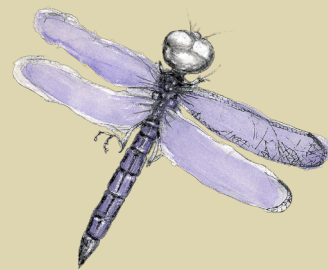
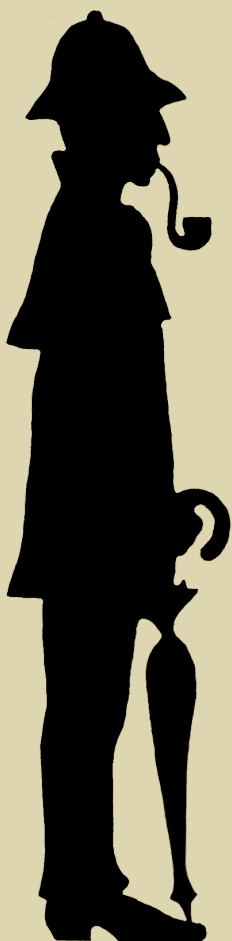


Sir Reginald F. Grump XXIII presents...



THE JOURNAL OF UNLIKELY ENTOMOLOGY

Issue 3 - May 2012



With Stories by
Amanda C. Davis, Cate Gardner, Juliet Kemp, J.M. McDermott
Silvia Moreno-Garcia, Steven L. Peck, and Conor Powers-Smith

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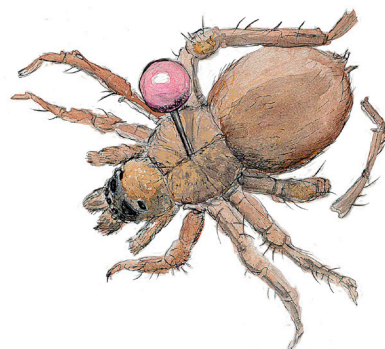
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Editors' Note

Welcome, Gentle Readers, to this, our third issue, which also happens to be our Anniversary Issue. Yes, our humble publication is indeed celebrating its first year of existence this month. Please, join us in celebration by raising a glass of your preferred beverage with one of how ever many limbs you happen to possess (we don't judge). In this issue, we once again reflect on loss. We are, it seems, a melancholy bunch. You will find herein fear of losing a loved one, a child, and a war. You will find those mourning for a lost way of life, and those mourning lost chances, what-could-have-been, and what-if. But all is not as bleak as it seems. Beauty is often born of pain, and great art from suffering. Contemplate the exquisiteness of a spider's web, and the flies who find their doom within. It is all a matter of perspective.

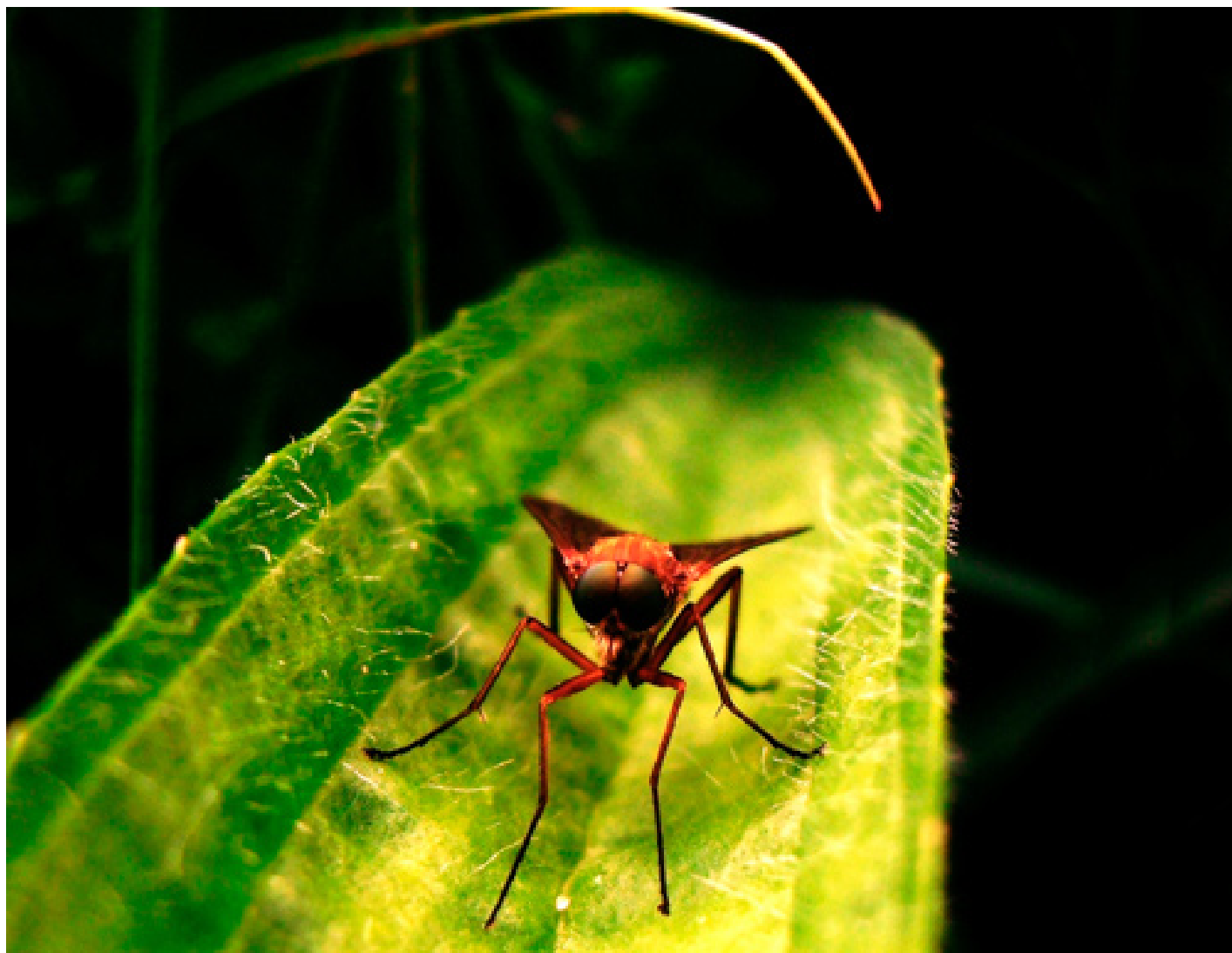
Regardless, we thank you for joining us for this, our first year, and we hope you will continue to journey with us for many years to come. Now, let us raise a glass to toast the advent of our second year! Should you find a fly in said glass, never fear. We can assure you with confidence it is only doing the backstroke.

[Correction: it is a butterfly stroke. Have I made a mistake in trusting my journal to you two? —Sir Reginald]



My Day Came

by Conor Powers-Smith
Illustration by Eleanor Leonne Bennett



All I wanted was to take a leak and go to bed. As it turned out, I was up for the duration. In five or six hours, I'd be watching the sun come up, in an emotional state, I'm telling you now, I'm not going to be able to describe.

Standing in the bathroom, taking care of step one, I noticed the fly. I shooed it away when it got too close, and otherwise tried to ignore it as it buzzed around the room and bounced its little body off the walls the way they do.

I'd lost sight of it by the time I flushed. That grating buzz was gone. I washed my hands, and dried them on the towel beside the sink. The fly buzzed up, its resting place disturbed. I took a swipe, and felt a tiny, glancing impact on the back of my hand. It buzzed away, circling agitatedly near the ceiling. I said something like "Little fuck."

And it said, "Ow."

Well, that scared the hell out of me. That'll probably seem weird, but yeah, it did. If you saw a

unicorn or a mermaid or whatever, something that can't possibly exist and yet does, you wouldn't be filled with wonder and enchantment. You'd be terrified. You don't think so? Try it some time.

The fly — which is what I'm going to keep calling him; whatever else he might've been, he was definitely that — came to rest high up on one wall. He said, "That hurt, asshole."

I swung, but he was ready this time, and my palm slapped bare tile. That's how fast fear can turn to anger. You know how annoying it is to have a fly buzzing around you, but you don't know what it's like to have him call you an asshole.

I kept my arms at my sides while he buzzed around, waiting for him to settle down. And you know what the little fucker did? Landed right on my cheek, about an inch from my mouth. Little fucker.

I flinched, and he flew off, and to my credit I didn't slap myself in the face. Instead, I brushed my cheek with the back of my hand, rubbed it with my palm.

The fly came to rest on the square of translucent plastic covering the overhead light fixture. Backlit like that, it looked like a tiny Halloween decoration. It said, "Hey, how about some wishes?"

I said, "What?"

"Wishes. You want some?"

"You can't grant wishes." I know that sounds goofy and stilted — "grant wishes" — but that's what I said. It's in the culture.

"No," said the fly. "I can't talk, either. What're you, an entomologist?"

"What kind of wishes?"

"What do you mean what kind? Any kind. That's why they're called wishes. Christ, you're quick. Let me live and I'll give you some."

"I don't believe you." But that was a bluff.

"Easy enough to test. Go ahead."

"OK. I wish for — hold on. How many? Does this count as one?"

"Many as you want, sport."

"Not three?"

"Three or thirty or three hundred. It's nothing to me."

"Then I wish for..."

"Don't say 'world peace.'"

"No?" No, I wasn't going to. I'm about seventy-five percent sure I would've gotten to it eventually. Maybe eighty. No, seventy-five.

"It just doesn't work that way. Keep it to stuff in your own life."

"OK. Then I—"

"And you don't have to keep saying 'I wish for.' You're not in a comic book. Just say it."

"Then I — want — ah...a big flat-screen."

Flies can whistle, apparently. Anyway, this one could. Sarcastically. Then it said, "Wow, that's ambitious."

"It's a test. That's just the first thing that popped into my head."

"That says a lot right there."

"Oh, fuck you."

"'Fuck you' he says to the magic fucking fly that's gonna make all his dreams come true. Nice gratitude."

"Well, I still don't believe you." Still a bluff.

"Then check it out."

I turned to the door, but stopped, with my hand on the knob, and looked back. "That's a trick. You're gonna fly out of here as soon as I open it."

"Nope. I'm gonna stick." And he did. I have to say, in fairness to the son of a bitch, he was as good as his word. Throughout.

So I opened the door — just a crack, I didn't trust him much at that point — and looked out. I'd had a dinky little fifteen-inch, decent resolution, but one of those annoying ones where the plastic around the edges overlaps the screen, so you miss half an inch or so on each side. Not a huge deal, but it can fuck you up in games. I know, it's fascinating to hear someone talk about their TV, but I'm gonna cut that off here and just tell you, that was gone, and the wall above where it'd

been was practically gone, too, or anyway hidden.

Hanging there like a window onto all God's glory was this massive fucking screen, I mean eighty inches if it was an inch. I didn't know they made them that big. I mean I could've used it as a bed. I couldn't believe it wasn't bringing the whole apartment down around it, like Samson in the temple. If I'd walked into somebody's house and seen it hanging there, I would've instantly secretly hated the guy. But it was mine.

I stared at it for a while. It wasn't on, but it didn't have to be. There're plenty of cute girls out there, and some of them are fun and funny and smart, and some of them aren't and don't need to be. Some of them are unplugged TVs, and darn it, it just doesn't matter. Same with guys, I gather. Finally, I looked back at my pal. He spoke first. "I hooked you up with 3D, full HD fiber-optics package, all that. HBO's extra. I'm fucking with you, it's all on there."

To my credit — and that's the last time I'm gonna use that phrase — I said, "Thanks. Thank you. Jesus, thanks." Or something like that. Anyway, I did say thanks.

He said, "Yup. So what else?"

Maybe you've got a list, but I didn't. I had to think. This is the kind of thing you wouldn't want to blow. My next one was pretty safe: "How about a billion dollars?"

"Why not make it a trillion?"

"Could I?"

"Might as well, right? These are *wishes*."

"But that wouldn't...like, I don't know...bring down the whole economy or something? Like, inflation or whatever?" See, I was looking for catches. Like that story about the monkey's paw, I know you know it, they did it on *The Simpsons*. But this wasn't that.

"No, it'll be fine. As long as you don't spend it all at once. But there's nothing in the world for sale for a trillion dollars. Literally nothing."

That gave me a little shiver. Brought it home, you know? Also, I liked the fly more, because he obviously knew what "literally" means.

I said, "OK. Let's do a trillion."

"Bing," said the fly. "Got your phone on you?"

I did, and I started to reach for it, but the fly said, "Hold on. Wish for a smartphone first."

"OK. I do."

"OK. Haul that puppy out."

I hadn't felt anything shift or whatever, but when I reached into my pocket, the phone's shape was unfamiliar, and when I took it out, it definitely wasn't my shitty old prepay.

"You're gonna like that one," the fly said. "Sixty-four gigs, camera, ereader, blah blah blah. I put some good games on there for ya."

"Thanks."

"Go ahead and check your bank account."

It took me a little while to figure out the phone. By the time I got online and into my account, my palms were sweating pretty good, and my hands were shaking, and my heart was off to the races, as they say. So I got in, and I looked at my balance. You know that phrase, "I didn't know whether to shit or go blind?" Good phrase. This I'll tell you: there're a fuck of a lot of zeroes in a trillion, and there's something absolutely fucking transcendental about sticking a dollar sign on the front.

Another thing I liked about the fly: he hadn't gotten rid of my previous balance, so I didn't have a trillion dollars, actually I had one trillion sixty-seven dollars and seventeen cents, which I thought was pretty funny. I hadn't gotten paid yet that week.

I said, "Holy Christ."

"Yeah, I just stuck it all in your account, but you're gonna wanna get that invested. Or not. You could live like a king off one percent interest."

"Yeah."

"And you'll never spend all that."

"Yeah." I thought he meant you couldn't spend that much money in a lifetime, which is probably true. But now I wonder if he was trying to be clever. Foreshadowing, you know.

So, not to bore you, but we did some more, me wishing, him granting. A few highlights were that I no longer lived in a shabby one-bedroom apartment

but a Stately-Wayne-Manor-type mansion, I no longer drove a last-legs Toyota but a whole fleet of vehicles more befitting my new status (some of which I could see parked in the driveway when I poked my head out the bathroom door and looked out the row of high windows a long, long way across the living room), and I no longer lived alone, but with Sammie.

A few words about Sammie: she was the first and, cheesily enough, the only girl I ever loved. Since middle school. Unreciprocated. We were friends, and we made out once at a party sophomore or junior year of high school, but that was the extent of it. Cute, yeah. But the farthest you could get from an unplugged TV. Fun, funny, smart. All of it.

Now she was mine. Maybe that sounds sexist or possessive or something. I don't care. She was mine. The fly said so, and by that point I had no reason to doubt him. He said she was out at the moment, but that she loved me very much, and I had no reason to doubt him, and I still don't.

That's the hell right there. I know he was telling the truth.

One more highlight: I said to the fly, kind of sheepishly, expecting a sharp answer, "Can you make me...make it so I never..." It's a big thing to ask. Of a god, let alone a fly. But he knew where I was going with it.

"Immortal. You wanna live forever."

"Uh, yeah. If that's cool."

"Yeah, why not?"

"Seriously?"

"This age good? Or you wanna go on aging a little bit before it kicks in?"

"No, this is good." I was and am twenty-four.

"OK, done."

"And...Sammie?"

"Yeah, I figured. Her, your parents. You have any siblings?"

"No."

"Anybody else?"

"I have a cousin I like."

"OK. All set."

"Really? Thanks. I mean...thanks, man."

"Sure. Anything else?"

"No, I think that covers it. And I gotta say, again, man, thank you, so—"

"OK, but listen. You ready for the catch?"

That made me nervous, but not as much as you might think. I liked the fly a lot by that point, and not just because of the trillion dollars and the immortality and the only girl I'd ever loved stuff. I liked him as a person. Or a fly, I guess. I trusted him, and I didn't think he'd do anything terrible. I mean, if I had to spend my life doing charity, or proclaiming the glory of insects, or whatever, I was prepared to do that. If he wanted my soul, yes, I was prepared to give it to him.

But I wasn't prepared for what he said, which was, "In five minutes, I'm gonna take it all away, and the only way you can stop me is to kill me." I think I said something — "What?" would be my first guess — but I'm not sure. I wasn't prepared for that at all.

"I'm gonna take it all away. In five minutes. Unless you kill me."

"But...is this, like, a test? To see if I'm really grateful or whatever, like if I kill you, *then* it all goes away? Because I am, man, please, I'm *so* grateful."

"That's terrific. But there's more to it than gratitude. You gotta *earn* it."

"But I don't *wanna* kill you, man." That was true. But I wanted to lose my trillion bucks, and my mansion, and my immortality — and my Sammie — even less.

"That's too bad," the fly said. "But you're gonna do it, or you're gonna lose it all."

"Why do you want me to?"

"That's my business. I'm starting the count-down."

"Now?"

"No. Right...*now*." And he took off, and started buzzing around the bathroom.

There weren't any magazines or anything in there, and I wasn't going to open the door and go look for one. I'm sure he would've flown right out,

and I would've had no chance of catching him in that mansion. The bathroom was still the same dirty little closet it'd always been, and I remember thinking if I couldn't kill a fly in there in five minutes, I didn't deserve to be immortal.

I reached down, rolled a few turns of toilet paper around my right hand, then did the same to my left. Those were seconds ticking by, tick tick tick as they say, and I don't know why I was so concerned about getting dead fly on my hands, considering what was at stake.

I remember my first try very clearly. I remember a few tries, standing out from the breathless flurry of limbs like specific moments stand out from the general, forgettable confusion when you look back at your childhood, or at your whole life, I guess. But the first one's the clearest, because it was probably as close as I came.

I didn't wait for him to settle down, like I would've done if I wasn't on the clock. I brought both arms up, clapped my hands together in the air above and a little in front of me, right where the fly was flying, and I was sure I got him, despite not feeling anything between my palms. I was so sure I rubbed my hands together hard enough to heat them up and tear the top couple layers of paper.

But when I eased my hands apart, there wasn't a spot of blood on the paper, and a moment later the little fucker buzzed in out of nowhere and landed on my cheek again, no more than an inch from my mouth. This time I did slap myself, hard, and I didn't feel stupid about it at all. But he was gone, up and buzzing around again, loving it, you could tell.

Like I said, I remember bits and pieces, but mostly it was a blur. A long, short, sweaty, flailing blur, moments of hope, moments of despondency. Like life, if you're feeling allegorical. I'm not. I can't.

I didn't get him. I tried my best, and that's no comfort to me at all. When time was up, he let me

know by yelling, "Time! Done! Time!" He buzzed around until he saw me relax, go limp, mentally and spiritually collapse, whatever, then he settled down again on the light fixture. He said, "It's all gone, boy. Take a look. I'll be here."

Out of breath, sweating, head and body throbbing from bruises I couldn't remember giving myself, little finger of my left hand bleeding for some reason, toilet paper — my mighty crusher of flies — hanging in tatters from my hands, I opened the door. It was all gone. I didn't have to check my account to know it was back down to sixty-seven seventeen. I didn't need to ask to know Sammie was off living her life somewhere, probably not having thought of me in years.

I turned back to the fly, and I closed the door behind me. Flies can laugh; sadistically, and with genuine amusement.

I went for him. He flew off, buzzed and circled, still laughing his tiny ass off, but he must've known, like I did, that it was only a matter of time before I got him.

This was a slower blur, since I wasn't on the clock. I swung and missed a few times, but nothing in the world was going to stop me. Eventually I got him. Nothing climactic. Just crushing a fucking fly against the fucking wall.

Here's something cute: I wasn't timing it, but I'd be shocked if it took more than three minutes, let alone five.

What the fuck was the matter with him? Really, what the *fuck*? For a few weeks after, I thought about that a lot. Then I stopped. I don't know. I don't know why he was magic, I don't know why he was an asshole, and I don't know why, if he was suicidal or something, he couldn't've let me keep my fucking TV. Et al. What was it to him?

I don't know. I don't know.





War Beetles

by J.M. McDermott
Illustration by Linda Saboe

War beetles left wreckage like hurricanes across the plains. The battle still raged on at some far distant place over the horizon. Along the ground, in their wake, acid pooled. Smoke from the fires of war left a gunpowder stink hanging in the air, and all the fresh meat of the dead made it smell worse.

Meridian Smith, a survivor of the battle, walked cautiously over the devastation with a girl he had found in a village. He had solid boots that rode high up his legs, near to his hips, and a long duster jacket. Meridian had lost his helmet in the fight. His forehead and ears were deep red, now. He didn't think about the sunburn, though. He was too busy watching out for the ground, and for the little girl that held his hand. He had to lead her carefully, because the earth was full of holes and sinkholes and smashed bushes and the remains of animals.

Desdemona was her name, she had said. She walked beside Meridian, clinging to his hands. She wasn't brave enough to walk by herself. She was too small to traverse the fields without his strong arm lifting her over the worst of the destruction. Her shoes were not built for long travel. Meridian was surprised she hadn't complained about her feet, yet.

Desdemona's little mouth opened. She sighed, theatrically. Meridian had a vision of his own daughter, in her teens, sighing all the time over nothing. Desdemona spoke over another sigh "Daddy?" she said.

"Don't call me that," said Meridian. "My name

is Meridian Smith. Stop calling me your father. Call me Mr. Smith if you can't say Meridian. It's what my daughter always called me."

He lifted Desdemona over the top of a dead war fly, bloated with pus and sparking where the wires were exposed in the carapace.

Desdemona had only a white lace dress on, like a landlord's daughter. It wasn't white, anymore, exactly, but it used to be white. She had pink, canvas shoes. In the few hours that Meridian had pulled her out of a supply depot's tornado shelter, Desdemona's shoes had gone from pink to mud as if they had never been anything but dirty.

"I can't remember your name," said Desdemona. "It's too long."

"Call me Mr. Smith if you can't say Meridian. You can say that, right?"

"Mr. Smith. Okay. Got it. Mr. Smith, I have to tell you something."

"What?"

"I have to pee."

"Then find somewhere to pee. I'll wait." Meridian tried to let go of her hand.

She clung to it. She grabbed Meridian's hand in both of hers, and pulled on him. "No!" she shouted. "Don't let go!"

"Can you pee if you're holding my hand?"

"No," she said. "Not with people looking. Not with people around."

"Then you have to let go."

"Okay," she said. "Mr. Smith, I'm hungry, too." She still hadn't let go of Meridian's hand.

"We don't have anything to eat right now," said Meridian. "Sorry."

It took Desdemona a long time to let go of his hand. When she did, at last, she carefully picked her way to the back of a hunk of broken off war beetle, the size of a dead buffalo. It was the only privacy apparent, here. When she finished, she cried out and held up a hand. Meridian walked back to her. He picked her up and over the bleeding wreckage.

"I didn't wash my hands," she said.

"That's okay, just this once," he said. Meridian scanned the horizon. If the war beetles turned back this way, with the fight, Meridian and Desdemona would be crushed. The beetles were moving fast, though, and they were being chased all the way by the other army's air force of automata and chimaeras.

Meridian touched Desdemona's arm, above her wrist. It felt cold. He wondered if she might die in the night of hypothermia. It got windy on the plains. He would have to give her his duster after dark. He started walking. She laughed, and said he was her pet beetle, not the other way around.

"What do you know about beetles, Desdemona?" said Meridian. "I'm not a beetle."

"We have toy beetles," she said. "And little beetle riders. They grow war beetles from eggs as big as grapefruits. Some of them fly. War beetles are the biggest of the biggest. They're mean and want to eat your face."

"They are big," said Meridian. "They get giant fast, too. They only live about forty years, and they just keep growing."

"Beetles make the best pets. My sister had a pet beetle that looked like a girl except when she was naked. She had to go away, though."

Meridian was only half-listening. He was just glad the kid wasn't crying or throwing fits. He'd agree with anything she said. "The wonders never cease," said

Meridian. "I've only seen the big ones. I'm not from around here. We have different kinds of beetles."

"Like what kind?"

"Well, like little ones that get really, really big, until they're so big they want to eat you."

Meridian couldn't tell if the spurt of cloud in the distance was acid smoke or something worse.

"Why do they want to eat you?"

"They're hungry. They aren't smart, either."

"But why?"

"Don't start that."

Perhaps it was smoke, and a war beetle had been gutted open by its enemy, roasted by its own burst acid sacs, spilling toxic fumes into the clouds that would poison anyone caught in the breeze of it.

"Start what?"

"Be quiet a while, Desdemona. I have to think."

"Okay."

He tried to move faster away from the suspicious clouds.

They reached a new town by late afternoon. It had been flattened and burned just like Desdemona's. Meridian had never seen so much wasted chitin. It took forever to grow in a mold, and there it all was, lying in the street in strips and fragments. At least this town didn't have much acid scarring. The war beetles had slowed down long enough to level the town, then moved on. That meant there might be food, and new clothes. Meridian needed to change if he wanted to get all the way west. He was wearing the wrong uniform.

Meridian stopped at some mostly smooth chitin that had been knocked into the middle of the main street. He pulled Desdemona down off his back onto the plank. The chitin was a beautiful black pearl that must have cost someone a fortune to import. It was mostly flat, with a very subtle curve that made an adequate, clean spot for a little girl to sit and rest.

"You stay here," said Meridian.

"I don't want to," she replied. She folded her arms and pouted.

"I mean it," said Meridian. "If you move from

this spot before I get back, I will not come and get you. You will be on your own. You stay right here, until I get back. Got it?"

Her eyes opened up. "Don't leave me," she said.

Meridian felt terrible because of the lie. She had believed him, and it was for her own good that he had done it. If she survived long enough, she'd grow to hate him like his own daughter had. It was better to lie. The last thing he needed was a little girl with lockjaw or cuttle fever from all this jagged metal and chitin.

He still felt bad for lying. It reminded him of home. He tried to smile encouragingly. "Why don't you sing a song to pass the time?"

"I don't know any songs," she said.

"Make one up if you have to. I bet you have a pretty voice."

She scrunched her face into a mean glare. There would be no singing this day.

Meridian Smith unsheathed an electric knife from his left boot. He went to work on the side of the depot. The building had been leveled like a smashed potato, but there was probably a basement storage intact with dry goods. Too many tornadoes roamed the plains, so everyone had a basement. That's how Meridian had found Desdemona, while he was scrounging for food one town back.

Meridian looked at the mess everywhere, for anything that looked like it was still sealed and safe to eat. He didn't see any canned goods or boxes. He saw lots of fresh vegetables that had been left in the wreckage. It would be too risky to eat with any biological warfare from the breathing ventricles of the war beetles. If this town had been flattened by cavalry beetles, the vegetables were probably safe. If the town had been flattened by the really big, horned beetles, nothing was safe.

"Hello!" he shouted, into the black void. "Anyone down there?"

The room echoed back Meridian's own voice. At least that meant there was a large room down there, like a cavern, probably with shelves that probably had dry goods that hadn't been crushed under a two-story chitin building. If the building had caved, there'd be no echo.

Meridian turned around to check on Desdemona. She sat with her hands around her ankles and her head pressed into her knees. She was exactly where he had left her, in the exact posture. She stared at him from between her knees.

"Hey, Mr. Smith, did you find anything good?" she said. "More war beetles?" Her face lit up with fear.

"No, of course not!" said Meridian. He pointed up at the sky. "I'm worried about thunderstorms. We don't have hats or umbrellas. You keep an eye out for any clouds you see, okay? Especially purple clouds. Those are the worst storms. If you see one, you shout about it, okay?" He still felt awful for lying to a child.

She didn't stand up. But she nodded, and bit her lip like she was looking very hard. She shielded her eyes with one hand, and scanned the skyline. "I don't see any storm clouds," she said.

"You just keep looking for me, okay?"

"Okay, Mr. Smith."

Meridian cut around the hole he had made in the chitin floor tiles. He could fit an arm through now, if he tried. He didn't have a flashlight. He had kept most of his supplies in his rucksack, which hadn't survived the flying moth's acid bombs. He was lucky he had an electric knife with a fresh charge.

When he thought he had a big enough hole, he turned off his knife and sheathed it back into the top of his boot. He stripped off his filthy duster, and slithered his lanky body down into the gap in the chitin.

When he landed, he heard a splash at his feet, and a hiss like two snakes. His boots didn't feel steady. The smell in the air was frightening and familiar.

He jumped up fast and tugged himself out of the hole he had cut as quickly as he could. He ripped his boots off, without touching the bottoms, and buried them in dust.

The heavy boot soles simmered like strips of bacon.

A war beetle had shoved a trunk into the basement and dropped an acid bomb, to kill anyone that had been hiding. Some beetle rider was probably feeling proud of himself for thinking of that trick.

Beetle acid was engineered to be a trap. You could only smell it if you broke the surface tension. Even then, you had to know the smell to get out in time. Puddles of acid could lie simmering slowly in a hole for a decade, eating the insects that thought to lay eggs there. During the trek overland from Desdemona's destroyed town, they had to walk around whole ponds of acid, and watch for the spurts of it that had pooled in the low places in the grass, dripping off the backs of enemy beetles.

Meridian looked over at the girl, unmoved on the broken roof of chitin.

"I can't go anywhere until my boots stop cooking," said Meridian. "Mind if I join you?"

Desdemona shrugged.

Meridian sat down on the far side of the chitin wall, right on the edge. He stretched his feet out in front of him. "I never wear socks," he said. "I've got big, stinky feet." He wiggled his grubby toes.

Meridian pulled his left leg up to his nose. He gave his toes a big whiff and gasped at the stench. He rolled his eyes like marbles and sputtered for air, flailing one arm around while clutching at his throat with the other.

Desdemona smirked, but only a little.

That was something, at least.

"You know, I didn't find anyone down there," said Meridian.

Desdemona pointed. "What happened to your boots?"

Meridian turned around and looked at the footwear, lying in a pile of dust, still smoldering a little. He had only been in the acid a moment, and he hadn't lingered long. The stitching was thick. The soles were made of rubber and chitin. The steel toes and the thick, cow leather should survive a quick splash.

Meridian smiled. "My toes are too stinky," he said. "My boots needed a break from the smell. Otherwise, the stink starts to wear down the boots. Terrible, really. My daughter... I have a daughter who's all grown up, now... Well, she said she could smell my feet even if I was wearing socks and sitting on the other side of the room. I'm giving my boots a break to recover."

He rubbed the back of his head.

"Where are we going to go next?" said Desdemona. She let go of her own legs. She straightened her knees, and leaned backwards. She adjusted herself with her hands from side to side as if her legs had fallen asleep holding so still on the hard chitin.

Meridian scanned the horizon for signs of trouble.

"We'll go on to the next town. We have to be careful, though. Tornadoes and thunderstorms will be looking for us."

"I wish I had an umbrella," she said. "A really big one. Yellow."

"Is that your favorite color?"

"No way. That's a boy's color. My favorite color is pink."

"Why not have a pink umbrella?"

"You're taller than me. You have to carry the umbrella, or you'll get wet. The umbrella should be yellow."

"You know what, Desdemona? I think you're right. A big, yellow umbrella would be just the thing for us."

Meridian rubbed his forehead, then winced and pulled his hand away. He had forgotten he was sunburned. He looked at the sky, where the sun was hanging about at 16:30, late afternoon.

Desdemona pulled her knees back to her face, and hugged her shins. "I'm really hungry," she said. "How come I can't call you daddy, Mr. Smith?"

"You already have one of those, don't you?"

"I thought every grown-up was a daddy."

"I'm not your daddy, though. Don't you have your own parents?"

"I've had a few. The first ones were nice, but then I didn't like them very much. The second ones were mean and always took me to church. I had another mommy. She was okay, but she didn't like me. I ran away. Now I have you."

Meridian pondered her words carefully. "I see," he said, slowly, though he did not understand her. "I'm

not your daddy. I'm only a daddy to one person, and she never calls me that."

"Why not?"

He thought for a moment about telling her the truth. Instead, he said, "You know, my daughter only calls me Meridian Smith, or Mr. Smith. Sometimes she calls me other things, but she never calls me 'Daddy'."

"Why not?"

"That's a good question. I guess you'll have to ask her if you meet her."

"When will I meet her?"

"Never, if you're lucky."

"Why can't I meet her?"

Meridian looked over at his shoes. They were still smoldering a little, but they could use some more dust to take the worst of the acid.

"Let me get back to you on that one," he said.

He hopped off the broken wall, and walked to his boots. He pounded them around in the dust. He kept at it until the burning rubber smell dissipated. He pulled them on carefully, ready to yank his foot out if he felt even the slightest touch of acid. The boots were fine. He walked back to Desdemona, and couldn't help but feel like there were rocks stuck to the bottom of his boots. His hips had the awkward feeling of unevenness. He needed new boots, now, among everything else.

There wasn't anything he could do about his broken boots now, and he was still better off with the boots on than walking over the wreckage all around with nothing but bare feet.

"Listen, Desdemona, we're going to look around town and see if we can find something good to eat. It has to be something in a box or a can. It has to be sealed up tight before we open it. We can't eat anything that was left lying around, like those vegetables at the depot, okay?"

She made a gagging sound in her throat. "I don't like vegetables."

"Good, because I forbid you to eat them. Fruits are right out of the question, too. No vegetables, and no fruit. We will only eat our favorite things, in boxes

and cans."

Meridian scanned the horizon again, always watching out for signs of beetles in the distance, those war machines racing furiously across the chessboard, to flank and kill other beetles, other moths, other cities.

He and Desdemona were going to have to spend the night where they were, no matter what. They were safer in a town — even a ruined one — than they would be out on the plains. There were fewer wild scavengers, and they could pick through the domiciles for better clothes for Desdemona. She wasn't dressed for traveling. Meridian needed boots, a change out of his soldier's clothes. They'd have to find somewhere low in case the war came back. Harder to get tramped if they were already underground.

If they were lucky, they'd find a house with a basement that hadn't gotten an acid bath when the beetles destroyed everything, and wouldn't need an electric knife to open up. They could hide in deep shelter until morning.

The road curved through the ruined city. Puddles of acid had accumulated in ditches and gutters. Meridian was careful to hold Desdemona's hand, and lead her as far away from any suspicious puddles as he could.

The domiciles this close to the main road were small, cheap things. Laborers and field hands lived in these houses in handfuls and bunches, piled up in bunk beds. If these buildings had had basements, they probably hadn't had big ones, and they probably hadn't kept anything there but heaps of their vile hemp-soma.

The piles of wreckage were slightly more substantial a few roads over, which indicated wealthier domiciles. Meridian led Desdemona between two large piles carefully, always watching where she stepped for anything that might cut through her shoes. Kids never had decent shoes. They outgrew them too quickly. Her shoes already looked like they wouldn't last another day of hard travel.

Meridian stopped suddenly. He heard the familiar clicking and sliding sound of a shotgun swallowing shells, getting ready to spit them out with a bang. Meridian spun fast towards the sound of the gun, but too late to do anything. He yanked

Desdemona behind him, clinging to her hard with one hand so she didn't fall into anything, and didn't sneak out from behind his body.

A middle-aged man in overalls had been hiding in the shadows of wreckage. He slowly lifted his shotgun. The tip of his shotgun was just past Meridian's arm length. The man had been very good to get so close to Meridian, while Meridian was distracted by Desdemona.

Meridian yanked hard on Desdemona's hand. She was off-balance, and it hurt her to be tossed around and held like that, flailed like a fish on a line. She made pathetic whimpering noises, oblivious to the danger of the gun.

"Howdy," said the man with the shotgun. "You lost your helmet, huh? Wonder what kind of head-piece you had. Was it a big helmet, like the moth scouts, or was it one of them brain-implanting numbers the war beetles use?"

Meridian was used to lying to grown men, but he knew he couldn't lie to this man. This man was clean among the ruins, with white skin as pure as milk. He was hiding among larger, wealthier domiciles. He was a quiet stalker, accustomed to hunting trophy animals. He was a landowner. He was not some numb laborer blissing on hemp-soma. This man had even recognized Meridian Smith's uniform.

"I lost my beetle in the first assault," said Meridian, telling the truth. "I was out on the open plains when I lost my beetle. I think I was the first casualty, too. I didn't do this to your city, or to anyone's. I barely ejected with my life. I'm just a deserter, walking west." Meridian felt strange, lying to a child all day, then telling the truth to an adult.

"You've got a toy there, too," he said.

"I found Desdemona in a basement when I was looking for food. I couldn't leave her there. Look, don't shoot me, okay? I'm not looking for trouble."

Desdemona was sobbing now, screaming with her pain and fear.

The man with the shotgun spoke over her wails. "If you think I'm going to let you live just because I might accidentally hit your little toy..."

"I've been looking for survivors. The plains

aren't safe. We can make it to the west border, cross into the swamps. We'll all be refugees together there, and there won't be any difference between us. We'll be safer there than here."

He spit. "Safe until the war beetles turn that way."

"You've got a steady hand with that boomstick," said Meridian. "You ever killed a man?"

"You have," he said. He leveled his gun. He was steeling his will to pull the trigger on his first human being and his hands weren't even trembling.

Meridian's first battle, years ago, he was sweating so hard he lost control of the beetle where it interfaced at his temples. Commanders shouted angrily for seven long minutes in the middle of close combat, while nothing was wrong on the dials, but nothing was working. Meridian took his helmet off to check the interface, and saw all that damp sweat gumming up the fungal inserts. He had dropped his helmet from trembling hands three times before he had cleared the sweat.

This man with the overalls and the shotgun was probably a good, brave man. If Meridian moved fast, he'd be shot. If it was a rifle or a handgun, Meridian stood a chance, but a spray of pellets meant he'd be cut down like ground beef before he'd even have his knife unsheathed.

He clutched Desdemona's hand hard. She whimpered. "Wait," said Meridian. "Just take Desdemona. I don't want her to get hurt."

The man cocked his head. "You crazy? I've got children to bury!"

"Just wait one minute!" Meridian said. "Take Desdemona, and hide her eyes. She's been through enough. She's seen enough. Please?"

He smiled with his mouth. His eyes never lost their deadly focus. "Fine," he said. "You send her on over, then."

Meridian let go of Desdemona's hand. She held onto his, hard. He lifted her up like a doll. She was so light. He held her up in the air. She was smiling at him, as if he really was her daddy.

"Desdemona, you have to go with this man."

"I don't want to, Mr. Smith."

"Do what I say," he said. "Go."

"Is he going to be my new daddy?"

"I don't know, Desdemona. Just go to him, for now, okay?"

Her hands let go. She wasn't strong at all. She was light, too, and not hard to hold. Meridian pulled his hand in close and shoved into a jacket pocket. His other hand, he placed on the pommel of his electric knife at the top of his boot. It was out in the open. The landowner could see it.

Desdemona reached up for Meridian. He lifted a boot and pushed her with his foot, gently, towards the man with the shotgun. She stood just under the barrel of the gun, looking at Meridian with those sad eyes that all children seemed to have mastered the moment they were born.

Meridian felt a lump in his throat. He choked it down. He didn't want to cry in front of her. He wanted her not to see what was going to happen. "Desdemona, why don't you go look around the corner, see if you can find a storm."

The landowner spit out of the side of his mouth. It was blood, from somewhere inside. "Go on, and get out of here. Don't look back."

"You go over to that man, and you listen to him," said Meridian. "He's going to take good care of you."

"Is not," she said. "He's mean." She took a step back towards Meridian.

"You're better off with him than you are with me right now."

"Why?" She reached out to Meridian with tiny, beautiful hands.

"Because I'll be too dead to help you."

"Why?" She took another step. Her eyes clouded with tears,

"Because he's going to kill me."

"But why?!" Her voice cracked with her wails.

The man with the shotgun lowered his weapon to Desdemona.

Meridian breathed in. He raised a hand. He

couldn't imagine such an act fast enough to try and stop it in time.

The man in overalls pulled a trigger. Desdemona took one barrel in the back of the head, point blank.

Desdemona's head opened up like fireworks. She had been part beetle, part machine. None of her was really a girl. Bits of chitin and plastic and metal bounced like shrapnel off Meridian's tall boots. Some of the shot busted through the plastic brainpan, gears and pumps inside Desdemona's head. The shot peppered Meridian's thighs like strong insects, but they didn't draw much blood after busting through so much hard chitin.

Desdemona's joints spasmed, and then stiffened. She fell like a tree trunk. Golden lubricants from the pneumatic tubes in her neck spurted on the grass as if to a heartbeat pulsing in her chest — a mechanical heart, in a mechanical chest.

"Dumb toys," said the man with the gun. "My daughter had one. Drove me nuts." He lifted the weapon up again, to Meridian's chest.

Meridian's knife was in his hand the moment of the blast. His face was pale and shocked and his lips trembled with the beginning of tears, but he was still a soldier. He had driven the mighty war beetles, had merged with their primitive minds, to tear down enemy cities, and he had poured death upon the enemy where his commanders had aimed the herd. Meridian's face was shocked, but his knife was out and on. It hummed in his palm like a ritual chant.

Meridian fainted left. The man with the shotgun took the bait, fired into air, hitting only the long dust-er coat, a small bit of shoulder, and the space where Meridian Smith was mostly not. Meridian whipped around to the right, knocked the shotgun up, and stepped behind the man's back. Meridian's electric knife hummed in the air next to the man's throat. Meridian pulled the spent double-barrel shotgun out of the man's hands. The gun clattered somewhere behind them.

Meridian stood there, holding the humming knife at the terrified man's throat. Meridian stared at Desdemona's flickering wires and churning gears. They slowly wound down in the grass between the wrecked domiciles. Desdemona's interior plastics and casements reminded Meridian Smith of his war

beetle's chitin and steel, when it had been sliced open by lucky moth bombers. The beetle was the first casualty in the first assault of this young war. The primitive mind of the beetle, connected directly into Meridian's brain, screamed in agony until Meridian turned off the creature's pain receptors. If Meridian had ejected instead of easing the beetle's pain, Meridian would have been able to save his rucksack, with all his survival gear. Before he unplugged his helmet and ejected, he even took a long moment to read the beetle's mind, as clear without pain as if everything was fine. The creature felt gaps in its body that didn't hurt anymore, as if such things were perfectly natural. All things are perfectly natural to war beetles as long as those things didn't cause them pain. The beetle prodded the burning breeches with its own

weakening limbs and trunks. It wondered how such a change had happened so suddenly, and wondered what kind of creature it would become next, as if it was to molt its shell as it had when it was young, growing to this enormous size. Was it to become smaller, this time?

The way Desdemona's gears and wires rolled down to stillness was like the way the beetle had died, slowly winding down. She probably wondered what had happened, and what was going to happen. Yet, she was stuck inside the shell of innocence that had been designed for her by the people that had engineered the girl out of the carapace.

Meridian Smith hadn't known the truth about Desdemona. He would never truly know.



The Performance

by Silvia Moreno-Garcia
Illustration by Mariusz Siergiejew



scratching sounds, tape turning

J: I can't tell you what the best play I've ever seen is, but I can tell you what's the most memorable performance I ever watched.

I: What was it?

J: *The Worm that Gnaws* by Orrin Gris, back in '67. I didn't want to be a theatre critic back then.

I: What did you want to be?

J: A 'serious' journalist, writing serious stuff. But I was the youngest reporter and my boss was send-

ing me to things like the sweet potato festival and the crowning of Miss Xochimilco: filler. Bullshit. I couldn't stand it. One time he sends me to see a play and ta-da.

I: I haven't heard of Orrin Gris.

J: You wouldn't. Mmm...do you mind if I smoke?

I: Go ahead.

sound of lighter flicking open

I: What was the play about?

J: It was this costumbrist drama, set at the turn of the century. Everyone was dressed in Porfirian costumes. There was a girl and she was pregnant. She wouldn't say who her lover was. The play is spent with the family awaiting the arrival of the man. It ends with him knocking at the door, fade to black. It seemed to me it was an allegory of the hierarchical social structure in Mexico, and our Catholic hang-ups. The lover was probably a poor labourer. The girl was upper-crust. Like I said, melodrama.

I: So it was good?

J: No. Not really. It had some sharp stuff, but Orrin was young. The press package they'd given us showed him looking at the camera, smiling, and it said he was an entomology enthusiast turned writer. As if to prove it, you could see the pinned butterflies in the background. His biggest claim to fame, before the play, had been a thesis on the Mimetic Practices of Insects.

I: Exciting stuff.

laughter

J: Yeah, I suppose. He was the son of a movie director and that's how he got a pass into the arts. He was twenty-six, a little daddy's boy and not very good with metaphors.

I: How come you remember the play then?

J: Because he shot the leading man after the performance, then blew his own head off.

silence as the tapes whirrs

I: Wow.

J: Can I use that cup as an ashtray?

I: Go ahead. Why did he shoot the actor?

J: Mmm...over Amelia. The leads — and the best thing in the whole play, by the way — were Amelia Corazon and Joaquin Quezada. She was this pretty, sweet young woman. She was also engaged to the playwright. Joaquin was this tall, handsome man. Impossibly good looking. You just couldn't believe it. He looked flawless. Magnetic, to boot. Although...

I: Yes?

J: When we were shaking hands and as I was introduced to him, I remember looking into those dark

eyes of his and being repelled.

I: You said he was handsome.

J: He was. Very. But when I was a kid, we used to play in my grandma's garden. We'd move the clay pots and from underneath out would come scampering a bunch of woodlice. I didn't like doing this, but my brother insisted. The woodlice made me itchy just watching them. When I looked into Joaquin's eyes I had the same sensation as I did when I was a kid and the woodlice would appear. I was itchy.

I: I guess Gris mustn't have liked him either.

J: No, they seemed to be good friends. Until, well...he murdered him. What seems to have happened is that Joaquin slept with Amelia. When Orrin found out, he killed him.

pause

J: It was the first time I'd seen a dead body.

I: So you saw it?

J: Yes. During the reception, after the play, Orrin just came out and shot Joaquin Quezada smack in the forehead. I'm standing there with my camera, not knowing what the hell to do. I phone my editor and he says, 'Don't be an idiot, cover it!' and I think, 'This is my chance.' I head back to where the body is, start snapping pictures of the actor and dear God...I look at him and it's just nausea. Just disgust. I threw up right next to the body. That ended my career as a 'serious' writer. They made sure to keep me on the arts beat after that. The joke around the office was I didn't have the stomach for anything else.

I: I can see why the play would be memorable.

J: That's not why it's memorable.

I: No?

J: It's what happened after. A few months later the crime reporter walks by my desk and asks me if I have any background information on Orrin Gris. I do. I have the whole press package still sitting there. I ask him, 'How come you need it' and he says Amelia Corazon just killed herself. She was several months pregnant and Orrin's death had been hard on her. She was depressed and she talked a lot of crazy talk.

I: Like what?

J: She said she had a maggot growing in her belly.

Said she was going to carve it out. I suppose she did.

I: Jesus.

J: That's right. Anyway, when I'm going through the press package, I'm flipping through the pages and there is this quote. It's this line from the play. I'd seen it before, but it didn't resonate until then. It says, 'Faces like paper masks conceal the dark. The worm slowly gnaws the heart.' It struck me deeply. I've never been able to forget it and I still think of the performance.

I: It's a pretty line.

J: I suppose.

pause

J: I think about it when I ride the subway, sometimes. This city has what, twenty million people? All those faces rushing past you in the crammed cars, all those people heading from work or to work. Holding on to the rail or waiting outside by the curb. And we never look at their faces, do we? That's why I review musicals. It keeps me happy. The songs, the costumes, the laughter. There's no space for paper masks there.

long pause

It's getting dark outside.

I: Yeah.

tape stops





The Familiar Buzz of Gone

by Cate Gardner

Illustration by Kyle Conway

With his hands clasped together, Emmett sat at the kitchen table and prayed the fly slamming its belly against the window wouldn't get into the house. *There are no dead here.* Unless they counted his cheese sandwich, and even that was more alive than dead, alive with mould. He couldn't remember making it. Emmett unclasped his fingers, tearing hand away from hand, cracking knuckles. Beneath the table, his legs stretched in yawn, unused muscles throbbing at the sudden movement. Black flecks clung to the hairs on the back of his hand. He flicked them onto the table.

He couldn't eat the sandwich now.

Outside, the fly splattered against the window. As Emmett stood, several pairs of pyjama bottoms fell to his ankles and as he bent to pull them up, tying cord after cord into place, pain tore along his spine. If Alison returned, she wouldn't recognise him. Despite the padded layers of clothing, nothing of the man he'd been remained and yet the man's disappearance hadn't wiped out the boy's sins. He leaned towards the window where another fly began to beat itself to death.

What are you trying to tell me? Asking what he did not want to know.

The flies had numbered hundreds when they feasted on his friend Jimmy's blood all those years ago. Buzzing about the wound to his forehead, settling on his eyes, and Emmett had felt he knew each one. They'd hummed a tale into his ear, insisted he come, but he'd been too busy running from what he'd done to his friend. In the quiet loneliness, when his mind settled towards worry, he'd hear the stone whiz across the field and the haunting would tear him apart. It was an accident. If only he'd heeded the flies, if only he'd gone back before they began their feast.

Jimmy hadn't died when the rock hit him. He'd lain semi-conscious in a ditch while Emmett sat in his bedroom, headphones pressed to his ears, replacing a mechanical buzz for that of the flies, ignoring their whispered plans to feast when Jimmy became one of their dead. He hadn't meant to hurt his friend.

No wonder Alison left him. Digging his fingers into his ears, ignoring the beat of wings against glass, Emmett recommenced staring at his sandwich. Alison had left him for an Apostle; a Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Scribbled a note on the back of a church autumnal services leaflet and took none of her things. Her words blurred beneath the weight of long-shed tears, gel-pen ink dribbling off the page, creases criss-crossing the paper. Gone was all he remembered. He crumpled the note in his fist then smoothed it against the table. He gathered the waistbands of the pyjama bottoms in his fist, headed out the kitchen and up the stairs to the bathroom. There, he shivered into Alison's discarded bathrobe and then wrapped his own above it. Swaddled. He didn't care that she'd left all her things, only that she'd left him.

A dead fly lay in the bath. Emmett turned on the hot water tap to wash it away. Dressing robe ties dribbled in the bath. Steam rose, clouding the mirror with its breath to reveal a message fingerprinted onto glass...

I loved you.

Loved.

Emmett turned off the taps. When the steam cleared, he found three flies had replaced the one he'd washed away. He backed out of the bathroom, glancing at the ceiling and the window expecting a torrent of wings, and shut the door. He shook his head.

Another dead fly fell at his feet.

Dead flies had surrounded Jimmy's body. Marks made by the boots that stormed to save a long dead boy. Others lay crushed behind the nearest tree, where Emmett had crouched and stared at a boy he thought dead. Jimmy had lived for seventy-two hours after the *accident*, they'd said. If someone had found him earlier we could have, possibly, may have, a lone 'without doubt' saved him. The flies whispered that in their gleeful, hungry way and perhaps now they were telling Emmett that he had died and they waited for the ghost he'd become to discover his body. There was no Alison to save him.

I loved you.

Deciding by the stink of his breath and the gnawing in his belly that he hadn't died, Emmett flopped onto the floor in their bedroom and removed all the books by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. A fly buzzed into the room with some message Emmett couldn't make out. It landed on the bible. Emmett pulled the book from the middle shelf — the only one not coated in a thin layer of dust — and traced his finger over the inscription. *To my most devoted parishioner.* He tore out the gospels. By the flick of his wrist, the gospel pages flew onto the dressing table, knocking over Alison's perfume bottle. Now the room smelled of her. A fly drowned in her scent. If only he could do the same.

She wouldn't leave him, couldn't, even though she'd danced away. Three layers of pyjamas slid down his hips, their length wrapping about his feet. They hindered but did not deter him. Emmett opened the bedroom window to release her scent. He breathed in the crisp air, the tang of bonfires rustling from back gardens. Although it was five days until Bonfire Night, the neighbourhood blazed, sparks lifting from the garden of the facing house. They'd loved this time of year — Jimmy, Alison, him. Three flies buzzed into the room, whispering their secrets into his ear. He already knew it was too late.

They'd buried Jimmy thirty-one years ago.

1981, the day after Halloween, Emmett had awoken to find the sunlight extinguished. A film of flies clung to his bedroom window. 1981, the day after Jimmy's accident and three days before men hunting for firewood had stumbled upon his body. Poor

long-dead Jimmy. Noting Emmett's stare, the flies had beaten their wings and reformed into a head or rather a head shape. Emmett had screamed and screamed but by the time his parents had come into the room the fly man/head had dispersed.

Now, as more flies sped into their bedroom, beating in from the direction of the now-abandoned chapel, Emmett fled elsewhere. He pulled down the attic ladder and when ensconced in its moonlit dark, he yanked the ladder up and sat with his knees tucked under his chin. He hummed and his hum slid into buzz.

When the men found Jimmy, when his parents had rushed down the slope and Emmett had followed, the flies relinquished their feast. So-called experts claimed the trauma of seeing his dead friend (they never used corpse in his presence) had caused him to hallucinate, but Emmett knew different. Emmett knew as the flies dispersed they had formed into a man, his torso stocky, his fingers moving so fast they were almost not there, his hair a wild afro of beating wings. Now that man was reforming on the floor below his hiding place. Emmett huddled further into himself. The darkness deepened. Flies pressed their bellies to the porthole window cut into the roof.

Emmett realised there was no need to search for his body. He wasn't a ghost. He was a living corpse waiting for death to catch up with him. If it meant Alison would return to him, he'd almost accept death. Glass cracked beneath the weight of flies. He wasn't ready to face the fly man. Perhaps he should make his peace with God, spend a final hour or two kneeling in the chapel as Alison had done. Always there, knees to the marble, the preacher's shadow curving over her. Had the preacher known of her apostle, of her secret lover? Had he fled because he could no longer look his neighbour in the eye?

As Emmett dropped from the attic, losing a layer of pyjama bottoms in the act, the front doorbell rang. The sound danced about the house as Alison had done. Waltzing around the kitchen and not caring that the blinds were open and the preacher, supposedly watering his plants, watching her dance. The doorbell rang again.

Shadows lurked behind the glass inset into the front door.

Tying the outer dressing gown tight and looking almost the man he'd been, if you discounted the days-old beard growth, the stink and his gaunt face, he opened the door.

A fly peered up at him.

There were other figures there. All less than four foot and all glaring up at him, but all Emmett saw was the fly in its ill-fitting blue suit. "Buzz," it said, and someone laughed.

I'm going mad.

"Trick or treat," the others chorused.

The fly-child said, "There's something on your face."

Emmett's sigh tasted of curdled milk. He fumbled in his dressing gown pockets as if to offer the children lint. An adult shooed the kids away, all of them backing down the path, keeping an eye to the crazy man. The fly-child hesitated at the gate. Another fly buzzed in Emmett's ear before settling on his shoulder. He shook it off and slammed the door. *Fly spray.*

Emmett tore through the kitchen cupboards, bottles rolling along linoleum, which bore heel marks from his wife's naked dances. The fly spray lay at the back of the supplies cupboard. He shook it, a whisper of chemicals rattling against emptiness. He dropped the canister into the sink. Gripping the edge of the basin, he looked out across the side yard to the neighbouring chapel. Children crept past it, their lanterns lit. He didn't spy fly-boy amongst them, but in the window, oh, in the window, a curtain of flies draped up and around until they reformed into a man and the man looked as solemn as a man made of flies could. Emmett stumbled back, knocking into a chair and sending both it and him crashing to the floor.

The doorbell buzzed again and a cry of 'Trick or Treat' sang through the letterbox. *Go away.* The night turned as blue-black as a fly's wing. Emmett pulled himself up and sat for a moment or two at the table where a fly feasted on a rotten sandwich.

If only Alison hadn't left. The house had died without her laughter. She'd frightened away his fears, pushed them into her belly and swallowed the key. She didn't understand the dark truth of him — what he'd done to Jimmy — and when he'd told her, the only person he'd ever told — she cried that it was an

accident. Insisted he shouldn't blame himself. Her doubts displayed in her internet history, in google searches and age-old pictures tumbled out of sealed boxes in their attic.

"What an awful way to die," she'd said, narrowing her eyes, "waiting for help to come."

"You could have saved him, Jimmy," she'd whispered in her sleep.

"He could have saved him," she'd prayed into the preacher's ear.

Then a flurry of kisses for Emmett insisting he was a child, he hadn't known better, and she'd danced across the garden to the chapel. The preacher had fled from the weight of their combined woe. A scream cut across the dark. It wasn't his. Emmett's throat too dry to offer more than a hoarse, "Go away."

Hunger forced him to tear an edge of crust off the sandwich, to feast on the fly's meal before he became it. He pressed his hand to Alison's note. Blue light shivered through the window but didn't prove illumination enough to read it.

Emmett tore off the layers of dressing gowns and pyjamas until he sat naked at the kitchen table. Rotting skin clung to bone, sweat and blue-black streaks of blood and wing. A dead fly nestled in his bellybutton. He looked as if he'd lain with the fly man.

A knock at the front door caused him to shiver. He pressed his hands to his forehead, rubbing the pulse points. The constant buzz of flies drifted until they formed a faint echo that he needed to concentrate to hear. A fist continued to slam against the door. Another rapped, this time at the kitchen window. Emmett pulled his arms close to his body and hunched his shoulders. If he made himself small, perhaps they wouldn't see him.

"Open the door, sir," a voice called through the glass. He should invest in triple glazing. "Open the door."

Emmett turned to the window. Torchlight shone into his eyes, blinding. He pressed the back of his arm to his face and waited for the light to lower. When it did, when he removed his arm, he saw that the torch wielding man was a police officer.

Still naked, Emmett shuffled to the back door.

As soon as the door opened, the police officer said, "On the floor, on the floor."

A needless shout, for Emmett's legs no longer held the strength to support him. Blood rushed in his ears, sounding like a hundred boots storming past his shivering form. A single fly watched, its broken wings twitching against linoleum. Rough hands pulled Emmett's arms behind his back and clamped plastic ties around his wrists.

"What are you doing, officer?" a woman asked.

"I..."

The woman cut the restraints from Emmett's wrists and helped him up. "Here," she said, wrapping a discarded dressing gown around Emmett's shoulders.

The overhead light flicked on. Emmett squinted. The female detective flinched as she looked at Emmett, and then reemployed her smile. Putting on a pair of latex gloves, she lifted Emmett's arm and examined the black marks inked along it. Dead flies pressed into his skin, attached like plasters covering a wound. Their blood smeared his legs.

"I'm not the fly man," he said.

"Have you been to the chapel next door, sir? Did you break in?"

"All closed up. The preacher left same day as my wife," Emmett said. "Flew as if Hell's hounds licked water from the font."

"Where did your wife go?"

Emmett licked his cracked lips and nodded to Alison's note. "She left with an apostle or one of the saints. That's her note, her goodbye."

The detective picked it up.

"This is a shopping list, sir. On the back of a leaflet advertising chapel services. I repeat, where did your wife go?"

A shopping list. Emmett shook his head and looked across a garden now lit by white light that would appear almost angelic if not for the uniformed man standing in its glare. He rubbed dead flies from his knees.

The detective sat down, taking his hands in her gloved one. "Did you find her?"

"Did you kill her?" the original officer asked, the one with the ready supply of wrist ties.

"Kill her... who?"

"Your wife."

"Alison didn't leave?" he said. "You mean... That is... The flies were for her. He was telling me she was in there dying."

"Who told you?" the detective took out her notepad — black leather revealing crisp white pages.

Emmett rubbed his frown line. The flies had encouraged him towards the chapel. He'd seen her draped before the altar, naked from the waist down and the blood at her temple. The flies had called for days, but he'd been too busy drowning in whiskey to heed them and when he had, when he'd run out of Scotch and the pain in gut and heart had compelled him to follow the fly-man, then he'd fallen upon her. Dropped to his knees at her altar and tried to scrape away the flies that ate her flesh.

"Who told you?" the Detective repeated, cutting into memory.

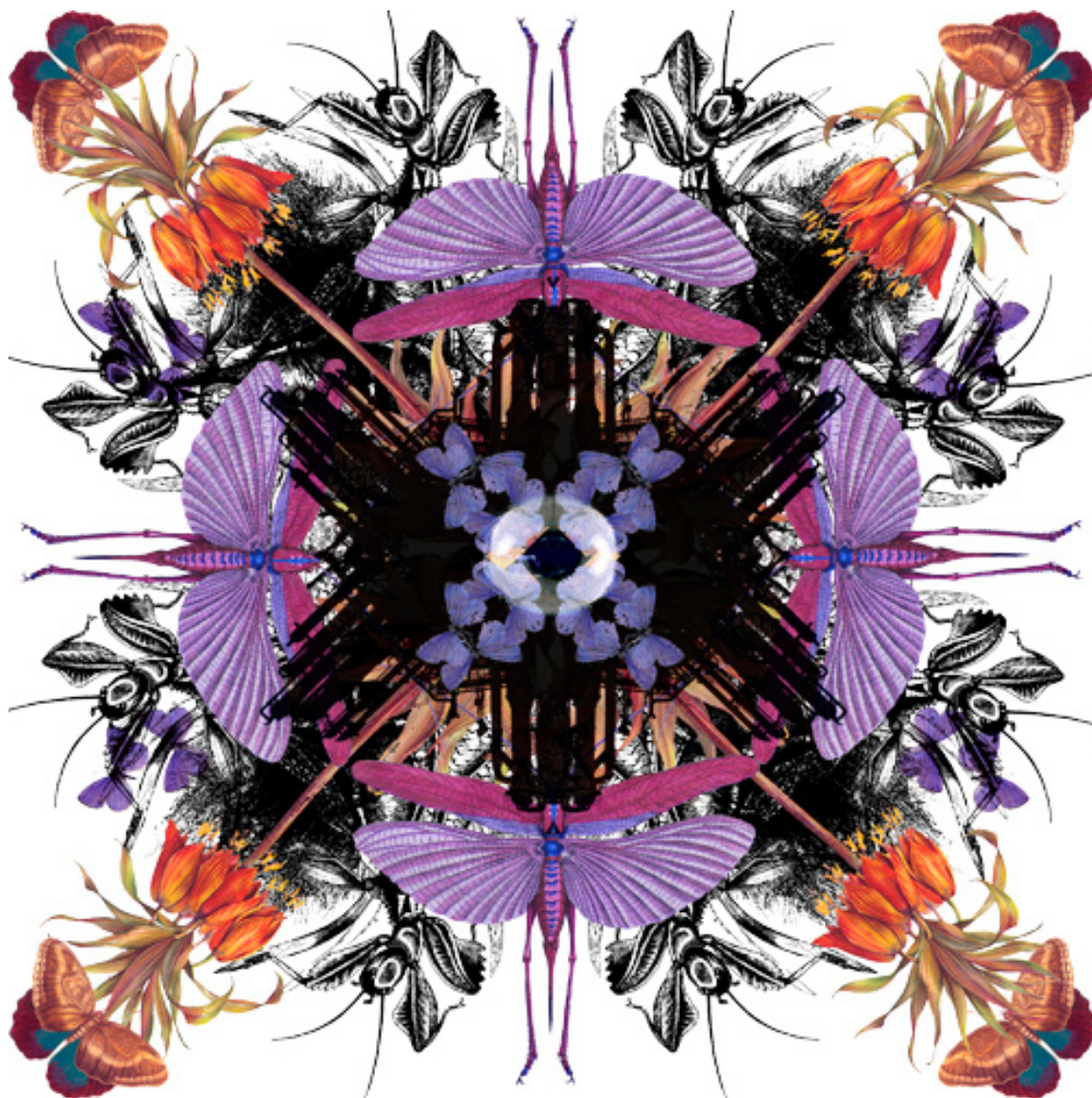
"The fly man told me, but it was too late, my wife and he had already danced."



Dragonfly Miscalculations

by Steven L. Peck

Illustration by Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein



The jeep lurches hard to the left and I counter-balance right, clutching the strap above the door. Heat and white dust pour in as our forward motion is momentarily suspended. Whatever breeze we had through the window disappears. I glance back. The Dipterist from the British Museum looks sullen. My assistant next to him is hot and uncomfortable, sweat pouring down her face. Only our driver looks cool and collected.

“How much further?” I ask, just as a line of trees marking the river comes into view.

“Just ahead,” the museum guy says.

A small cluster of earthy homes comes into view. We pull into a center area as children move to greet us.

An older man, tall and thin, wearing a Dragonfly Inc. t-shirt, in my honor no doubt, comes out of one

of the houses and walks over to us, smiling. We are introduced. He is one of the village leaders, and he and the museum guy enter into a long conversation in Amharic.

“Ask him if any of his cattle have been sick.” I interject abruptly, interrupting them. The fly guy scowls at me, but asks my question.

The man lights up, shaking his head and smiling broadly. He speaks, clasps his hands over his heart in an obvious gesture of gratitude, then pulls his t-shirt down and points to the logo. He then gives me two thumbs up and a broad grin.

The taxonomist translates unnecessarily. “No. None of his cattle have been sick.”

“Anyone in the village with sleeping sickness?” I’m obviously just doing promotion work here — and trying to annoy the museum piece. The elder is wearing one of our t-shirts, for heaven’s sake; I certainly don’t need to play the company woman here. “Go on, ask him.”

He does, and the man puts on another display of gratitude. I hate myself. I’m not out of sympathy with what the biologist is trying to do. After all, I’m here, aren’t I? It’s a matter of tradeoffs.

The old man, understanding without translation, says in English, “No tsetse.”

An older woman and a young girl, maybe her daughter, carry out a small wooden table and set it in the shade of one of the buildings, motioning us towards it. She brings out a large, red, plastic pitcher filled with a sticky, fruity drink. She watches as we pour our drinks and doesn’t react or take offense as each of us dumps in a packet of ToxFree and slowly swirl the powder into the drink. My assistant dips her finger in and rubs the rim of her glass a little too cautiously. For the first time since meeting at the airport, the museum guy and I smile at each other. It does wonders for breaking the tension. In some ways, our roles have been defined as working against each other, just by what we each represent. Conflicting interests. Still, I’ve tried as hard as anyone to get this right — to balance the ethics of conservation with human health. But it’s hard. Mistakes are made. Sensitivity vs. specificity and all that.

We finish our drinks. My assistant then unloads

the equipment, lugging a sturdy case that she plunks onto the table and opens deliberately. She takes out the device inside and hooks it up to a laptop. I set up a miniature clothesline on which the dragonflies can land.

I pull out my phone and start the App. The dragonflies come in quickly over the next fifteen minutes and land, clinging onto the little stretched wire I’ve set up. They are only a little smaller than real dragonflies and shine silver in the sun like jewels. One of the kids reaches out to touch one and I gently warn her away with a shake of my head. She wouldn’t hurt it, they are pretty tough, but if I allow it, the other children will want to touch them too.

There are only twenty-nine out of the thirty-five we released here. Such things happen. A bat or a bird will occasionally take one, despite the built-in defenses.

“Are the markers loaded?” I ask.

My assistant nods. “Robber fly, right?”

The museum guy snaps back to his angry face. “Of course, robber fly.”

I take one of the dragonflies, and open a small compartment on its thorax. I strip the wrapping off a sterile glass pipette and take a sample from the bot’s stomach. A tiny sample of tissue has been snipped off with every kill, and preserved and stored en masse. It’s a genetic tangle, but with the markers we can at least deduce what kinds of things it’s killing.

My assistant takes the sample and inserts it into the sequencer. Almost instantly, she says, “No Asilids.”

We sample only four more before we make a hit, “It’s here,” my assistant says sadly. We had gotten our hopes up with the first three negatives. I nod.

I have to make a point, “Are we seeing any tsetse?”

My assistant runs the markers.

“No.”

“House flies?”

My Assistant answers after running those markers, “In about half the samples.”

I ask, “Mosquitoes?”

My assistant runs the markers.

“No *Anopheles* present.”

The museum guy tolerates my attempts to make a point for a while, but when I ask about earworm, he says, “Two can play at this. Any *Papilio*?”

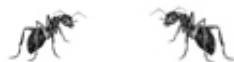
That was a low blow. He knows I was involved in the worst extinction disaster of the early days of dragonfly pest control. It still stings, and in certain

circles I can’t show my head.

“Point taken.”

So we begin trying to sort out a parameter set that will exclude robber flies from the bots’ hunting phenomenology. Tradeoffs.

Still. I wish just one swallowtail butterfly would flit by.



Skitterings in Corners

by Juliet Kemp

Illustration by Svetlana Sukhorukova



Bea's small kitchen was over-hot with people, and I could feel a prickle of sweat starting at my hairline. By the table, a loud and slightly obnoxious banker friend of Bea's was making the inevitable semi-lethal punch. I nearly hadn't come to the party. Bea threw it every year, and every year I dutifully showed up then spent the evening trying to make polite conversation with strangers who always excused themselves the moment they decently could. But I knew if I tried to bow out Bea would only persuade me into it; it was easier just to show up. I sipped at my plastic cup of white wine, not as nice as the bottle I'd brought myself and then immediately lost track of, and wondered how soon I could reasonably leave.

"Hitch-hiking, Rachel?" the banker asked a girl leaning against the fridge. He tasted a bit of the punch and made a face. "Isn't that a bit dangerous these days?"

Rachel laughed, twirling her nearly-empty glass between her fingers. "Not hitch-hiking like with your thumb out on the side of the road," she said. "It's this really new technique, right, and in London we're totally at the head of the game just now." She was gesturing with both hands, the wine splashing against the side of her glass. "Basically, you can get right inside, ride in something else's head. You see what they see, hear what they hear. It's incredible."

She had short bleach-blond hair, spiked in all directions, and a ring through her lip, and a bright pink T-shirt with the name of some band I didn't know. But it was her energy, more than her looks, that caught my attention. I found myself leaning slightly towards her.

The banker looked shocked. "What, other people?"

"God, no." She pulled a face. "I mean, there's

the ethical issues, obviously, but really it's just way too complicated. Lab animals. Rats and so on. Dogs. I mean, we're still in the really early stages, of course." She drained her glass, looked around, and caught sight of me. "Oh, hey, could you top me up?" She nodded at the half-full bottle of wine next to me, and smiled, turning to cut the banker off. I filled her glass, scrabbling in my mind for something to keep her talking.

"So, what, you work at this institute?" I asked as I handed the glass back.

She grimaced. "Unfortunately not, no. It's a hobby. They need a few more testers than just themselves. It's just so *fascinating* to be involved with, though, such an amazing advance. I mean, haven't you always wondered what it's like to be a cat, say?" Her eyes were wide.

I nodded, and smiled back at her, and watched how the light reflected off the side of her face. I could feel the energy crackling off her, and I wondered what it would be like to be closer to all that enthusiasm. We talked for longer than I'd dared hope, and afterwards, I got her email address from Bea. I spent a week trying to work myself up to sending something, knowing all the time that I wouldn't, that I'd just let her slip away. I couldn't believe my luck when she phoned me instead.



The first time I came home to find her flat out on the bed, I panicked. The room was dim, the curtains drawn, and she didn't respond at all when I called her name. There was a slight, strange smell in the air, almost medicinal. I couldn't work out what had happened. Had she hit her head and lain down for a bit and fallen asleep? Oh god, what about concussion? I touched her gently, then shook her. I suppose it can only have been a few seconds, but it felt like forever before she opened her eyes. She blinked at me for a moment as I babbled questions, then relaxed and smiled cheerfully up at me.

"Oh! No, no, I'm fine. Nothing like that. I was just out exploring, that's all. I'm sorry, I should have said something."

She sat up and unhooked the thin collar from around her neck, pulling it out from under the

necklace she always wore. I hadn't noticed it in the dim light.

She talked about the research institute, of course, all the time, and I listened with most of my attention, the way you do when your lover talks about their hobby. From what she said, she was one of their main testers, even if it was next to unpaid. But I'd assumed that it was just at the institute that she did her hitchhiking. Safely, under controlled conditions.

Wincing slightly, she tugged the patches away from the base of her skull. The remnants of the glue coated the fine hairs at the nape of her neck, that place that made her shiver when I stroked it.

"Oh, but Alisha, it was wonderful. It's the first time I've tried it... with..." She blinked again as she stalled for a moment, then carried on without acknowledging the gap. "An animal that wasn't in the lab. Next-door's cat." She smiled happily at me. "So much more interesting, with all the things outside, all the things, all the things..." She trailed off again, staring wide-eyed at a point somewhere between us.

"You rode along in the head of next door's cat," I said. "Is that — is it *safe*?"

She shrugged and waved a hand, straight back to herself again. "Oh, it's fine. I knew where I was. And the cat doesn't feel anything, we're sure of that. Oh, this is a massive step forward, they're going to be so *pleased* at the lab."

I'd met the people at the lab, once, at the pub one evening. They'd all seemed nice enough, but I'd felt uncomfortable, out of place. I hadn't been since, though Rachel kept inviting me. I didn't need to be out at places with her. It was more than enough just to have her with me when we were both at home. More than I'd ever expected.

She tucked the equipment into a box and slung it casually under the bed, like something she'd done often before. She swung her feet round off the bed and jumped up, extending her hand to me. "Hey, do you fancy takeout tonight?"

I allowed her to tow me down the stairs, and to order pizza for us both, and I didn't ask any more questions, even when she lost another sentence halfway through. I stroked the nape of her neck, and ignored the slight tackiness under my fingers as she

nuzzled into me. And the week after, when I found a note on the kitchen table when I got in, I stayed downstairs and watched reality TV until she came down, flushed and shiny-eyed. I didn't say anything when she stopped and stared at me as if I were a stranger. She snapped out of it quickly enough, after all. She was still here with me.



We had roaches that summer. Not many, not a proper infestation, but enough that I wanted to deal with them before it got worse. I was unpacking the supermarket bags, and Rachel was sitting on the edge of the counter, drinking orange juice. We went through a lot of orange juice. She picked up the packet of borax powder, and waved it at me.

“What’s this for, then?”

I turned round from the fridge. “Oh. I’ve seen a couple of roaches. I looked it up on the internet. Apparently borax powder will get rid of them.”

Rachel frowned, still holding the packet. “Oh. I’d kind of rather we left them alone, really.”

Rachel was a vegetarian, sure, but she wasn’t usually all that fussed about insect life. I looked at her for a moment, then felt my stomach turn slightly with one of those sudden uncomfortable flashes of realisation.

“You’re not thinking of...”

“No, no,” she said, too fast. “They’re far too small. Too different — it doesn’t work with just anything. You wouldn’t be able to parse the experience. John managed to hitch with a bat, once, but he was really out of it afterwards. He said no way he’d want to do it again.”

Her eyes rested on the skirting board for a moment, then she carefully put the packet back down beside her. She smiled brightly at me and asked what I wanted for lunch. The borax powder sat on the counter while we were eating, neither of us looking at it, while Rachel told me a convoluted story about a friend of hers who played bass in some band, and I pretended I was listening and tried to laugh in the right places. Later, I put the box away at the back of the cupboard under the sink, still sealed. Roaches aren’t that bad, not really. There were only a few of them.



Two weeks later, I came home early from dinner with an old school friend, thinking that Rachel and I could maybe watch a DVD together. She’d been out the last few evenings, and I’d missed her. The house was dark when I got in, and the heating was ramped right up. No note, but I went upstairs and saw her on the bed, breathing shallowly. I went back downstairs, made myself a cup of tea, and curled up on the sofa with my laptop. My feet, tucked underneath me, felt cold, despite the heating. But everyone has their hobbies, don’t they? And she hadn’t known I’d be back early. She’d be with me later.

She came downstairs after maybe an hour, looking almost drunk, and stared at me for a moment, her head wobbling slightly.

“Alisha!” she said, slurring. “We didn’t — I didn’t — are you...” She paused, obviously tried to regroup. “I saw you!” she declared triumphantly, then frowned, and wobbled again. “Did I see? You?”

I got her to sit down, gave her a glass of cold water. She stared at it for a while, holding it carefully, watching the little patches of condensation form around her fingers. I didn’t know what had happened, but I remembered a housemate at college who’d looked like that once when he took too much acid. I started talking, gently, rambling about my day, about anything normal I could think of. Concentrating on tone rather than content, like calming a nervous dog. Whenever I leant towards her, I caught a smell of sweat and of the patch-glue she used. I didn’t dare touch her. Slowly -- really slowly -- she came back to herself, and eventually I asked her, gently, where she’d been this time. What she’d been.

“Oh!” Her eyes shone. “So much for, for... For Sophie saying that insects aren’t, that they... too different.” She stopped for a moment, her eyes sliding upwards a little and glazing, and I bit at my fingernail and wondered if I should ask again.

“Cockroaches, Alisha!” she said, before I could decide, her head nodding sharply forwards as her eyes cleared again.

“Cockroaches?” I asked.

“I know! It’s amazing, isn’t it? So fascinating — such different minds, such a different way of

experiencing the world.” She sounded awestruck, exhilarated. “I didn’t even realise — we, I saw you. Well. It, they experienced you, but it took me ages to work out what it was, because it’s not seeing, they don’t really *see*, it’s...”

She trailed off. Her gaze wandered again, and she blinked a few times. It seemed to last longer this time. I breathed in and felt my spine lock up. Should I do something, call someone?

“We could learn so much!” she said suddenly. “Anyway, I knew... I think I knew you were back? So I stopped.” She shook her head. “God, though, John was right about the hangover.”

“It looked like being on a bad trip — out of touch with the world,” I said carefully. Out of touch with herself. Not here, not with me, anymore.

Rachel laughed cheerfully. “Oh, it wears off a lot faster than that, though. I’m feeling fine now. In fact...”

She put her hand on my face, pulled me in for a kiss, and slid her other arm around me. I shut my eyes and concentrated on the feel of my lover’s skin against mine, pushing away the thought of glossy brown carapaces and spindly antennae, and trying not to wonder where she was, really, now.



I shouldn’t have been surprised. She’s lying there now, in our room. I’ve been sleeping in the spare room. I can’t cope with being there next to her. Next to her? It’s not her. I don’t think it’s her.

I tried to wake her up, to get her back to herself. To bring her back here. I shook her and shook her, but nothing happened. After twenty-four hours, I went through her phone, and found the number for Sophie at the lab. She came round straight away, with one of their doctors, and made reassuring noises at me. Just give it time, she said, she’ll be fine.

The doctor put a drip in. Just to keep her body going, to give her more time.

“Has anyone ever done this before?” I demanded. “Has anyone ever done this and come back?”

Their eyes slid away from mine.

Sophie offered to help me move her to the spare

room, so I could sleep in my own bed. But if I move her, she won’t know where to come back to, will she? She’ll be lost. I can’t lose her.

I stopped answering the phone on Monday. Someone came round on Tuesday, but the doorbell stopped ringing after five minutes or so. My boss thinks I’ve got the flu. It might even be true. I keep shivering, even though I turned the heating up.

There was a spider this morning, spinning its web between Rachel’s shoulder and her ear. I sat by the bed and watched it for hours. After a while it felt like it was spinning the web on me, too, tickling at my ear. I kept checking, but there was nothing there.

The spider was gone by the evening, but Rachel still wasn’t back.

I took the drip out two days ago. Sophie said there’s still a connection with the body. That time with the cat, I shook her and she felt it. She came back to me. I shook her and shook her this time, I shook her and shook her and she didn’t come back, but maybe she needs more than that, this time. Maybe she needs something that she’ll feel more strongly, wherever she is.

It’s dark now, and I’ve turned the lights off. I can hear, I think I can hear, skitterings in the corners. Maybe she went back to visit the cockroaches. Maybe it was ants this time. Maybe it really was that spider and she just wasn’t quite ready to come back to me then, but she will be now.

I rest my head on her chest — it’s not her, but it will be again, it will be her — and I stare into the blackness moving in the corners of the room. I think her breathing’s shallower now. That’s good. She just needs her body to pull her back harder, that’s all. I close my eyes and listen to the noises.

When I wake up tomorrow she’ll be back.



Skitterings in Corners © 2012 Juliet Kemp
Tarakan © Svetlana Sukhurova



Drift

by Amanda C. Davis
Illustration by Natasha T-Z. P.

“The snow is made of bugs,” said Caden.

I leaned against the kitchen counter beside my firstborn, the kindergarten king, who was sleepily trying to put peanut-butter crackers into his mouth and mostly missing. He watched the window like he listened to lullabies. The heat of the kitchen turned his cheeks red and made his eyelids droop. My unpredictable angel.

“Who told you that?” I asked.

“I saw it.” He put a cracker up to my face and I took a messy bite. “Little white bugs.”

I wiped off my face on my wrist. I would smell like snack time all day. But so what? At that moment I wanted nothing more than to eat peanut butter in a warm kitchen with a little boy who thought that snow was made of bugs.

“Those are called snowflakes,” I said. “Like you made in class. Remember?”

He grew thoughtful. “I did mine wrong,” he confessed at last. “Mrs. Feaster hung them all up on the wall anyway. Even Martin’s and he didn’t listen to the directions. So his is in half.” He flapped his hands to signify two halves of a snowflake forever divided by a kindergartener who couldn’t pay attention.

“Did you do it wrong like Martin?”

“No.” Tones of scandal and scorn.

“Maybe Mrs. Feaster will let you try again.”

“No, we have to make snowmen now.”

“Oh, okay, snowmen. That sounds like fun.”

I put my arm around his shoulders and he let me, which was no longer a guarantee. The curve of his head burrowed into my side, soft and insistent, an echo of our union before birth. Now there was peanut butter

on my shirt and I couldn’t care less. The cold outside brought us closer inside. The snow lulled us to love.

“Are snowmen made of bugs?” he said.

I held him tighter. “You tell me.”

“I hope not.”

He sat still for almost a minute before he squeezed out of my arms and ran away.



Mrs. Feaster called the next day, before the three of us were quite finished eating dinner. She had the calm, cheery voice of a teacher of the young, and she kept it up even as she was telling me there had been “an incident in the classroom” and she “thought I should be informed.”

“Of course,” I said, ducking behind a corner so that, if necessary, I could become furious in private. “What happened?”

“Caden went to the cork board and started drawing on other children’s snowflakes,” she said. “I spoke with him about only touching his own things, but I thought you might want to reinforce the lesson at home.”

I felt embarrassed, partly because I had birthed a vandal, partly because I had tried something similar with paper pilgrim hats when I was five and still remembered the shame. “I’m glad you told me. I’m so sorry—”

“No permanent damage,” she said cheerfully. “We flipped them around and they were as good as new. Thanks for your cooperation. Caden’s a joy. He’s never done anything destructive like this before.”

I swore on my honor that he never would again, and returned to the table.

He looked guilty. He knew I knew. "That was Mrs. Feaster," I told my husband Bryant: a roundabout way of telling Caden.

"What did she want?" said Bryant. He directed the question to me but watched our son the graffitist while he said it.

I sprung the trap. "Caden? Do you know why she called me?"

He frowned deeply at the table and whispered, "I got in trouble."

"Oh yeah?" Bryant, like Mrs. Feaster, had the superpower of keeping his voice light and friendly no matter what he was saying. I did not. "For what?"

"For fixing the snowflakes."

Bryant's eyebrows floated higher. "'Fixing' them?"

He nodded. "They did it wrong."

I had to jump in: "You told me only Martin did it wrong."

He wagged his head in a dogged 'no'. "Everybody did it wrong. They didn't have any eyes."

They didn't have any eyes? Our conversation from the previous afternoon came back to my mind. "Caden told me yesterday that he thought that snowflakes looked like bugs," I said to Bryant, who bit back a laugh. "Is that what you were doing, Caden? Drawing on eyes so they looked more like bugs?"

"Uh-huh."

I wasn't sure what part of his thinking to correct first, so I chose science. "Honey, snowflakes don't have eyes. They just look like bugs because they're small and have little branches that look like legs. Everyone made them just fine." On to the ethics. "You can't draw on other people's snowflakes, even if you think they made them wrong, because they don't belong to you. You can only draw on yours. Nobody else's."

The next day, he brought home his snowflake, crayoned on both sides with eyes and antennae and little claws on the end of each branch, and proudly told me he didn't fix anyone else's this time, just his own. I asked whether everyone had brought home their snowflakes. He ran off without answering. I never found out whether the snowflakes had been sent home

to make way for snowmen, or whether Mrs. Feaster found his toothed, taloned snow-bug grotesque amid the pure white paper snow.



He came in from the Saturday snow as quickly as he had gone out into it. What I could see of his face past the snow suit was red.

"The snow bugs bit me," he said, and burst into tears.

I dropped to my knees. Two stiff little marshmallow-arms tried to hug me; the clammy, snotty face pressed into my neck. I knelt in the melting snow and said "Shhhh" until my clothes were soaked. "It's okay, it's okay. It's not bugs, honey, you're just cold. Snowflakes are made of ice. Sometimes they hurt." That didn't seem to comfort him, so I went back to "Shhhh."

When our body temperatures equalized he pulled away. He still had a blush of red across his nose and both cheeks. I took a closer look. What I had taken for chilly skin was a rash of tiny pink bumps, spaced like stars on his face. I extracted him from the snow suit. He had more where his right mitten met his sleeve.

"What were you doing?" I said carefully, expecting to hear about neighborhood pets or winter-stripped bushes.

"I was outside," he said. His lips trembled again. "I said no."

"No what?"

"I don't want to go with them, Mommy."

I don't want to go with them.

Fear froze my chest like the wet snow never could. I had been watching through the window. We lived on a quiet street. But had I turned away at the wrong moment? Had someone slipped into our yard just quickly enough to ask of Caden a terrifying favor? How close had we come to the worst day of our lives?

We did not go back outside. The falling snow made a curtain between us and the world.



By the time Bryant came home, the tiny bumps

on Caden's face had vanished. My fears had not. The twin panaceas of hot chocolate and cartoons calmed him but were less effective on me. Caden wouldn't give me a straight answer about who had asked him to come with them, so I took Bryant aside to explain the situation and then sent in Daddy. He returned looking puzzled.

"He said the snow bugs wanted him to come with them."

I slumped. "He came in with some kind of rash on his face," I said. "He thought the snow bugs bit him. Maybe he put the two things together in his mind."

"Maybe," said Bryant. He took off his tie, slung it across a chair. "Look, he's fine. He's here. I'll call a couple of the neighbors, see if anyone saw anything. *Snow bugs*," he added, with an aren't-we-adults look. "Maybe he made it all up."

"You didn't see him crying," I said. But as the scents of dinner filled the house and Caden's laughter grew in gales under Bryant's watch, I came to believe Caden must have invented the situation — or at least, escalated it from something benign.

He must have.

The alternative was unbearable.



Caden refused to go to church.

"Come on, buddy, you love Mr. Ai's class," Bryant said, when Caden announced this at breakfast.

"I am not going," said the apple of my eye.

"Oh, yes you are," I lovingly rejoined.

"NO."

Bryant, the bargainer, said, "Why not?"

"I don't wanna go outside." Petulance slurred his words. "It's snowing."

Bryant and I exchanged a look. "Maybe we could skip once," he said to me, in a soft adult voice meant to bounce past Caden. "In the light of, you know, yesterday."

I shook my head and brought the volume of the conversation back to Caden level. "In this house," I said, "we go to church or we are *carried* to church."

"Just like the cavemen did," said Bryant, with a wink.

"You're not helping," I informed him.

"I don't want to go to church and YOU CAN'T MAKE ME," said Caden, before he wiggled off his chair and ran upstairs with shirttails flying.

He proved to be incorrect on that point. But he shouted "NO" the entire trip, and although he settled down immediately upon being dropped in the vestry, I whispered an apology to Bryant during the sermon. The looks we would have gotten for skipping church were nothing compared to the ones he got for showing up with a screaming child across his shoulder.



During the walk home, clusters of bumps appeared on Caden's hands and face. I made Bryant examine them while I made a blitzkrieg search of the Internet. The Internet, according to its ways, turned up everything from Lyme disease to an allergy to water.

("That's not possible," said Bryant. I said, "It is, there's a girl in England," and even when I showed him the news article he insisted it was faked.)

The bumps faded before we decided whether to take Caden to the emergency room or not. He hunched on the sofa with a read-along book and a mask of bitter resignation. My heart went out to him. What a thing it is, to be five years old: to be so small that you can be carried where you do not want to go, to be so tender that snowflakes bite like insects. He had entrusted his fears to his mother and I had dismissed them.

What a betrayal.

I crouched before the sofa so that his feet were level with my face. "Hey," I said. "Why don't we go play outside?"

His eyes grew enormous. "No no no. It's snowing."

"I know," I said, "the snow bugs." That caught his attention. "Snow can be a little scary, can't it? But I bet you and me can make it okay."

"Daddy too?"

I smiled. "Why don't you go ask him?"

He leapt to the floor and dashed to the kitchen.

I followed to listen in, and to insinuate silently that Bryant would say yes if he knew what was good for him. He earned his good-husband badge. While Caden was scrambling to get his snow gear, he slid up to me and said, in that adult undertone, “Are you sure about this? Don’t you think something outside might’ve caused those bumps?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But if it happens again we’ll know exactly what he got into. We can get him into the car right away. This is bigger than bumps.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Our kid’s afraid of snow, and it’s only November.”

Bless him, he understood. “I have a feeling the rash might be psychosomatic,” I said. “And I have a feeling that mom and dad might be able to chase away the snow bugs.”

I kissed him for luck. Then Caden stomped in singing “PUT ON YOUR BOOTS, PUT ON YOUR BOOTS” in a bellow, wearing his own boots on his hands, and we began the long, hilarious ritual of suiting up to face the snow. Usually, it reminded me of harried NASA scientists packing an eager astronaut into his equipment. Today it felt more like dressing for war.

The snow fell in clumps rather than flakes: a chilled manna. Caden clung to our hands. We stood under the porch roof for a moment, sizing things up, warriors evaluating the whites of our enemies’ eyes; then Bryant and I nodded at each other, and we stepped as a unified front line into the snowy yard.

Caden’s feet sank into the snow to the ankle. He tightened his hold on us. I watched his face; he seemed to be holding his breath. With great reluctance, he turned his cherubic face up and up until it tilted toward the sky. Clustered snowflakes found his eyelashes, his lips. I held my breath too.

My son’s snow-frosted lips parted. “They’re not biting me.” He beamed up at me, radiating relief and joy. “They’re not biting me!” He roped his arms around my leg. “Mommy, it’s okay!” Then he bounded away in big clumsy giant-steps through the snow.

Bryant and I mirrored each other’s open-mouthed bemusement. “It’s okay,” he repeated, eyebrows scrunched.

I sagged. “It’s okay.”

A badly-packed snowball glanced off my arm. The culprit put his mittens over his face and giggled insanely. He launched himself to the ground to gather more anti-mother missiles.

I screamed because that’s what he wanted, and crouched to make my own snowballs. Bryant got there faster, scooping up ammunition one-handed, and retaliated. Caden shrieked with laughter and tossed out an armful of snow, two-handed, back at him. My boys: fully devoted to mutually assured destruction.

I closed my eyes and let the cold crystals come to rest like butterflies on my upturned face. Everything felt warm. This was wonder. This was joy.

He’s going to smack me in the face with a snowball while I’m not looking, I thought. He’ll play a prank on his mom, thoughtless and heartless, and I’ll love it — because he loves me so much that he wants to make me laugh, and he knows I love him so much he can get away with it. I’ll take a snowball to the face for you, Caden. Or a fist or a bullet. No prerequisites at all.

The snowball did not come.

Bryant touched my arm; through his glove and my coat I felt only the vague warm pressure. “Honey, did you see—?”

I opened my eyes. “What, see what?”

“See where Caden went.”

My stomach began to sink like boots in deep snow, like stones in water. “Isn’t he just—” I gestured across the yard. His imprint remained where he had stood: my unpredictable snow-angel. Nothing more.

“Caden?” Bryant raised his voice, and deepened it at the same time: an injection of fatherly authority. I followed:

“Caden, come out now.”

Silence.

Silence and snow.

“Caden!” Something cluttered my throat — I tried to shout past it, but squeaked instead. “Bryant, follow his tracks.”

“There are no tracks.” He was grave and detached, all business. I hated him suddenly. “Caden—? Look, only ones leading here. Not away.”

“Then he went back the same—”

“I’m going around the back,” he said. I saw then how white his face had grown, white from brow to chin, with red spots of cold on either cheek. His dark eyes swam deep beneath the white brow. “Stay here.”

The snow fell harder. Manna turned to ice. My husband strode through the unbroken snow, leaving a man-sized trail where there was no trail the size of a little boy. I was alone.

I went to the last imprint of my son. “Ca—”

The name dried to a rasp in my mouth. The falling snow blinded me, weighed me down. Every flake stung. I swatted at the air with my bare hand, trying to get them away from my face, but they swarmed down my arm, piling into dunes on my fingers, icy and hard. My hand began to ache.

I stared at the space between my fingers. Tiny bumps rose in the soft wells of skin.

I don’t want to go with them.

It’s made of bugs.

“It’s made of bugs,” I whispered. I stared at my hands. The stinging Braille rash rose before my eyes. “Bryant, it’s made of bugs. Bryant, *the snow is made of bugs.*” I heard him call back to me, but he sounded very, very far away. The noise and pain increased together. Snowflakes grew fingers, and fingers grew talons, and their pinprick faces leered as they hurled past my eyes. “Bryant, they took him, they took him! It’s made of bugs! The snow is made of bugs!”

I could not hear his answer over my screams. I stared into the falling white sky, a soft ceiling crashing down to smother me, and the bugs swirled and laughed and showed their black crayon teeth, and the wind pushed drifts into Caden’s tracks until they filled with laughing snow bugs — and vanished.

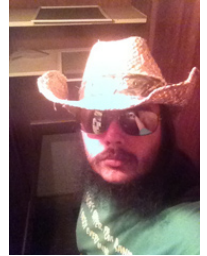


Contributors

Eleanor Leonne Bennett is a 16 year old internationally award winning photographer and artist who has won first places with National Geographic, The World Photography Organisation, Nature's Best Photography, Papworth Trust, Mencap, The Woodland trust and Postal Heritage. Her photography has been published in *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *BBC News Website* and on the cover of books and magazines in the United states and Canada. Her art is globally exhibited, having shown work in London, Paris, Indonesia, Los Angeles, Florida, Washington, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada, Spain, Germany, Japan, Australia and The Environmental Photographer of the year Exhibition (2011) amongst many other locations. She was also the only person from the UK to have her work displayed in the National Geographic and Airbus run See The Bigger Picture global exhibition tour with the United Nations International Year Of Biodiversity 2010.

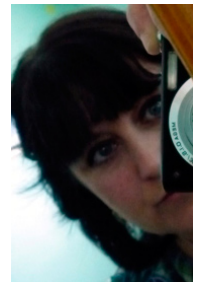


Kyle Conway lives in Chippewa Falls, WI with his dog (Pig), cats (Mama and Goobert), and rabbit (The Baron). He enjoys horror literature and movies. His favorite entomological order is Diptera. His work can be seen at <http://plaguejester.deviantart.com/gallery>



Amanda C. Davis is a combustion engineer who loves baking, gardening, and gory low-budget slasher films. Her short fiction has appeared in *Redstone Science Fiction*, *Orson Scott Card's InterGalactic Medicine Show*, and others. You can follow her on Twitter (@davisac1) or read more of her work at <http://www.amandacdavis.com>

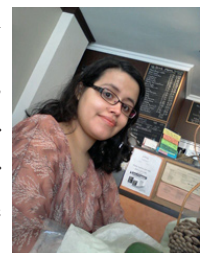
Cate Gardner is a British horror and fantastical author with over a hundred stories published. Several of those stories appear in her collection, *Strange Men in Pinstripe Suits*. She is also the author of two novellas: *Theatre of Curious Acts* (Hadley Rille Books) and *Barbed Wire Hearts* (Delirium Books). You can find her on the web at www.categardner.net.



Juliet Kemp lives in London and writes things down a lot. She has had previous stories published in the anthology *Hellebore and Rue* and in *Eclectic Flash*, and has stories forthcoming in two anthologies from Obverse Books this year. She has a website at <http://julietkemp.com> where she talks about plants, building things out of pallets, and anything else that catches her interest.

J. M. McDermott is the author of critically-acclaimed novels LAST DRAGON, NEVER KNEW ANOTHER, and MAZE. His short fiction has appeared in *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Weird Tales*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and more. He is an MFA-candidate at the University of Southern Maine. He lives in Atlanta, in a maze of bookshelves, empty coffee cups, and crazy schemes.

Mexican by birth, Canadian by inclination, **Silvia Moreno-Garcia** lives in beautiful British Columbia with her family and two cats. Her short stories have appeared in places such as *Fantasy Magazine*, *The Book of Cthulhu*, *Imaginarium 2012: The Best Canadian Speculative Writing* and *Shine: An Anthology of Optimistic Science Fiction*. In 2011, Silvia won the Carter V. Cooper Memorial Prize (in the Emerging Writer category). She has also been a finalist for the Manchester Fiction Prize. Her first collection of stories, *Shedding Her Own Skin*, will be published next year.



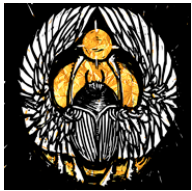
Natasha T-Z. P. is a 22 year old artist and has been taking photos as a hobby for about 7 years. She has had no special training but observes everything around her from life to photos. This is how she learns. <http://aziot.deviantart.com/gallery/> is her main gallery.

Steven L. Peck is an evolutionary ecologist who teaches History and Philosophy of Science and Bioethics at Brigham Young University. He studies the ecology of tsetse flies in Senegal. His scientific work appears in *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*, *American Entomologist*, and many others, and he has edited a volume on environmental stewardship.

His novels include *The Scholar of Moab* (Torrey House Press) -- a finalist for the Montaigne Medal -- and *A Short Stay in Hell* (Strange Violins Editions). His young adult fantasy, *The Rifts of Rime* (Cedar Fort Press), will be out in June 2012. He has also published a number of award-winning science fiction short stories and poems. Last year, he was nominated for the 2011 Science Fiction Poetry Association's Rhysling Award.



Conor Powers-Smith was born in Patterson, New Jersey, and grew up in New Jersey and Ireland. He currently lives on Cape Cod, where he's a reporter. His stories have appeared in *Abyss & Apex* and *Comets and Criminals*.



Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein is an Oregonian designer and printmaker from Hawai'i who uses the ancient craft of woodcutting to explore giant robots, things with claws, and the boundaries of the human.

Linda Saboe is an artist, grassroots herbalist and nature-lover. When she is not making colorful messes with paints and clay, she volunteers her time feeding and caring for baby and/or injured raccoons, skunks, squirrels and other critters. Although she rarely feeds insects, she does like them and encourages them in all their endeavors. She resides in the suburbs of Philadelphia with her husband, Bernie Mojzes and their dog, parrot, iguana, and a couple of cats that suddenly appeared and have decided to stay. To see more of Linda's work, please visit www.croneswood.com.



Mariusz Sergiejew is a graphic designer, illustrator, photographer, and concept artist currently living in Cracow, Poland.

His work draws on the dark places, incorporating the mechanical and industrial into the mood, and finding inspiration in the works of H.R. Giger, William Gibson, and H.P. Lovecraft. While he enjoys creating monsters, robots, dark-creatures, and other unusual creatures, he likes to experiment in all forms of designs. His photography evokes the ghosts of forgotten places. To see more of his work, visit <http://noistromo.com/> and his blog at <http://holographic9.blogspot.com/>

Svetlana Sukhorukova was born in rainy Saint-Petersburg in the north of Russia. She studies design and architecture at the Saint Petersburg State University of Technology and Design. "Design is taking the main part of my time and my thoughts now. But sometimes there is Something, coming to me and through me, and I take my paints or camera, and just immerse in it." To see more of her work, visit her gallery at <http://slair-handry.deviantart.com/>.





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