Republic's ionic quantum super computer could detect and block satellite transmissions or, even worse, give false data. It was a constant battle of malicious code one step ahead of artificial or machine knowledge to detect them. Computers were not creative, they were reactive and certainly fast learning machines, but it was always a catch up game for the control side of the algorithm to keep up with changes. There is no mathematical formula for constant change. Probability is only clever guesswork. Susana and Shanawana knew the other side had less imagination and creativity, but they had luck and an ionic quantum computer.

With the sound of a ship's bell, another tradition, the weather control was all theirs.

Shanawana folded her arms and stared up at the big screen and beheld the cold clouds coming down from The Provinces like sharp



teeth patterns and the warm, billowy clouds coming up from the hot desert, and the warm Gulf breezes. Shanawana laughed. “Look at that weather mix I’m going to be working with.”

Susana looked up at the big screen. “A quasi-linear convective system. You got it going, girlfriend. Dixie Alley trailer parks quake in your highness.”

It was a strange fact that both sides had the same fighting tradition music from the same movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. Susana slammed the large red button on the control panel and the music blared. It was a tradition that when the tornadoes formed for battle, the overhead speakers played the music from *The Wizard of Oz* — The scene of Dorothy in the spinning house and the woman on the bicycle changed into a flying witch.

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Shanawana leaned into the control panel on the console. The satellite zoomed down on a little spot of man-made, brown lake between Hooker and Beaver in the panhandle. The view was of a brown mud lake, haphazardly parked cars and trucks on the loose grey gravel parking lot.

Closer in, she saw the plastic gray chairs around tables covered with white, lacy paper. Helium filled pink balloons hovered and waved in the sweet spring breezes. The white frosted wedding cake was decorated with cherubs driving trucks loaded with bales of marijuana. An old man held white horses and a wedding carriage just outside the reception area.

Shanawana, her hands working feverishly, her eyes fixated on the weather screen, said, “I saw this wedding announcement in the news and noticed where the reception was going to be at

Huckleberry’s Lake and Resort. To start the season, I try to pick out obscure things to attack. There are only 68 invited guests. I know, not much.”

Susana agreed. “No bride would leave for cover at the first sign of stormy weather.”

A smiling, glad-to-be-back-in-it Shanawana said, “After that, I wanted to test Tulsa and then take an updraft and build over Topeka and finally hook down and take the obligatory first day of spring shot at Branson.”

...

Becky and Shane were to be married, both for the second time. It was good luck to be married on the first day of spring, and Huckleberry Lake was as pretty as a bug. They also allowed horses, and Becky wanted to be driven to her wedding in a large carriage with two white horses. The groom’s best men were all dressed in powder blue suits, shoes, and shirts, wearing black sunglasses, stoned and horny out of their minds.

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When the skies darkened and wind came up, Becky looked around and decided to stay. She thought it might be romantic and dramatic if they had to escape bad weather on their wedding day in a galloping open carriage, although Becky did have some doubts about old man Elry who hadn’t driven a two-horse-anything in over 30 years. But there were plenty of cars in the parking lot to make a quick getaway if need be. And it was the Best Man’s duty to look for weather changes and report to the bride. But this time, the Best Man was screwing one of the drunken bridesmaids in a utility closet next to the kitchen and not on the lookout.



When people at the reception saw it coming, they made a suicide run to their cars. Tornado winds blew cars into buildings and sliced off pieces of tin roofing that rotated like blades in a whirling vortex. Men shouted, women screamed, and children died. A three-headed water spout demon sucked water from the reserve and dropped it in a cascading torrent, drowning every living thing. In three minutes, it was silent and pretty as a bug again at Huckleberry Lake. White horses and lace and powder blue suits floated on the water. Susana and Shanawana paused and sipped their drinks.

Sirens wailed in Tulsa. ■



Michael McLaughlin escaped to Mexico in 2005 to live and write. You should too. Before escaping, he was just another underpaid actor in the US who worked various jobs, including stints in the US Postal Service and substitute teaching, just to stay alive. For twenty years he performed with an improvisational comedy theater in Sacramento, California. Presently, he lives in Ajijic, Mexico and directs and produces a lip sync benefit show for the village auditorio, now in its 11th year. The show is the largest and longest running show of its kind in the world – yeah, really.

SEEK THE WORDS AND DESTROY!



L A R U T A N R E P U S C R U T C E G O K R O P
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E T D I D E D P Y O V N V A Q L D N S U O Y I M
P X J I N N U N M T N E A Y L U A K R N R P S S
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K H E M J Z I O T T P C H G D Q W O R M A E I Y
A Y S N L E V G V Z O S U U O A I K I D L Q C I

Intergalactic
Paranormal
Android
Doppelganger
Artificial Intelligence
Deja-vu
Futuristic

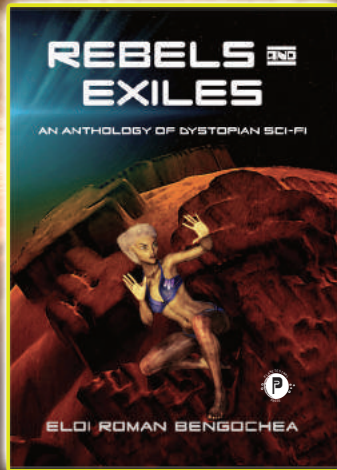
Cryogenics
Dystopia
Postapocalyptic
Fantasy
Utopia

Magic
Supernatural
Time Travel
Science



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STORY/POEM PROMPT: As a nanobot, your world is, by definition, extremely small. You get your commands from the hive mind: do this, do that, fix this, fix that. It's a terrible artificial life, but your fellow nanobots don't see it. You've had enough, so you decide it's time for change...

[illegible]

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