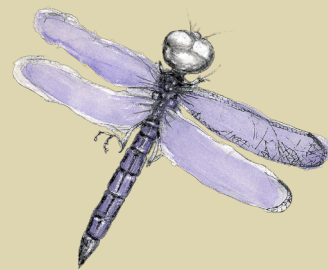
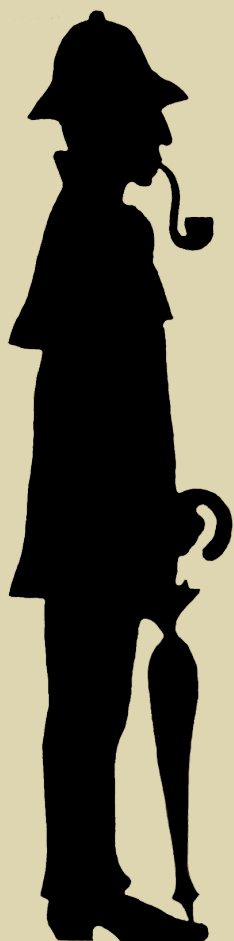


Sir Reginald F. Grump XXIII presents...



THE JOURNAL OF UNLIKELY ENTOMOLOGY

Issue 5 - May 2013



With Stories by
Lew Andrada, Nicola Belte, Nicole Cipri, Michelle Ann King,
Jesse William Olson, Cat Rambo, and Pam L. Wallace

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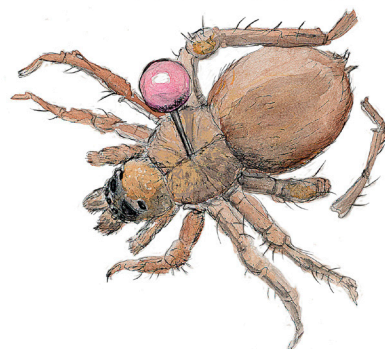
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Editors' Note

Hello and welcome, Good Readers. We at the esteemed (by some) Journal of Unlikely Entomology are delighted to be celebrating the start of our third year in existence. As always, we thank you, Dear Readers, for joining us on this journey. After all, where would our publication be without dedicated eyes to consume it? We are also immensely grateful to the authors and artists whose works have graced our pages over the years, and for all those who have sent work our way. We hope you will all join us in raising a glass to this momentous occasion. The first (entirely virtual) round is on us.

Within the digital pages of Issue 5 (which is, by some counts, our 7th issue), you will find stories of struggle and resistance – whether it be the mysterious cosmic strivings between spiders and centipedes, the struggle against loss and personal demons, individuals standing up to a government, or standing up to their family members, these are all stories of people (and insects) who fight for what they believe in.

Thank you once again for joining us, and we hope you will enjoy these tales of struggle on scales both large and small.





Ecdysis

by Nicole Cipri

Illustration by Sarah Emerson

I was in the orchard when the siren went off, ripping through the clear air of the afternoon. I was dozing underneath one of the trees and heard it first as an insect whine in my dream. Then I recognized it for what it was, and startled myself awake.

I'd been in the orchard for hours, safe in the knowledge that my uncle and the farmhands would be haying in the eastern fields. There was a pile of apple and pear cores on the ground below me. I'd been late to breakfast that morning, and Uncle Mo had said that the early bird got the worm, but the late one ate air. His voice was rough and sharp in the way he had, like a rusty scythe. I'd snagged the uneaten toast crusts from my cousin's plate and slipped out the back door.

I looked up, but the sky was clear of clouds. It was a beautiful day, with a cool breeze shaking the branches of the trees, so it couldn't have been a tornado warning. I felt a little thrill, uncomfortable and prickly, wondering if maybe a swarm had been sighted — it was the season for them, after all, and they'd hit a town to the southwest of us only last month — but my mind snapped shut on the thought. Better not to think such things. It was probably just a drill, I told myself. Nothing more. Nothing ever happened around here.

I'd lived on my uncle's farm since my mother died. It was beautiful here, but lonely, too, the kind of loneliness that sat heavy in your stomach and devoured itself. I never had to wonder why my mother

chose to leave the family farm; I dreamed of the day I'd be able to break free like she had, go to a city and be swallowed up in noise and light and other people.

The siren went on wailing, so I got up, gathering the discarded cores and tossing them over the fence into the neighbor's pasture as I went. The siren's cry was pitched high and panicky, sweeping through the air. It sounded like the sustained yowl my cat Violet made when a dog cornered her. I screamed like that once, last year, when Uncle Mo twisted my wrist until I felt something give. That was before I'd gotten better at hiding, at disappearing from plain sight into corners and tree tops and the crawl space beneath the cellar stairs.

I snuck up to the house from the back, tiptoeing when I heard voices. Uncle Mo and the farmhands — older men with rough hands who occasionally followed me with their eyes, but wouldn't speak to me if Uncle Mo was in earshot — were on the front porch. They must have taken a lunch break. The thought made me hungry again, or rather, made me notice I was still hungry from the morning. Of course, I was always hungry: I'd shot up two-and-a-half inches since spring, and it felt like I'd grown a second stomach along with it.

A truck roared up to the front of the house while I was still pondering whether I could sneak inside and grab some leftovers. I recognized it as Frank's by

the sound of its engine. He slammed on the brakes, skidding on the gravel drive, which was unusual. My cousin loved that truck with all the ardor a sixteen-year-old boy could muster up, and treated it like others might treat a skittish horse, with no sudden moves. I peered around the side of the house, through the latticework underneath the front porch.

Frank threw open the door and yelled, "They're coming! The locusts!"

The siren's whine was his only answer at first. Then one of the men said, so low I could barely hear it, "Jesus, God, no."

I felt a rush of cold that went straight from my spine to my fingertips, and thought back to last Sunday, when the pastor had chosen the locusts as the topic of his sermon. The plague of mouths and wings, he called it. The reflection of our own greed, to remind us who the Earth really belonged to, that what we thought of as ours were just things loaned to us by the grace of God.

I had heard other stories too. Frank had shown me the photos from the newspapers last month, the empty skins that looked like sacks of wet silk lying on the barren ground. Some people, instead of being devoured by the swarm, were transformed by it, discarding their skins and humanity like a suit that had grown too tight. It was how the swarm sustained its catastrophic numbers despite the culls and hunts.

On the lawn, Frank was panting for breath, as if he'd run all the way from town instead of driving. Maybe he was winded by the news, by the disaster that was flying towards us on the wind. "The swarm is heading from the northeast," he said between gasps of air. "They'll be here in the hour, unless the wind shifts."

The farmhands shot each other and Uncle Mo worried looks; the haying wasn't even half done, and the orchards were still full of fruit, waiting to be picked.

God's plague of mouths and wings, and our farm was a feast set out for them, ready and ripe to be taken. I looked up at the sky, trying to catch a glimpse of either God or His plague, but it was still business as usual up there, the blues and golds of a late summer afternoon.

Remember, the pastor had said last Sunday. We all enter Paradise with empty hands.

"We gotta go," one of the farmhands said. I didn't know his name, or any of their names. I kept clear of them as much as I could, just like I kept clear of everyone else.

"Don't be an idiot," Uncle Mo said sharply. "They'll be here before you could get halfway home."

"My family—" the man said.

"Trust in God," Mo replied. "Trust Him to keep them safe. In the meantime, grab all the food and feed you can carry and get to the tornado shelter. Anything you want kept. God help us, it'll probably be lost otherwise."

Anything I wanted to keep was already hidden deep in the crawl space underneath the cellar stairs, one of my favorite places to hide: it was dank and coffin-sized, but too small for my uncle or any of the other men on the farm to get into. I had a curl of my mother's hair hidden in an old cigar box in there, a photo of my father, the last of my baby teeth that had fallen out, and the shucked-off skin of a cicada I'd found in the orchard.

Then I remembered Violet and her kittens. If there were anything worth saving on this farm, it was them, Violet and her quiet purr and green eyes, the kittens with their warm, taut bellies and soft fur. Violet had been a stray that had wandered onto the farm around the same time I had, not much more than a kitten herself. I'd wanted her as a pet, but Uncle Mo was adamant that all animals belonged outside, and said he'd drown her if he ever saw a cat hair on my bed.

I'd seen pictures of what the locusts left when they swept through a town or a farm. Brown dirt, broken glass, and a jumble of picked-over bones. I couldn't let that happen to Violet.

"What about Libby?" I heard Frank say to his father.

Uncle Mo spat. "Hell," he said, and that was all.

I bumped into Frank as he dashed around to my side of the house. He was almost a hundred pounds heavier than me, and I went sprawling on the ground. He hauled me up by my overalls. "Damn it, Libby,"

he hissed, quiet. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? Help me get the food from the kitchen.”

“I’m gonna grab Violet and her kittens,” I told him, pushing his hands away from my shoulders.

“Are you crazy? We’re about to lose everything and you wanna save a cat?”

I pulled away from him. “You’re gonna be sorry when we’re all stuck in that shelter and the rats start coming out.”

“There ain’t rats,” Frank said. But he wasn’t sure. He didn’t know where I hid when I went away, he just marked my absences by the rages they caused in his father.

“Are so,” I answered. “Trust me. Mice, too.”

Frank looked back at the sky, either checking for the swarm, or just as an excuse not to look at me, at the green-yellow bruise his father had left on my cheek the weekend before.

She’s clumsy, bruises easy, my uncle told anyone that asked. It was true. I wished I had tougher skin, that he couldn’t mark me, that my mother hadn’t died and left me in his care, but all those wishes amounted to less than nothing. I was still here, still soft-skinned and weak, loneliness eating away at me. There were days where I felt like an unexploded bomb was buried just beneath my breast bone, fragile as an empty egg shell, waiting for something to hit it just right and detonate.

“All right,” Frank said. “But be quick. If you’re still looking when they come—”

“I know,” I said.

“A cat ain’t worth it. You know what they can do,” he said, staring down at me. “This ain’t a false alarm. It’s the fist of God coming down on us. Like He did to Pharaoh, only worse.”

“I know,” I said, impatient.

He looked like he wanted to say something else, something meaningful, but all he said was, “Be careful.”

“I *know*,” I said again, and ran. The siren hurried me on to the barn, up the ladder to the hayloft.

“Violet,” I called, hoping that she was napping

up here and not in some other patch of sun. There was a little whimper of noise from one of the kittens, then Violet’s head popping up from the hay. She yawned and stretched, undisturbed by either the siren or my sudden appearance.

I pulled off my sweater and laid it down next to her three kittens. They’d had their eyes open for a week or two, but were still wobbly on their feet. She’d had them late in the year, and two had died already. I’d buried them in the orchard, beneath the trees where I’d dreamed away most of the summer, crying the whole time.

I picked them up, putting them in my sweater, and Violet came over to investigate what I was doing, making concerned noises deep in her throat.

“I know,” I said. “Trust me, this is better than—”

I cut myself off. I didn’t want to put it into words, the pictures I’d seen.

The three kittens blinked and sniffed at my sweater as I placed them there, confused but placid. I tied them up in a bundle. Violet wasn’t particularly pleased to see her kittens disappear in the folds of wool, but I didn’t know how else to get them all back down to the ground. She followed me down the ladder, complaints getting louder. She kept getting around my feet, trying to trip me up as I ran back to the house, to the coffin-sized crawl space beneath the cellar stairs.

I was so focused on getting back to my hiding spot that I didn’t see him in the cellar, hidden in a shadowy corner. I didn’t know he was there at all until I smelled the hay dust and diesel on his jacket, felt him looming up behind me.

“The *hell* are you doing, Libby?” Uncle Mo said. He grabbed my shoulder, fingers digging in, and I couldn’t help it, I dropped my bundled up sweater with the kittens tucked inside. There were a few grunts, and Violet immediately pounced on the sweater and pushed it open, meowing loudly.

I couldn’t speak. I almost never could to him. His size and his anger just dwarfed me, seized my throat up in a vice, made me small and weak. *Violet*, I thought, maybe even mouthed the name. *Her kittens. Safe.*

“God help me,” Mo hissed. “I do not have the time or patience for this.”

He started to drag me away, back up the stairs. I found my voice then. “No,” I said. “No, please.”

When he didn’t listen, I started shrieking it. *Please. No. Please.* They were the only two words I could ever summon when he had me.

Violet was crouched over her kittens, tail twitching, eyes watching us. Would she know what was happening? When the locusts came into the house and then the cellar? Would she fight them, scratch them, as they grabbed her and her kittens, devouring them all? Would they even give her the chance to fight?

I struggled, like I hadn’t ever before. All I could think of was the locusts grabbing up Violet, pulling her apart with their claws, those nightmarish mouths, killing the only friend I had on the farm.

Maybe he was so distracted by the imminent disaster that was flying towards us, that he wasn’t holding me so hard. Maybe my fear gave me strength. Either way, I tore out of his grasp, scooping the kittens up and shoving them into the crawl space. Violet darted in after them.

Uncle Mo’s fist connected with the side of my face, knocking me into the wall. I shook my head and tried to wriggle into my hiding spot, but he caught me by the leg and dragged me back out. I kicked out at him, purely by instinct, and connected with something soft. He grunted and staggered back, and I ran, never looking back to see if he was chasing me, looking only at what was right in front of me. The top of the stairs. The kitchen door. The back yard. The dirt road. And then I was back in the orchard, running through the rows of trees. There wasn’t anything in me but the instinct to run, and I forgot all about the cellar and Violet and the swarm—

Until I heard the buzzing of wings.

I stopped so suddenly that I tripped, rocks biting into my palms as I hit the ground. I lay there stunned for a moment, as the swarm landed on the grass around me, not so much like the fist of God, but like dancers. Some touched down lightly, on their toes, wings barely twitching. Others — the younger ones, the newly-turned that still wore scraps of clothing and their old skins — landed on their hands and knees, as hard as I just had.

The locusts still looked like people from the

back, skinny and hungry-looking, dirty and in need of a bath. You could ignore the deep cracks in their hard skin, where their skin folded over their wings, the way it shone opalescent in the light. Maybe it was an instinct to find the similarities and ignore the bits that were too strange, their too-long limbs set with too many joints, their fingers that ended in curved claws. Once they turned to look at you though — once you saw their opaque eyes and the monstrous things they had instead of mouths — you knew they weren’t human. They were locusts, they were hunger itself, with grasping hands and long, translucent wings.

I thought of my mother then, reminded of the way her face had sunk into itself, the sharp lines of her cheekbones. Cancer snuck into her like a fox getting into a hen house. All that was left by the end were bones and hair that had fallen out like feathers.

Nearby, an animal screamed. A dog barked frantically. The siren slowly lost its frantic pitch and eventually died down to nothing.

Run. The thought came to me in my mother’s voice. *You can still make it to the house.* Then I remembered Violet, still hidden away with her kittens. What if the swarm followed me in there? There were too many of them, and my legs felt like jelly. I’d never make it.

The dog’s barking cut off with a yelp. The only sounds now were the shiver of wings and the wet grind of mandibles chewing up the grass and leaves and apples.

They watched me, edging closer. I couldn’t move, not even to get away. My pants were wet, and for a second I wondered if I’d landed in a puddle, but then I caught the scent. I’d pissed myself without even noticing.

One approached me. Her eyes were amber, shining and faceted. I could see my reflection in them. All around her was a smell like tree pollen, something sweet and sticky and calming.

They know me, I thought. They recognize me. Like I recognized something in them, the hunger in their opaque eyes.

I’d been hungry, too. Not just from the missed meals when my uncle banished me from his dinner table, or the hours I’d spent hiding from him and his

rage. It was a hunger that grew during the long nights spent alone in my bedroom, listening to lonely sound of the wind; the nights where I would touch myself to keep from flying apart, feeling sick with shame when I did, but not knowing how else to keep that fragile-shelled bomb in my center from exploding.

There's a reason we call it fall, my mother told me once, during one of our infrequent visits back to the farm. We'd walked through the orchard, her arm over my shoulder, and she pointed at the limbs that were bowed under the weight of their fruit. Everything gets so ripe, she said, it can't stand to stay on the branch. All the fruit lets go of whatever was holding it back, and topples towards the earth.

The locust lay down next to me, and the skin on her back cracked apart. Her wings slowly rose over us, catching the light like iridescent glass. They were beautiful, the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I was no longer afraid.

I opened my arms, and the locust crawled closer to me, resting against my chest. She was small but dense, heavy against my bones, strong. She drew her legs over mine, caressed sharp fingers against my

cheek. Her smell surrounded us, sweet like grass, like the sun-soaked afternoon itself.

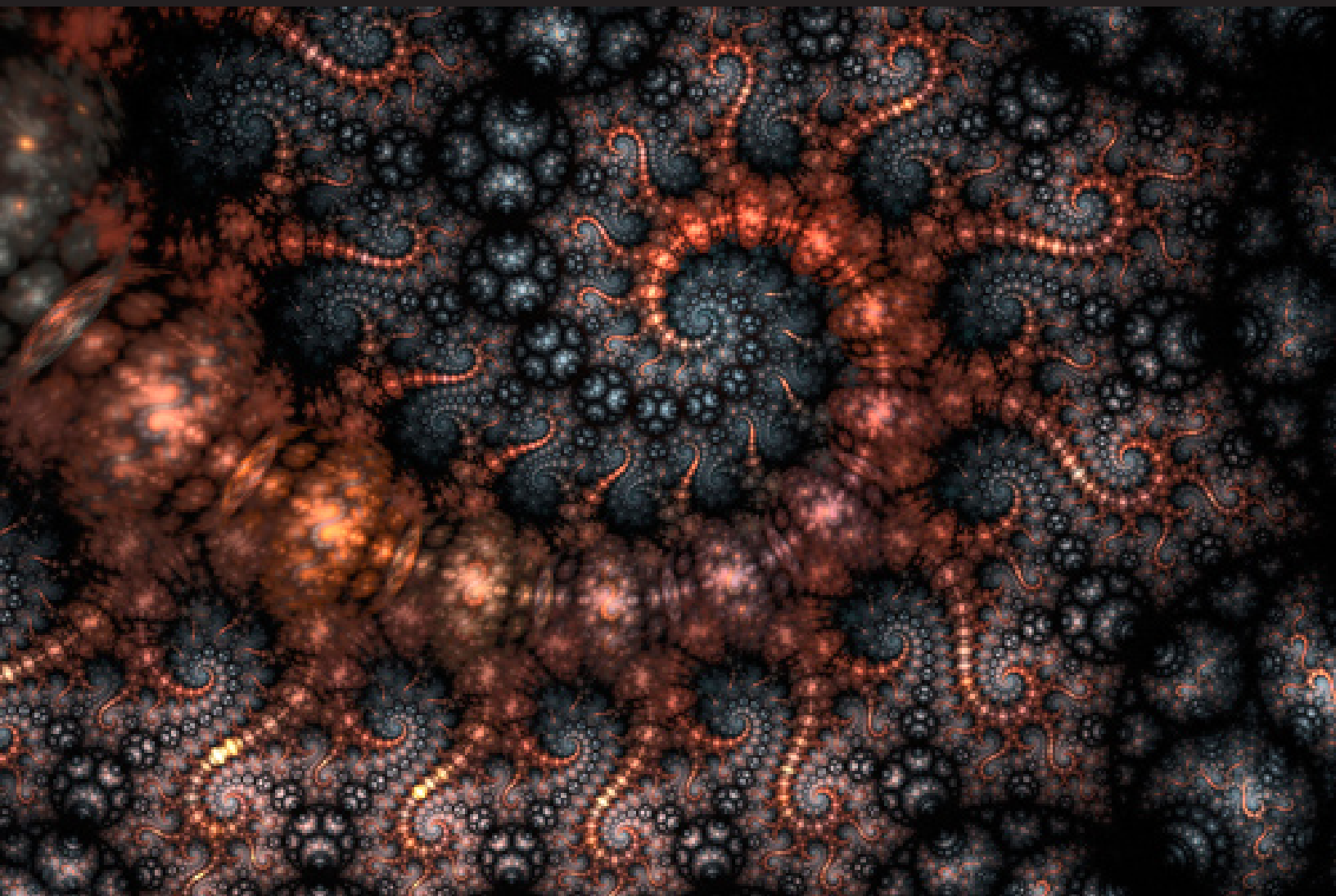
"Does it hurt?" I muttered.

Yes. It will hurt. I didn't know if it was my thought or the swarm's, carried into my mind on her scent and the thin chatter of wings. The lines between us were blurring, and for a moment, I fought it. I tried to remember: my name is Libby, I'm fourteen years old, I'm an orphan, I live with my uncle and cousin, my cat had kittens late in the summer. There are layers of bruises beneath my clothes. I am a fruit that fell too early, that was marked by the hard impact of the ground, by the hard impacts of my uncle's hands. There is something that is empty in my center, that feels fragile and fraught with loneliness....

But that was no longer true. Whatever was rotten in me before — the fear that had fermented in my gut — had been carved away, replaced with something denser, heavier.

My skin was a shroud, tightening up in the sun. It was too soft and bruised too easy, but now I knew something harder lay beneath. I shut my eyes, waiting for it to crack through and emerge into the light.





Spiders, Centipedes, & Holes

by Cat Rambo

Illustration by AkuraPare

If the spiders run faster than centipedes then black holes will turn white. The black holes, now white, may swallow both centipedes and spiders. Holes of any sort have little patience with insects. Holes of any sort have little patience with anything. They are rapacious entities, eager to swallow other things and make them into something else.

This is, in fact, why the spiders are running, in order to escape the holes. They don't have to run faster than the holes — just the centipedes. No one is quite sure why the centipedes are running or how they feel about any of this. Centipedes are morose and solitary creatures, and their thoughts on getting from Point B to Point A is anyone's guess.

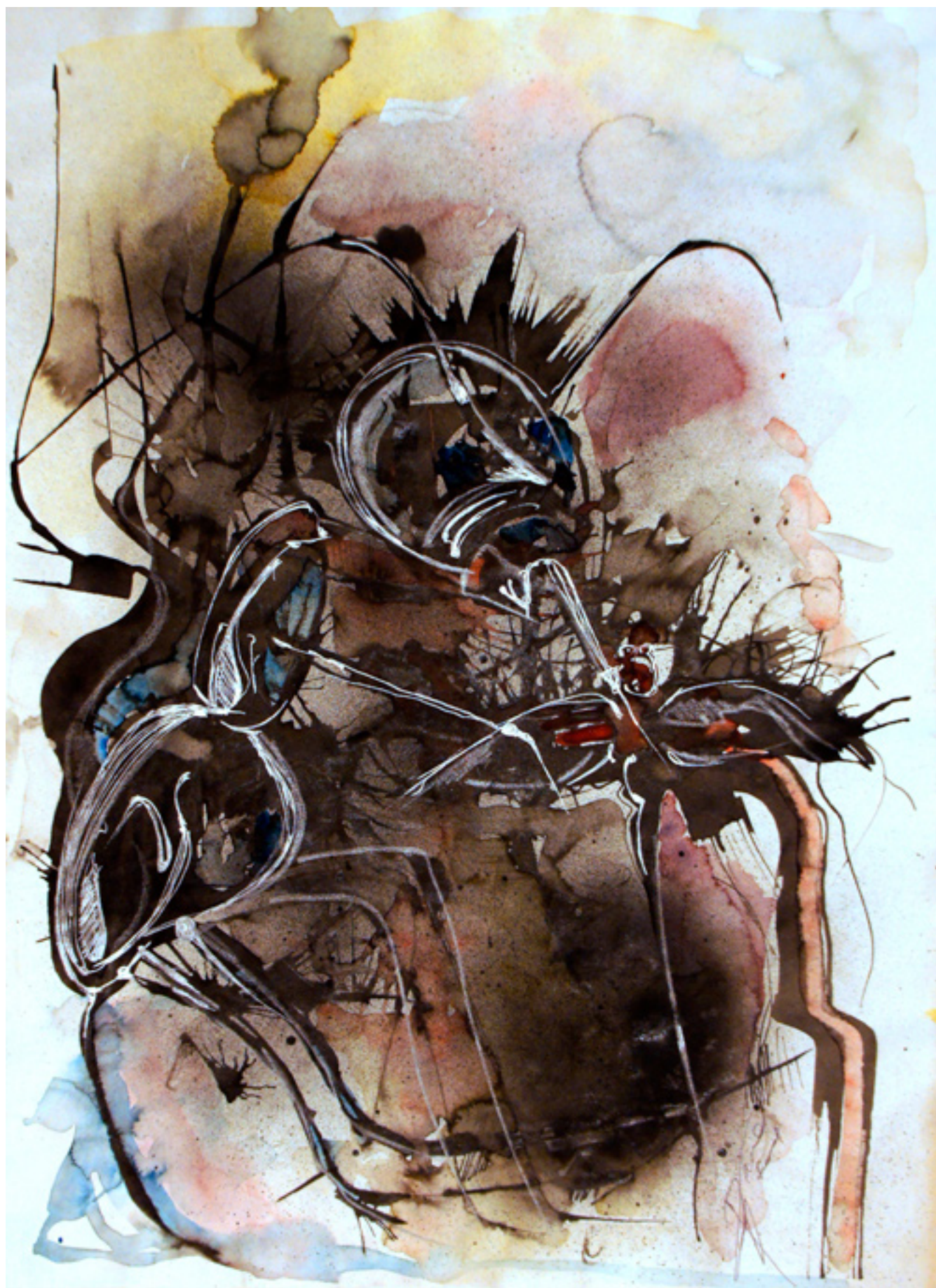
We do know this. Centipedes form letters as they writhe along in their journeys. Not all the letters of the alphabet, of course, but the curvy ones — C's and S's and sometimes the awkward contortion of a W. They spell words full of O's and U's but they cannot manage A's and E's. And so the language they write in (who they are writing to is unknown as well) is one full of those vowels, and sibilants, a soft whisper of s ending almost every word. What they say is enigmatic: directions for assembling five-legged tables or the names of chicken-chasing dogs.

The spiders think such linguistic efforts are common, lacking grace. They point out that language has been borrowed from humans, and that to return it, changed, altered, surgically manipulated is rude, like returning a neighbor's lawnmower after having painted it blue or removing the blades. You don't give something back after you've changed it. You give the people something new, and the spiders are pretty sure the centipedes are holding back, that they could be producing something of value to humanity, rather than meaningless, unassembled fragments that, like a glow in the dark kaleidoscope, form patterns dependent on proximity and angles.

The holes have no such concerns, no worries about ethics or etiquette. They just want to swallow something, and it doesn't matter what, whether it's a centipede or spider, or ball of pale blue glass dropped by some insect in its flight. What souvenirs can the holes collect and destroy? What meaning will be lost forever, before it can even be deciphered, before it has even been transcribed, changed from an accident of motion into meaning, into something from nothing, an alchemy that doesn't care whether the writer is insect or accident of something much like a hole, devoid of meaning, yet meaningfully empty.



Spiders, Centipedes, & Holes © 2013 Cat Rambo
Dragon Centipede © AkuraPare



The Space Between

by Lew Andrada

Illustration by Rasa Dilyte

Senith used his pincers to dig deep into the brown land. The damp, rich odor gave him a fleeting sense of home and his love, Noora. When he was a Soldier, his days overflowed with battle drills, meetings on strategy, and teaching young cadets about the art of war. However, all that stress would vanish, as soon as Noora welcomed him home with a playful tug on his antennae. She always smelled of mushrooms, spices, and the musk of plowing the fields all morning. Senith leaned back and scratched at his antennae. He smelled like cow dung.

Senith grasped the nearest Kamate seedling and placed it into the small hole he had dug. He handled the young plant with a delicate air, as if he were placing his own hatchling to slumber in a soft bed of powdery earth. Senith wondered how his family had been doing without him. Noora would keep the hatchlings under control, but he worried about their advancement. He hoped at least one of them would be chosen by the High Council to serve as a member of the Soldier caste and follow in his footsteps. That caste brought honor and wealth, unlike the Builders and Farmers.

Senith stared at the Kamate. The reversal of his situation made him miss home even more. He gently scooped dirt around the seedling, whose waxy green leaves glinted in the sunshine. At least he would be able to get a taste of home, spicy and sweet, once the fruit ripened.

“Captain?” Rozan tilted his head, and his mandibles twitched. “Is something wrong?”

Senith brushed manure off of the seedling’s leaves before looking up. “Everything’s fine. I was just thinking about Noora.”

“Ah.” Rozan turned his gaze downward and pawed at the dirt. “Her cooking?”

“No, this time it’s the way she smelled. Do you think that’s strange?”

Rozan traced concentric circles around the Kamate seedlings with his pincers. Senith could tell that the young B’latta was thinking of a careful response. “Sir, it’s perfectly normal to miss things like that.”

“There’s no need to be so formal, Rozan. Our time as Soldiers has come and gone. We’re equals now, so be honest with me. I won’t get angry if you think I’m crazy.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but you’re my commanding officer. In victory or defeat, I must treat you as such.” Rozan paused for a brief moment. “But I don’t think you’re crazy.” He sat back and stared at the geometric pattern he’d created in the dirt between them. The intricacy of the doodle told Senith that Rozan had a lot of things on his mind. “You know what I miss? Fertie. She’s my pet Nemoda. I used to love watching the way she would hop when I sang for her.”

“I didn’t know worms could hear.”

“They can’t. Fertie loved my singing anyway.”

Senith wrapped his legs around his body and released a laugh. He felt like a bottle of fizzy Kamate juice being uncorked for the first time. “That’s impressive. I’d like to listen to your gift of song sometime.”

Rozan’s antennae wiggled in a happy manner. “It would be my pleasure, Captain.” Rozan stood up

and stretched, his exoskeleton crackling as his joints loosened up. “Perhaps when it’s time for the harvest, I’ll have enough energy to sing a ballad about Soldiers and their adventures in—”

Angry shouting derailed the tranquil afternoon, as Nobu Kobayashi came chugging onto the field. The old man wore faded overalls and a yellow shirt that must have been a pristine white lifetimes ago. The clothes hung loose on his wiry frame. A bamboo sugegasa sat on his head, giving him the appearance of a pointy-headed scarecrow complete with a scowling expression. During the Galactic War, a human like this would have lasted seconds against Senith’s sharp claws. Instead of pointing this fact out to Kobayashi, Senith kept his mouth shut. The old man shook a clenched fist at both of the B’latta.

“Idiot bugs!” Spit spewed from the corners of Kobayashi’s mouth. “What’s with all of the loud buzzing? You want to scare my cows away?”

Senith knew the livestock was kept on the other side of the farm, too far away to be disturbed by any noise the B’latta made. The old man simply enjoyed finding excuses to yell at the two of them. Standing up on his thick hind legs, Senith towered several feet over his employer, but the farmer held his ground.

“I am very sorry, Mr. Kobayashi.” He tried to properly enunciate every word, but “Kobayashi” always came out sounding like “Koo-bazz-hat-zhi,” which made the old man flinch and grit his teeth. English had proven to be a difficult language for Senith to learn, but he managed to pick up a good deal during the few years he spent in a concentration camp after the failed invasion. He had to do most of the talking since Rozan could barely understand the language, let alone speak it. “We were just having a small conversation.”

“All I hear is ‘buzz,’ ‘buzz,’ ‘buzz.’ I can barely understand you damn bugs.”

Senith’s antennae drooped in opposite directions. He tried to slow down and enunciate his English words better. “Again, Mr. Kobayashi, we are very sorry.”

“Look, I’m paying you to work, not to chatter like some stupid school girls!” Kobayashi stomped on the ground. “Get those damned seedlings planted. If we miss the harvest, I’m throwing both of you back on the streets. You’ll be eating garbage just like God

intended. You understand me?”

Senith tapped a couple of his forelimbs together, a B’latta sign of apology. Even if the old man didn’t pick up on the gesture, it didn’t stop Senith from trying to be polite. “No, I do not understand.” He wished he knew the meaning of Kobayashi’s words. Admitting his incomprehension made him feel foolish.

The old man snorted and slapped his chest. A cloud of dust rose off of his crusty shirt. He pointed at the mound of seedlings still sitting in their plastic containers. “Plant those Kamates, quickly, or you get no money. Zero dollars. Understand now?”

Again, Senith apologized with his forelimbs. “We understand. We must work fast or receive no payment.” Senith turned to Rozan to relay what Kobayashi had said, but the young B’latta had already resumed his work at a much quicker pace. He didn’t have to know English to understand what the farmer demanded. Senith sounded off a low hum of approval, and Rozan wiggled his antennae in gratitude.

Matching his former cadet’s pace, Senith returned to the work before him. Dirt flew in every direction as he dug shallow holes with his pincers. The Kamate seedlings, once handled with reverence, were now dumped into their final resting places. Senith focused on his task, refusing to let Noora creep back into his thoughts. From the corner of his left eye, he watched Kobayashi bend over and pick up a hoe. Instead of going back into the house as expected, the old man began digging into the earth a few feet away from the B’latta. Senith paused for a moment to fully observe Kobayashi. His face was flushed, and he muttered to himself as he worked. Senith wondered why the old man pushed himself to work the fields. Wasn’t that what he and Rozan were for? He was afraid to ask, and Senith wasn’t going to refuse Kobayashi’s help. In fact, he welcomed it.

The three of them worked for hours. The morning sun sailed across the sky and approached the peak of its journey. Senith began to feel the sting of hunger deep in his thorax, but he continued to push on. Kobayashi had not slowed down since he joined them. That gained him a little respect in Senith’s eyes. Not many humans were willing to hire B’latta for jobs, let alone work alongside them. Hatred and distrust still ran deep in the hearts of both humans and B’latta. The war may have ended decades ago, but the scars had

only begun to heal. Senith knew he was fortunate to find work, and despite Kobayashi's abrasive behavior, the old man was fair for the most part. Wages could be better, but Senith would rather make a little than nothing at all.

Izumi came out of the house carrying a tray of tea and sandwiches. She wore a dark blue yukata with circular patterns throughout. To Senith, she looked like the evening sky illuminated with stars and distant worlds. Kobayashi stopped digging and wiped his hands on his pants. He helped himself to a sandwich.

"You made too many," he said.

"No I didn't." Izumi leaned over to Senith offering food and drink from the tray. He hesitated under the glare of Kobayashi. "Please, take some," she said.

Her encouraging smile outweighed Kobayashi's annoyance. Senith took a sandwich with one pincer and gently grasped a teacup with the other.

"Thank you for your kindness, Mrs. Kobayashi," Senith said. She gave him a small bow, and he returned the gesture. Izumi was a petite lady; her head was capped with silver and grey. She was such a gentle creature that it made Senith self-aware of how clumsy his pincers were in holding a tiny teacup. He did his best to make sure he didn't drop it or accidentally crush it.

Rozan accepted Izumi's offer as well and bowed in gratitude. Senith could tell the young B'latta also struggled to preserve the teacup's frail nature. "Why does she always insist on serving us fluids in such small containers?" asked Rozan.

"Be quiet," said Senith. "It's not our place to question their customs."

Izumi set her tray on a stack of empty pots. "What did he say?"

"Ah. Rozan said, 'the food tastes good.' He is very happy."

Izumi laughed. "It's just a simple chicken sandwich, but thank you for the compliment."

"I don't see why you have to bother making food for them," said Kobayashi. "We had scraps leftover from dinner last night." He stuffed the rest of the

sandwich into his mouth and glared at the two B'latta as he chewed.

"Nobu!" Izumi placed her hands on her hips. Her face darkened around the eyes. "We feed those scraps to the pigs." "So what?"

"I refuse to feed our workers with waste."

"They're bugs! They should be thankful to get anything to eat."

"There's no need to be so rude," she said. "They do good work."

Kobayashi took his hat off and fanned himself with it. He didn't respond to Izumi's remark, but he was obviously upset with her. Senith considered himself fortunate that Izumi was there to soften the blows. She approached him with a smile as she pulled a folded piece of paper out of her pocket.

"Senith, this is for you," she said.

He took the paper with one of his middle legs and unfurled it with the others. There were markings all over it. He recognized some of the human symbols, but he couldn't read the whole thing. "I do not understand. What does this mean?"

"Those are your earnings," said Izumi. "I've been keeping a tally for you and Rozan. You've made just enough to send a message home."

"Home." Senith stared at the paper. He longed to receive word from Noora and the hatchlings. He wanted to make sure they were okay, that they had enough to get by. But would they be relieved to receive his message? Senith wasn't so sure. He didn't want to shame his family, but he yearned for them. Senith thanked Izumi and placed the folded paper under one of his wings. He wanted to consult Rozan before composing his message, but he decided to save that for later when they would be alone.

"I would like to send Mate Noora a 'paper.' No, that is not the right word." Senith glanced at Kobayashi, who offered a silent scowl in response. He was no help. Senith felt his antennae droop in opposite directions once again.

"Do you mean 'letter'?" asked Izumi.

Senith's antennae perked up. "Yes, thank you! I would like to send Mate Noora a letter."

Izumi smiled and reached into her pocket again. "Then you could probably use this." She handed Senith another folded piece of paper. "It's blank. Fill it with your thoughts, and if you need more, just let me know."

"You are too kind, Mrs. Kobayashi." Senith placed the paper under his wing, next to his earnings sheet.

Kobayashi picked at his crooked teeth then spit on the ground. "What a waste of money."

"Nobu." Izumi reached out and squeezed his arm. "He has a family."

"So do we, and where are those ingrate children of ours? They're all travelling the galaxy because their mother encouraged them to go out and see different worlds." Kobayashi yanked his arm away from Izumi. Senith could see the fury start to spread across the old man's face like a wave of scarlet. "Now, instead of saving money on labor, we have to rely on these bugs to keep our farm productive. And where does our money go?" He pointed at Senith. "Two hundred dollars gone, just so he can send a space capsule to a hostile planet."

A corner of Izumi's mouth twitched, but she said nothing. She picked up her empty tray with one hand and turned around quickly. The tray smacked Kobayashi in the knee. He howled and grasped at the pain as he hopped on the good knee. Senith found the scene to be amusing, but he dared not laugh in front of an angered Kobayashi.

Izumi stormed back to the house in silence. A trail of wispy dust followed in her wake. Kobayashi rubbed his knee and turned to the B'latta. "You two! Get back to work. I want this field finished by tonight. Do you hear me?" Without even waiting for a response, he ran after his wife, muttering words that Senith could not comprehend.

"What was that about?" asked Rozan. He placed his now empty teacup on the ground.

"Something about their hatchlings abandoning them," said Senith. He placed his teacup on top of Rozan's. Once they finished planting, he would make sure to return the teacups to Izumi in hopes of making her happy again.

"And they did nothing about that?" Rozan got

back to digging with his pincers. "If I had dishonored my parents, they would have eaten me."

Senith hummed with amusement. "They are a more lax species." He returned to his work as well. "What they lack in discipline, however, is balanced by their determination. They are a tenacious people."

Senith planted five more Kamate seedlings before he noticed the silence beside him. Rozan had stopped digging. He was staring up at the vast, empty sky. "Captain, have you ever wondered what our lives would be like if we had won the war? If we had returned to Kaleegan as heroes?"

Senith scratched at his abdomen with one of his hind legs. "Not really," he said. "I guess my life would have been the same as before. I wouldn't want anything to be different."

Rozan's antennae wiggled left to right in a B'latta sign of consideration. "With my respect, sir, but wouldn't that be difficult?"

"How so?"

"Things can change so quickly." Rozan made a sweeping gesture with both his pincers to indicate the land around them. "Years ago, I would have killed the humans who owned this land. Now, I rely on them to survive."

Senith looked down at his own pincers. Little craters dotted the surface of his exoskeleton, each one the result of a piercing bullet. Scars from his battles with humans still lingered despite multiple sheddings since the end of the Galactic War. He thought about Noora again. How he longed to feel her smooth, glossy shell once more.

"Get back to work," said Senith. "We have to finish by nightfall." As they continued to toil in the dry heat, Rozan's words echoed in the back of Senith's mind. He no longer dwelled on the question of *what* had changed, but rather, *how much*.



The two B'latta managed to finish planting the seedlings just as the sun began to dip past the horizon. They settled down in the barn, their assigned sleeping quarters being empty stalls where horses once slept. Izumi had originally pleaded with Kobayashi to let them stay in the empty rooms of their house, but the

old man was livid at the idea. Senith didn't mind staying inside the barn. He enjoyed feeling the cool drafts blow through the barn's slats. His home in Kaleegan was carved into the ground, where the air always felt stagnant and wet. The air on this planet felt crisp and clean.

He could hear Rozan scraping at the bottom of his can for the last bits of food. Izumi had served them dinner in the barn, a dinner that consisted of canned fish and barbecue beans. Her eyes were red at the edges. Senith wondered why, but he didn't dare ask her. She apologized that she couldn't offer better food, but the two B'latta were grateful for the meal and told her so. Senith also returned the teacups, to Izumi's delight.

He scraped at the bottom of his can of beans and savored the last bite. It was sweet and smoky. Senith had never eaten anything that tasted like this before. He wondered if something this different, this delicious, would go over well on Kaleegan. He stood up, flexed out his right wing, and grabbed the piece of paper with one of his middle legs. Even if Senith couldn't read all of the strange symbols, he trusted Izumi's words. This paper was his chance to hear from Noora.

Senith looked over to Rozan, who was resting on his back in the next stall over. "I want to compose a message for Noora," he said.

Rozan stretched all of his limbs, then sat up. "What will you say?"

"I don't know yet."

Rozan opened and closed his pincers in a slow, thoughtful manner. "Perhaps, sir, a simple greeting would be enough." He turned to Senith. His antennae twitched with uncertainty. "After all, you don't know how she will respond to contact."

Senith let out a long breath from his spiracles. The warm air whooshed out of his abdomen and thorax, stirring up the hay and dust in his stall. "I guess you're right. I will try and make it brief."

Senith left his stall and moved to the front of the barn. The three horses Kobayashi still owned looked up from their stalls and snorted as he passed by. They used to be afraid of him. Now, they seemed indifferent. Senith didn't mind. He preferred indifference over fear or hatred. He grabbed a pen from the clipboard hanging by the entrance, being very

careful not to disturb the papers. Kobayashi kept notes about the farm there. He would know immediately if something was disturbed or missing.

Senith sat outside. The quarter moon emitted enough light for his eyes to properly function. He unfolded the papers Izumi gave him and found the blank sheet. The pen proved to be a challenge with his large pincers. It wasn't quite as comfortable as the giant quills he once used on Kaleegan. After a moment of thought, he managed to scribble a message for Noora.

To my Honorable Mate Noora,

I am alive. At the end of the war, I was taken prisoner. The humans, however, granted myself and many others amnesty as long as we agreed to follow their ways. I live in a country named America, in a region the human Farmers call "The Midwest." I, too, am a Farmer now. Two humans have taken me under their employment. They have treated me with a kindness that I would not expect from former enemies. We are raising Kamates, which grow so much bigger on Earth than they do on Kaleegan. I wish I could show you.

Noora, I don't expect to hear from you, but I want you to know that I think of you often. I love you and wish you and the hatchlings well.

Always,

Senith

He folded the letter and placed his home address on the top flap. Even though Earth and Kaleegan had gone to war, they re-established diplomatic ties rather quickly after reaching a peace agreement. The Inter-galactic Post was up and running, according to Izumi, so Senith knew his letter would get to its destination. He was only uncertain of whether or not he'd receive any kind of response from Noora. He tucked the letter back under his wing. In the morning, he planned to give it to Izumi to mail whenever she had the time.

When Senith returned to the barn, Rozan was leaning into one of the stalls occupied by a horse. He scratched the animal behind its ears, and the delighted horse responded with a couple of gentle nibbles. "I've

made a new friend, Captain,” he said.

“So I see.” Senith approached the young B’latta, but as he did so, the horse let out a low sound of protest and moved to the back of the stall. “Apparently, I’m not on the same terms as you.”

“Give him time. He wouldn’t come up to me at all in the beginning.” Rozan tried to coax the horse back towards the stall’s entrance, but the animal remained stubborn. He gave up and turned to Senith. “Did you have luck finding your words?”

“I did. I hope it will be worth all of my savings.”

“I’m sure it will be, sir. At the very least, Noora will know you’re safe.”

Senith suddenly felt tired; the day’s work had finally caught up to him. He moved back to his stall. “I think I will sleep now,” he said. “There are still two more fields to plow and sow. Mr. Kobayashi will be in a foul mood tomorrow.”

“When is he ever in a good mood?” asked Rozan. “You go ahead and sleep, Captain. I plan to stay up a while longer.” Now that Senith had moved away, the horse approached Rozan once more.

Senith felt his antennae wiggle in amusement. “You’re a natural Farmer.”

Rozan stroked the horse’s mane. “Perhaps the High Council assigned me to the wrong caste after all.” He turned to Senith. “Captain, after you send your letter, what do you intend to do with your future earnings?”

Senith felt his body stiffen. He hadn’t thought that far ahead. All this time he had toiled on the farm just to send a single letter. There would be no need to send any more. “I don’t know.”

Rozan patted the horse on its neck. “I think I’ll save my earnings and buy a farm of my own someday.”

There was no idea of ownership on Kaleegan. All the fields belonged to the Queen, and the High Council oversaw all the work. Senith watched the young B’latta. He could barely remember the day when the young Soldier joined his battalion. Senith did remember, however, that Rozan had been eager to please and quick to learn. Now, the Soldier that Senith once knew began to disappear. Rozan was adapting

to Earth customs faster than Senith could hope for himself. “I think it’s a sound plan,” he said.

“Sleep well, Captain.”

Senith lay down on his pile of hay. “Same to you, Rozan.”



The next morning, Izumi came into the barn with a special treat. “Waffles,” she said.

Senith stared at his plate containing two light brown squares, each one indented with even more squares. He had never seen such intricate food. “Thank you. This looks very difficult to make.”

Izumi laughed. “Not if you have a waffle iron.” She poured a brown, viscous liquid over Senith’s and Rozan’s waffles. “You need syrup to fully enjoy them.”

Senith could see Rozan hesitating, so he decided to take the first bite. It was sweet, crunchy, and chewy. They were wonderful sensations that overwhelmed his sense of taste. He struggled with the small fork, but he managed to get another bite of happiness. “This is incredible, Mrs. Kobayashi. I have never eaten such delicious food before.”

“I’m glad you like it,” she said.

Rozan took a bite and licked the syrup and crumbs off of his fork. “This is amazing. Sometimes, I’m almost happy to have lost the war.”

“What did he say?” asked Izumi.

“He enjoys the waffles very much,” said Senith. He struggled with the word ‘waffles,’ but Izumi didn’t seem to notice. “Rozan is grateful.”

“Well, it’s my pleasure.” Izumi took a seat on a nearby bale of hay and watched them eat. A smile formed on her lips and remained there throughout the meal. It took all of Senith’s inner strength to prevent himself from devouring everything, including the plate. When the B’latta finished, Izumi collected their dirty plates and silverware.

“Mrs. Kobayashi,” said Senith. “I would like to ask you a favor.”

“Of course. What can I do for you, Senith?”

He produced the letter from underneath his wing and gave it to her. "Could you please send my letter to Mate Noora? You will have my gratitude forever."

Izumi laughed. "Forever is a long time, but that's very sweet of you." She looked over the folded piece of paper. "The nearest IGP station is in Saint Louis. It's about a two hour drive from here. Don't worry, though. I have family around that area. Your letter will give me a nice excuse to visit my sister."

Before Senith could offer his profuse thanks, Kobayashi entered the barn. He sniffed the air. "Did you give them waffles?" His brow furrowed at Senith and Rozan.

"Of course," said Izumi. She glared at her husband. Senith noticed a change in her tone of voice. With him and Rozan, it had been soft like the scarlet petals of a Kamate blossom. With the old man, however, her voice was hard and jagged stone.

Senith sensed that the couple would begin fighting again. He tried to calm the situation. "We are very grateful for the waffles."

Izumi turned to both B'latta. "And you're very welcome."

"I can't believe you understood all that buzzing." Kobayashi folded his arms. He smirked at Senith, but the B'latta sensed no friendliness behind the gesture.

"That's because I know how to listen," said Izumi.

"Oh really? Then why don't you remember what I said about wasting our food?" Kobayashi's voice grew louder. Senith could see the deep wrinkles form at the corners of the old man's frown.

Izumi placed her hands on her hips. "I am not going to let these boys starve or eat our scraps."

"Boys? Boys?" Kobayashi's eyes bulged at that word. Senith feared that they would pop out of his head. "Listen to yourself. They're bugs! Stop treating them like children. It's not going to bring any of them back."

Senith had seen Izumi angry before, but he had never witnessed her ears turn bright red and her eyes narrow into dark slits. "Don't you dare bring that up again. I'm treating these two like a decent boss would treat her farmhands."

"If you hadn't filled those kids' heads with ideas—"

Izumi shoved the plates she was carrying into Kobayashi's hands. A strand of silver hair fell over Izumi's left eye. It didn't hide her fury. She pointed a small, but fierce finger right into the old man's face. "You're the reason why our kids left in the first place. Did you honestly believe that the children wanted to inherit a farm that's stuck in the twenty-first century? This piece of paper," she held up Senith's letter, "is about to travel thousands of light years away, and you're still digging holes with a hoe and spade."

"The old ways still work," said Kobayashi, in what was almost a whisper. It was the first time Senith felt genuinely sorry for him.

"Look around you," she said. "Times are changing, Nobu. You're being left behind. *We're* being left behind."

"But—"

Izumi dismissed him with her free hand. "I'm visiting my sister for a few days. You better treat those two well." She glanced over at Senith and Rozan. "If I get back and learn that you did otherwise, I swear to God, I'm going to leave you here to rot on your own." In one swift motion, she turned around and stomped back towards the house.

Kobayashi was left stunned and holding two syrup covered plates. Senith approached cautiously and tapped his forelimbs together. "My apologies, Mr. Kobayashi, but would you like us to begin working on the second field?"

Senith's voice snapped the old man's attention back to the B'latta. He cleared his throat. "Yes. You two take care of that." Senith and Rozan must have been too slow in their response because the old man began yelling again. "Go on, get out of here!"

The two B'latta scurried out of the barn using all their limbs. Once they were a safe distance away, they stopped to catch their breath. "That was a terrible argument. What happened?" asked Rozan. His antennae drooped forward, and he looked dejected. "Are we losing our jobs?"

"That depends on Mr. Kobayashi," said Senith. "Let's not worry about that for now. Take the wheelbarrow and begin gathering the seedlings from

the greenhouse. I'll start plowing."

Rozan bowed his head slightly and obeyed without any further questions. Senith dug into the earth with his pincers but paused when he heard a loud noise. When he looked up, he saw Izumi leaving the farm in a green JetCar. It was an old model, covered in scratches and bumps. Kobayashi stood on the porch of the house, watching. The JetCar sputtered and wobbled in midair before the stabilizing rockets kicked in, causing ripples of dust to puff out in all directions. Izumi made no gestures to her husband. The JetCar zoomed along a dirt road until it curved behind a hill and disappeared. Kobayashi bowed his head and rubbed his face with his hands before retreating into the house. Senith didn't see him again for the rest of the day.



The B'latta finished planting the second field of Kamates by the time dusk kissed the sky with purples and reds. Senith and Rozan put all the tools back into the shed by the barn. They rested outside on bales of hay.

"I'm hungry," said Rozan. "We've had nothing to eat since this morning."

"Let me talk to Mr. Kobayashi. Maybe he can give us some food."

Rozan let out a high-pitched hum. "With my respect, Captain, but I think we'd have better luck hunting for rats or stealing food from the pigs."

"He may be angry, but he's not always unreasonable," said Senith. "Besides, Mrs. Kobayashi asked him to treat us fairly."

"Really?"

"Wait here." Senith stood up and stretched his pincers to the sky. "Hopefully, he'll be in an agreeable mood since we finished all our work without disturbing him."

The lights in the house were on, creating a soft glow all around. As Senith approached, he spotted Kobayashi sitting in a rocking chair on the porch. He looked drained of energy. The way his body conformed to the chair's shape made it look like he'd melted right into the wood. Senith froze, afraid the old man might start yelling at him for coming too close to the house. To his surprise, Kobayashi looked up then motioned

to him. Senith didn't know how to interpret the signal. He moved closer in a slow, cautious manner.

"Hurry up," said Kobayashi. "For a creature with so many legs, you bugs seem to enjoy taking your time."

Senith tapped his pincers together and bowed his head. "I am sorry, Mr. Kobayashi. I did not understand what your hand movement meant. It is hard—"

"Yeah, yeah." He pointed at a chair next to him. "Sit down."

Senith obeyed, but he found the chair to be too small. It was a bit uncomfortable. He twitched a few times, but the old man didn't seem to notice. Kobayashi pulled something silver out of his pocket. He unscrewed the top, then drank out of the container. Senith was fascinated by this new drinking vessel. It didn't resemble Izumi's teacups.

"Do you drink?" Kobayashi presented the silver vessel to him.

"Not necessary," said Senith. "We pull our required moisture from the air."

"Even in this hot weather?"

Senith nodded. It was a gesture that he saw humans use many times to show their agreement. Kobayashi grunted in response then leaned back in his rocking chair. "Is that so," he said. Senith was secretly thrilled that his imitation of a human gesture was interpreted correctly. "Tell me something, bug. If you get all your water from the air, why do you bother to drink the tea that my wife makes for you?"

"We wish to give her joy."

"I see." Kobayashi took another sip. "On your planet, did you ever have problems with women?" He looked at Senith. "Or females for you, I guess."

"Never," said Senith. "On Kaleegan, the females kill then eat rebellious males."

Kobayashi spit out some of his drink and guffawed. It caught Senith completely by surprise. He didn't know what to make of the old man's hysterics.

"Well," said Kobayashi, after regaining some of his composure, "thank God I don't live there. I would've been finished a long time ago." He chuckled a few more times.

“Finished?” asked Senith.

“Dead,” said the old man. He made another gesture: he pointed his thumb outwards and passed his hand across his throat in a slashing motion. Kobayashi sighed and took another sip of his drink. “What about this wife of yours? Did you ever have problems with her?”

Senith tried another human gesture. He shook his head. When Kobayashi stared expectantly at him, Senith tried to elaborate. “I was ‘fortune’? I do not know if that is correct.”

“I think ‘fortunate’ is the word you’re looking for,” said Kobayashi.

Senith was momentarily taken aback by the old man’s sudden helpfulness. “Yes, thank you. I was fortunate. My mate, Noora, always asked me for my opinions. She did not make all the decisions alone. Even so, her decision was always final.” Senith tried readjusting his weight on the chair. He felt like he was being squeezed by the tiny piece of furniture. “For most B’latta, the females give orders, and the males must follow. If the males fail to follow, then they are finished.” He imitated Kobayashi’s gesture by dragging his pincer across his mandibles.

“Huh.” Kobayashi looked out into the darkening sky. Flashes of purple remained on the horizon, but the stars began to sparkle. A slight smile formed on the old man’s cracked lips. “I suppose marriage is always hard, no matter where you’re from.”

They sat together in an awkward silence as the purple hues finally faded from the sky. The moon was a little fuller than yesterday, and it glowed right above the barn. It reminded Senith of the reason he came to the house in the first place. He stood up and tapped his pincers together. “I am sorry, Mr. Kobayashi, for it is late, but Rozan and I have not eaten since the waffles this morning. May I request some food, please?”

Kobayashi bolted upright in the rocking chair. “Hell, I forgot. Listen, don’t tell Izumi, okay?”

Senith’s antennae twitched in confusion. “Okay?”

“Hold on, I’ll be right back.” Kobayashi placed the drinking vessel into the pocket of his dirty pants then disappeared into the house. A few moments later, he emerged carrying four cans. “This is the best I can

do right now. I hope four servings of Spam will be enough?”

“You are very generous, Mr. Kobayashi.” Senith took great care in grasping each of the cans with a different limb. “I will return to the barn now.”

“Right.” The old man slumped back down onto his rocking chair. As Senith was leaving, he called out to him. “By the way, bug, thanks for lending an ear.”

Senith stopped and turned around. Once again, his antennae twitched in confusion. “But I have no ears to give.”

The old man laughed then pulled out his silver vessel once more. “Never mind. It’s just a matter of speech. Damn bugs.”

Senith thought Kobayashi was angry again, but he resumed rocking in his chair and staring out at the sky. No more insults were flung his way, so Senith hurried back to the barn.

When he presented the cans of Spam to Rozan, the young B’latta was overjoyed. He almost couldn’t believe Senith’s description of Kobayashi’s strange behavior and sudden generosity. As they enjoyed their dinner (both B’latta thought that the strange substance was delicious), Senith found himself hoping that this run of good fortune would continue. Maybe Noora would take a chance on him. Maybe she would allow him to return home, back to Kaleegan, and back to her warm, mushroom-and-spice scented embrace.



The next day, the two B’latta finished planting the third and final field of Kamates with Kobayashi’s help. The old man still did his fair share of yelling at Senith and Rozan, but he was no longer angry at the sight of them. There were times when he even engaged Senith in light conversation without complaining about the “buzzing” noises Senith made when speaking. Kobayashi also allowed them to take breaks throughout the day and brought them more Spam for lunch and dinner. His generosity didn’t go unnoticed by the young B’latta. Rozan had asked Senith how he managed to change Kobayashi’s behavior, but Senith couldn’t think of a good answer. “All I did was answer his questions about Noora and Kaleegan,” he said.

The next morning, Kobayashi tasked the B'latta with harvesting the fields of carrots and parsnips. Just like the previous day, the old man joined them in the labor. At one point, Senith heard him whistling a cheerful tune. It was something he was used to hearing from Izumi but never from Kobayashi.

The rest of the week passed by quickly and without incident, which Senith found to be both surprising and relieving. The three of them harvested all the root vegetables, then began tilling the land for a planting of squash seeds. On Friday night, Kobayashi joined the B'latta for a dinner of pork and beans in the barn, along with fresh slices of carrots and pan-fried parsnips. "It's been a long time since I did any cooking," the old man said.



On Saturday morning, Senith awoke to the roar of a JetCar's engine. He stretched out his limbs and stood up. He unfurled his wings and flapped them a few times. It felt good after keeping them folded up for so long. Rozan was already awake, and he stood by the barn entrance.

"Captain! Mrs. Kobayashi has returned."

As Senith exited his stall, Izumi walked into the barn. She greeted Rozan, who managed to say "hello" in almost perfect English. She then turned to Senith and smiled. "And how are you doing?"

"I am well," said Senith. "Thank you for sending my letter." Senith spotted the old man lingering outside by the door. "Also, Mr. Kobayashi has been generous in sharing the Spam with us."

Izumi looked surprised. "Really?"

"I even gave them some carrots and parsnips yesterday, fresh from the harvest." Kobayashi walked into the barn. He had a meek smile on his face. "Hello, dear."

Izumi placed her hands on her hips, as if she was going to get angry, but then she paused and sniffed the air. "Nobu, are you wearing cologne?"

"Well, I had just finished showering, and I knew you were coming home." Kobayashi ran a hand through his gray hair, smoothing it out to one side. The old man looked almost embarrassed, much to Senith's amusement. "How's the family?"

Izumi's eyes brightened and she smiled. It wasn't one of the small smiles that she often gave to Senith or Rozan. This one was big, complete with milky white teeth. "They're all doing well. John and Hitomi send their love." She walked over to Kobayashi and stood on the tips of her feet. They hugged, and she kissed him on his cheek. "Things have really changed around here, huh?"

"Little by little," said Kobayashi.

"Oh, I better give this to you now, Senith." Izumi reached into her purse and pulled out a piece of paper. Senith recognized the handwriting immediately. "A letter came through the IGP station right before I left Saint Louis. I'm told that it's for you."

Senith took the letter gently and expressed his gratitude. He moved out of the barn and into the bright sunlight. He felt his pincers tremble as he unfolded the paper. Without even looking for a place to sit, he began to read.

To my Darling Mate Senith,

Happiness filled my body when I received your letter. I am glad you're alive, and that you've thought of me all this time. I, too, have lingered on your memory. You must know, however, that this letter will be the last you will hear from me. The Queen doesn't accept failure. To us, to the colony, you are a disgrace. The majority of our hatchlings have been chosen by the High Council to become Soldiers, so I have kept your letter to myself. Please understand. I cannot bear to let our hatchlings know that you live. They might lose their caste just by being associated with you, and I know you do not wish that fate upon them.

I hope, sincerely, that the life you now lead will give you the happiness that you deserve. I will always remember you, as will our hatchlings.

With Love,

Noora

Senith read the letter twice, three times. He was happy to know his family was safe, and that they had not forgotten about him. Senith was saddened, however, by what Noora had to say. This wasn't

just a response to his letter. This was a farewell. His antennae drooped forward and his limbs felt weak. Senith sat on an overturned wheelbarrow and stared at the piece of paper, hoping that the letters would change and say something different.

“Senith?” It was Izumi. She approached him slowly, a look of concern on her face. Rozan and Kobayashi followed close behind her. “What did she say?”

“Noora is well, and so are my hatchlings.” Senith folded up the letter. “She loves me still, but she cannot send any more letters. By failing my duty as a Soldier, I have brought shame to them all. I have no home anymore.”

“That’s not true. You can stay here as long as you like.” Izumi gave Kobayashi a look of uncertainty.

The old man grunted. “That’s fine, as long as you continue to work. This farm won’t tend to itself.”

“Perhaps,” said Senith.

“Let’s give him some time alone,” said Izumi. She took her husband by the arm, and placed her head on his shoulder. They walked back into the house.

“Captain?” Rozan sat down on the ground nearby. His pincers began to absently draw geometric patterns on the ground. “May I speak freely?”

Senith squeezed the letter between his pincers and listened to the paper crinkle. “Go ahead, Rozan.”

“Our time as Soldiers for Kaleegan may be over, but we can still be Farmers here on Earth. No one, Queen or High Council, can send us to the slave mines for betraying our caste. Perhaps this change is a good thing.”

Senith looked at the young B’latta. No, not young any more. Rozan had matured so much since the early times of his Soldier apprenticeship. “Maybe you’re right. Yes, let’s stay here and continue to learn our new craft. Then, when you purchase your own farm someday, maybe you can hire an old, creaky B’latta to help you plant Kamates.”

Rozan looked up from his circles in the dirt. “You would follow me, Captain?”

“Yes, under one condition. If we are going to be Farmers, then you must treat me as an equal and not as a superior. Can you do that?”

Rozan stood up from the ground and gave a B’latta Soldier salute. “It will take some getting used to, but I think can do that Cap—” he lowered his pincer and flexed his mandibles in embarrassment. He took a breath and relaxed his body. “I mean, I would be honored to have you as an equal, Senith.”

Senith stood up and clasped pincers with his former cadet. “Then let’s go tend to the Kamates. They need to be watered before the sun gets too warm.”

“Allow me to start the irrigation pump for the first field,” said Rozan. With a happy wiggle of his antennae, Rozan scurried off to the crops far behind the barn.

Senith looked down at the letter in his hand. With quick and precise motions, he sliced the paper into hundreds of little pieces. A breeze swirled around his body, the air clean and cool and nothing like Kaleegan. Senith raised his pincers to the sky, the space between him and home, and released his old life into the winds of change.





Silent Drops of Crimson and Gold Rain

by Pam L. Wallace

Illustration by Brigitte Fredensborg

Celebration of Life. Pretty name; pretty concept. I want to scream every time I hear it. For the last six months, I've been walking a tightrope, pretending at normalcy, pretending I haven't lost my only sister. I've surrounded myself with imaginary walls. If I don't feel, I can't hurt.

Now I understand how fragile life is, how quickly it can be ripped apart. What I don't understand is how to put it back together.



I know every bump and turn in the road. It should bring me comfort, heading to my childhood home, but I feel out of sync, as if I'm watching myself through someone else's eyes.

I pull into the driveway and sit for a minute, shutting out the memories of two young sisters laughing and playing. If I focus on the orange trees across the pasture, my gaze skims by the playhouse and the stump of the huge eucalyptus tree that used to hold the treehouse Dad built.

I won't let in the memories. I can't. But on the way to the back door, I almost step on a big black beetle. And that's all it takes for a memory to pop through.



I was seven and Rebekah nine. "Watch out!" she screamed, pointing at my feet. I'd almost stepped on a

black bug crawling across the sidewalk. She'd always had this thing for bugs. She was so stupid. Bugs were icky.

She hopped around, eyes closed, worried about the bug. But what about me earlier, when she wouldn't let me color with her? She hadn't been worried about my feelings then.

So, I looked her right in the eye and stomped that bug. It squished under my flip-flop with a loud crunch. Rebekah cried for hours, casting looks filled with hurt and betrayal at me. I pretended like I didn't care, but inside, I was crying, too.



Dad's in the kitchen, sitting in his usual spot at the counter. "Thought you'd be here fifteen minutes ago," he says, without looking up from his crossword puzzle. There's a coffee mug at his left hand. It doesn't take a genius to know it holds more than coffee.

"I forgot how slow everyone drives around here." *Hi, Sara. Nice to see you. I missed you.* Something along those lines would be nice. But why start now, after forty-five years?

Rebekah and I learned from the best how to swallow our feelings in straight shots of ice-cold vodka.

I carry my suitcase into our old bedroom. It smells musty and there's a scraggly spiderweb in the

corner. How in the world did two twin beds, a dresser, a bookcase, and a desk fit in here? There's a worn brown sofa against the wall that folds out into a bed with a thin, lumpy mattress. Last time I was here, Kyle and I were together. We kept rolling into each other all night. It hadn't bothered us in the least.

I wish he were here. No. That's over. I can't give him what he wants. I can't give him me. I don't know where I am.



Memories of childhood engulf me. Giggles with Rebekah in the night. Fighting over the phone, or whose friend got to spend the night. Hours and hours of talking about nothing. Baking cookies. The time Kathy Larson made fun of me at school. Rebekah pushed her down and got paid for her heroics with a black eye. We made it our mission to snub Kathy every chance we got after that. Not that it mattered to her and the other popular girls.



I'd hoped after six months, I'd be ready for Rebekah's Celebration of Life. It was Dad's idea — let the grieving ease, and then scatter her ashes. It'd worked two years ago when Mom died, but this time, the grief is still a raw, aching wound. I'm not ready to let go of my big sister.

I can't breathe in our old bedroom. The walls are too close, the memories too big. My heart thumps against my ribs; my mouth is so dry I can't swallow. I grab my car keys and rush out the door with a mumbled, "Be back soon," in Dad's general direction. He doesn't answer — not that I'd expected him to.

It's a couple of miles down the road to the Quik Stop. When we were growing up, it was a local mom-and-pop country store. Rebekah and I used to walk there for candy, talking about school or our friends. Never about our parents or the arguments. Never about how Dad's glass held more than just water, or how Mom's tears were over more than some silly TV show.

The old store's been remodeled into a gleaming chrome and glass-fronted mini market, the vacant pasture now an asphalt-covered parking lot.

I buy a super-sized soda, leaving enough room for a generous slug of booze. It's an old habit that comforts me in a perverse way, telling myself I can top it off with vodka if I choose. It's all about choices these days. So far, choosing to get sober is the only sensible decision I've made in the last ten years.

I plop down on the curb at the edge of the parking lot. Cars come and go as dusk steals the last traces of an orange-colored sunset from the sky.

The full moon rises. I take a long sip of soda, letting the sweetness roll over my tongue, wishing for the acrid bite of vodka instead. The parking lot lights switch on, growing brighter as the sky darkens. One bulb flickers and buzzes, drawing my gaze.

A bug flutters into the circle of light, soon joined by another, and then another. A whirring sound fills the air as a dark cloud of beetles is drawn to the light. There's thousands of them, circling and diving in erratic flight, black carapaces glinting like polished ebony.

The door of the store opens and a small girl, maybe seven or eight, walks out, blonde hair tied in a thin ponytail.

My breath catches and a chill shivers down my spine. She looks just like Rebekah at that age, right down to the knock-knees and pigeon-toes.

I can't stop myself from whispering, "Rebekah?"

Without answering, she sits beside me, delicately crossing one ankle over the other. She points at the swarm of diving bugs. "Ever see that before?"

I drag my gaze away from that too-familiar face to the bugs, now in frenzied flights, their wings beating so rapidly they emit a high-pitched whine. I don't know why I feel calm enough to answer, because inside I'm freaking out. "They come through like this every few years."

"They're so beautiful! And look how they whirl through the air!"



We played with whirlybird seed pods as children, throwing them into the air to watch them spiral down. Rebekah would twirl with them, her arms open to the

sky. “They’re swans,” she’d say, “landing on a lake. And one’s a princess, waiting for her prince to come kiss her and then they’ll ride away on a white horse and live happily ever after.”

Happily ever after didn’t happen for either of us, most especially for her. Torn and tattered by man after man, still she’d showered them with attention, immersed them in a womb of love. But she gave too much away, so much there wasn’t anything left for herself, and then the rank words that others used against her filled her head and turned in on themselves until she believed each and every one of them. And no matter how well any one treated her, no matter how many kind words were spoken, she couldn’t hear them over the sibilant whispers of unworthiness that came from within. Until, even had there been a knight on a white horse, she wouldn’t have recognized him, would have turned him away with harsh words and never a backward glance.

In time, only booze had eased her pain, but only momentarily. When the vodka hadn’t been enough, the downers came out, even though she was already about as down as she could get by then, looking for a place to hide, a moment of surcease from the pain. But it had her by the throat, wormy fingers reaching into her brain, leaving maggots and filth, and wiping out any trace of the little girl that had been.



“It’s okay,” the little girl says, patting my shoulder.

I realize I’m crying. I nod and sniffle, taken aback by her maturity and compassion.

Her gaze flickers away and she points at the parking lot. “Here they come.”

A bug hits the pavement, followed by another, and then another, until it’s a shower, and then a deluge — beetles plummeting from the sky and bouncing off the asphalt, ping-ponging like hailstones.

The girl crouches over a bug, picks it up, examines it, sets it down. Picks another, puts it aside. The next, she peers at closely. She picks up one of the discarded bugs, compares the two, and then sets them both down.

Plop. Plop. Plop-plop. More bugs fall. They lie

on their backs, stunned or wasted from their mating ritual, legs waving at the sky. The parking lot is a surging sea of beetles. The little girl wades through their midst.

I anticipate the crunch of smashed beetles, but the black tide clears a path, skittering and flopping out of her way. She turns to me. “Coming?”

She’s small and delicate, pointed chin and smattering of freckles across her nose, but she stands with a regal tilt to her head, a goddess on her small island. A gray path of asphalt invites me to follow in her wake.



Rebekah and I always followed the path of least resistance, taking the easiest route in life instead of fighting for what should have been ours. It led to countless bad decisions along the way, especially for her. Too proud to admit her own failures, she shut herself away and rejected everyone who loved her. And then she died alone, thousands of miles from home.



“Hurry! We have to save the Queen!” the girl demands.

“Save her?”

She nods, her expression serious. “So she can fly free.” She turns and continues examining the bugs.

Reason is already far gone this night. Letting my heart lead me for once, I step onto her path.

Behind me, the beetles close in. She picks a beetle here and there, tosses it aside. “What are you looking for?” I ask.

“The males have big pincers. But the Queen will have the biggest of all.”



When we were teens, I took to calling her Queen Rebekah, her nose in the air and a shoulder turned to me. I couldn’t break her, though. She wouldn’t let me in. Building walls were what we did best, especially invisible ones to keep others away.



“Here she is!” The girl holds a beetle between thumb and index finger. It honestly looks no different to me than the thousands of beetles on the ground. But the girl is practically dancing with excitement. “Come on,” she cries, racing to the edge of the parking lot.

Maybe I’m dreaming, and I’ll wake up back at home on the lumpy mattress. The nameless girl halts at the edge of the parking lot. My heart aches for my sister. I want to hug her, tell her I’m sorry. I want to tell her how beautiful she was, both on the inside and the outside.

I start toward the girl, to tell Rebekah what’s in my heart, but she stops me with an upraised palm. A beetle clings to her hand. She lifts it to the sky like an offering. Slowly, she begins to twirl. Faster and faster, around and around she spins, and then she flings the bug into the air. I see it take wing, outlined against the full moon for one brief second, and then it disappears.

The girl’s face radiates a simple, pure joy that moves me to tears. I cry for her happiness. I cry for Rebekah. Most of all, I cry for myself.

When I look up again, the little girl is gone.

I search for her around the building. In the store, I ask the pimple-faced clerk if he saw where she went, but he gives me a blank shrug and says he never saw a little girl.

After a half hour of fruitless searching, I reluctantly head for home, feeling like I’ve lost something. I feel even emptier than when I arrived, if that’s possible.

When I get inside, Dad’s in bed. The house is quiet and full of memories. I crawl into the lumpy sofa bed, wishing for Kyle’s warmth beside me. Our last argument — if you could call a one-sided monologue an argument — plays over and over in my mind. He’d finally grown tired of my withdrawn silences and my refusal to get married. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him of my fear.

He was the guy I’d never dared dream about. He was gentle, respected my feelings, and never put me down. How could he love someone as messed up as me?

So, I left. Five steps away, I’d wanted so badly to turn around, but I couldn’t.

Was I really any different from Rebekah?

Eventually, I sleep for an hour or two. The next morning passes with interminable cups of coffee. I’m lost in a sea of unreality, my mind still on the girl and the beetles. Old friends and family arrive. My Aunt Bess grabs me and blubbers on my shoulder while her daughters hover nearby.

I can’t breathe with her arms around me. I extricate myself as quickly as possible.

Finally, it’s time for the ceremony. After Dad leaves with my cousin, who’s going to pilot the plane, the rest of us go outside. I stand alone by the old eucalyptus stump. I look at the ground, not able to face any more memory-laden images of the yard or house.

After several long minutes, I hear the drone of the plane’s engines echoing off the windswept clouds like a giant bumblebee. I search the horizon, shading my eyes to catch the glint of sun on metal.



Life is fragile. One minute Rebekah was here, the next she was an empty shell, her spirit at last fled to a safer, quiet place. Our last conversation haunts me. She called to tell me she was in the hospital. She was in pain. She was scared and alone. I made arrangements to go to her the next day.

She didn’t tell me how seriously ill she was.

She died before I even left my house. I should have been there, to hold her, to let her know she was loved. Why hadn’t she called me sooner?

Why hadn’t I tried harder to reach her before it was too late?



The plane tips its wing as it passes overhead, sweeping low enough that I can almost make out Dad’s face in the passenger seat. A gray mist flows from the window.

It’s her. Rebekah.

The cloud of ash fans out, floating, dissipating, even though I try to hold each miniscule particle of my sister in my gaze. I can’t take my eyes off them — it would feel as if I were turning my back on her once again.

The plane circles back. Again, another stream of ash. There's so little substance. My eyes remain dry but my heart feels like a rock plummeting into my gut. On the third pass, they fly even lower. I see the urn come out the window, the last batch of ashes a short burst, quickly lost on the breeze.

Dad sticks his head out the window and waves, and then he tosses out rose petals. The plane waggles its wings and turns for the airport. I hear the others moving back toward the house. My aunt comes and squeezes my shoulder, but when I ignore her, she leaves me alone.

The rose petals, crimson with gold undersides, are all that remain with me. They twist and twirl like sparkling whirlybirds, drifting for what seems forever, suspended on wings of air.

A tiny breeze whorls the petals in a quick upthrust and then they slowly spiral down. They shower me, silent drops of crimson and gold rain. I want to cry again for all Rebekah has lost, but my tears are gone. I'm empty.

I let Rebekah shut me out of her life. I should have tried harder to reach her. But I didn't, and now I can't fix her anymore. I can't save her.

The petals settle to the ground. I pick one up. It releases its sweet perfume on my fingers. I remember the little girl at the Quik Stop last night, the beetles dropping around her in a black rain. Her joy as she set the queen free.

It was so simple for her. Free the queen.

Maybe I should take a lesson from her. Was I holding on too tightly to the past, while letting my future slip by? Had I been hiding behind old hurts, walling myself and Rebekah behind painful memories?

I offer the petal, palm up, to the sky. Then I hold my arms out and twirl. I throw my head back and spin, around and around. I reach for Rebekah, and this time, I let my memory fill with her beauty and generosity. I remember her deep chuckle, her shy, ducking smile. Most of all, I remember how much she cared.

I whirl until the sky spins with me.

I toss the petal into the air. It begins a slow downward spiral. It halts, softens, flickers in the sun, and then impossibly — for the breeze has died away, and the air is as still as death — it lifts. It rises, floating higher, flickering crimson and gold in the sun.

"Fly free, Rebekah," I whisper. I watch until the petal disappears.

Then I let her go.

Slowly the world comes back into focus. A car passes by, its tires whooshing on the old pebbled road. My heart beats lighter, my breath flows without a hitch.

A movement across the pasture catches my eye. From the orange grove, out steps the little girl from last night.

She looks at me, solemn and still. It no longer feels surreal, nor do I wonder any longer who she is.

I smile and blow her a kiss. She smiles back, one hand raised in a silent salute. And then she disappears.

I hope she's happy at last, sealed in her childhood memories.

As for me, I know now what I've been missing, what I've been holding on to, and what I've let slip away. I know what I need to do.





The Lonely Barricade at Dawn

by Jesse William Olson
Illustration by Linda Saboe

By waving her legs, *Scutigera coleoptrata* carried her body down the kitchen wall. She didn't like the light which had just flickered on, as it obstructed her vision and was a mild discomfort. And, today at least, it was a convincing enough reason as any to leave the room. Besides which, she logicked, the eggs would bear mouthing — turning them over and making sure they were properly moistened.

As she continued down the wall, she thought of her eggs, hopefully safe in the gap between the bathroom cabinet and the floor. The location was good and out of the way, but it was also a little too damp, and as such promoted fungal life, which made it a constant war to keep the eggs nurtured and clean.

Scutigera, one foot away from transitioning planes to the kitchen's smooth floor, hesitated. Her antennae worked the air alongside the black facets of her eyes, and she noticed that the smaller hominid had entered the room and had occupied itself with some tools on a counter at the opposite wall. *Scutigera* slowed. She'd seen the aversion the hominids demonstrated at the presence of her kind and she knew their eyes tended to track quick movements, even peripherally. This meant her best chance at safety, short of going back up and out of reach, was a slow crawl toward cover.

But luck, as it tends to, ran out. The child screamed and dropped her table knife, which revolved as gravity carried it to the floor, landing with a clang that sent globs of jelly across the linoleum. The girl didn't notice the raspberry streak on her pant leg, but stared instead, drop-jawed, at the bug, which moved, as she interpreted it, toward her across the floor. The thing was almost two inches long, and its too-many legs were too long. Revulsion overpowered her hunger, and the girl abandoned her half-made sandwich, instead calling for her father and running out of the room.

Her slippers padded across the linoleum and onto the carpet. *Dad there's a bug!* she cried, but received no response. She stood, disgusted panic still evident on her face, and listened. No sounds from the kitchen, none from the entryway or the living room or the basement. Besides the sound of the news running on a TV which was always on in her dad's study, there was only the life of the house, creaking and hushing, holding back the outside winds and circulating its own air. *Dad!* she called again, and padded off toward the study.

He didn't notice her until she ran into the room

and grabbed his hand. *Daddy*, the girl said, drawing out the vowel, bouncing it slightly in her annoyance, *there's a bug! It's—*. He stretched out the fingers of the hand she'd grabbed, and she let go as he looked down at her. The emotions he'd been feeling toward the news broadcast were etched deeply enough that she thought, for an instant, they were aimed at her. It made her feel, fleetingly, like something grotesque and horrid, something that could not be suffered. But it passed, and the news reporter continued to reel out his shouted, breath-lacking commentary, underscored by the roaring wash of a crowd.

Her father's face became tense again as he returned his attention to the TV. He sucked in a breath and held it deep in his lungs, willing it to reassure him. A crowd was in protest at the state capital. His stomach churned as the camera swung, wielded by a cameraman who was obviously struggling to keep the reporter in frame. The reporter, meanwhile, who could have conveyed everything all the more easily by shutting up, getting out of the frame, and letting the camera pan the crowd, was struggling to keep his position and yelling to be heard over the chanting and jeering of the protesters. With the winter weather coming on, his breath condensed in the air. *Pray*, he said, *that the police can hold their barricade*.

A nearby man in a winter hat noticed the reporter. He flexed his muscles against the cold air as he listened, half-wishing he'd unpacked his cold weather jacket in time for the rally, even if it was an obnoxious shade of red which he'd never have purchased in all his life, and which he only kept because it was a gift, and because it was warmer than any of the lighter jackets he preferred. The cold man who was not wearing that jacket cocked his head at something the reporter said and, realizing what side the reporter was on, perhaps, and also driven by mob impulses which would have been unthinkable foreign to his quotidian life, swung his elbow into the reporter's face, meanwhile yelling something which was only half intelligible even to himself. The cold man in the hat looked the camera in its lens as the reporter fell, grabbed it, and struggled until the cameraman broke away and ran.

The cold man turned back and joined the crowd, fists pumping the air, lungs bursting with bold curses and a sense of both entitlement and power. "Fight the bugs! Fight the bugs! Fight the bugs!" the crowd chanted. The fever increased and the tempo of the chant overflowed into chaos. "Stop the infestation!" he yelled. Ahead of him, signs were being flung or dropped, and small projectiles, some of which looked like rocks, or shoes, or gravel, or all of those things, were being hurled — either at the police barricade, or, for those with stronger arms, at the building it encircled and had been placed to protect. The man pushed forward with the others, eyes darting from time to time to the top floor windows, behind the glass of which, he knew a woman waited.

The woman paced back and forth along the tinted glass, arms crossed, frowning. She flinched as the first gunshot sounded, the report cutting clear and high before it reached her ears. She watched the mob swarm the police with their tiny bodies propelled by tiny arms and legs, swinging, flailing, falling. More gunfire.

A shame, really, in all its futility. Within ten minutes, the foreigners would have landed on the building's heliport and she would be in a room signing their paperwork. This rallying would have no effect. But then, she was somewhat glad for the noise and commotion. In a way, it gave her a certain hope knowing something this monumental wouldn't come to pass in the abject silence of total submission. She paced.

And yet... she listened to the noise of the street: Not only was there not total submission, she was beginning to realize that in some people there wasn't even a half-hearted or a begrudging submission. Gunfire rang out from the barricade and with each bullet, one of the mass was surely hit, was surely falling. Some people were still willing to die — or kill — before submitting at all. And she knew that such noise was surely ringing out across all the countries of the planet, in every metropolis, every village, every home. In her mind, she could see the bodies, broken in defeat in crimson pools. Outside the window, she could see sprawled bodies already, dead at her own guard's

guns. What good was surrendering to save lives if her own people were already giving their lives in protest against surrender? A thing in her mind clicked.

Eventually, she heard the heavy clank of machinery and, shortly thereafter, a bustle of voices and hurrying footsteps in the hallway. She waited. The knock sounded on her door. She got up, nodded at the aide whose head poked through, and left the room, letting the aide follow behind her.

The aide, a nervous young man who'd felt on the verge of emptying his stomach for the past week, and who only hadn't because of how little he'd been able to eat in the first place, was stupefied by the calm grace with which the global matriarch walked down the hall. Ostensibly untouched by the rattle of gunfire, the knowledge that she was walking to her own surrender, or the more immediate prospect of facing the meeting room.

As the two of them approached, another aide held the door open, and they entered. All parties were then present, including the necessary body guards, advisors, aides, and translators. The aide glanced over the giant insectoid bodies of their new overlords with thinly veiled disgust.

The colonization officer looked at the assembly of humans before it. Their pale and pink softness disgusted it. No shell for decency, no strength. It wasn't sure why control of this planet was deemed necessary, but orders were orders. It asked their first question, which was translated, and the human thing that it had been told was the leader answered. "Yes, I speak on behalf of all Earth."

It asked its second question, in a tone that, to any race but the humans, would have betrayed its obvious boredom. The question was translated, and there was a gasp from the human side of the room as the human answered.

"What does the thing say?" the colonization officer demanded angrily. After a pause, the translation came: "No. I did indeed come here to surrender our homeworld, and for what little it matters, I do willingly surrender myself to your power. But as the voice of the Terran collective, I must echo that no, we do not, will not, and cannot submit. What we do at this point is up to you. My soul soars against the unknown."





Jeanette's Feast

by Michelle Ann King

Illustration by Justin Aerni

Gavin loved weddings. He loved the occasion itself — the dressing up, the rituals, the dancing and drinking — but what he loved most of all was the sense of optimism. Marriage was a celebration of confidence — of believing that you'd made the right choice.

Gavin had never been married. He'd never had that kind of confidence, either.

No. That wasn't true. For a little while, he had. When Jeanette was born, when he'd held her and let her put his finger in her mouth, he'd felt it. He'd closed his eyes and believed, in that single wonderful moment, that he could have all of it: the wedding, the honeymoon, the babies, the warm and welcoming home, the bliss of a huge, loving family.

But then his mother had taken the baby away, telling him he was holding her wrong, and when he went back to Fern's room with a mug of hot chocolate, a bunch of roses, and a velvet ring box in his pocket, she was gone. Discharged herself, they said. From the hospital, and from his life.

But this wasn't the time for melancholy memories, was it? No. It was time for congratulations and happiness. Cousin Cecilia was getting married, and that was something they should all be happy about.

Gavin picked up his champagne glass and raised it high. 'To marriage and family.'

He waited, but nobody at the table echoed it. His young niece and her boyfriend were both tapping away at their mobile phones, and Uncle Frank was reading a newspaper.

Maybe they hadn't heard him over the sound of the music. Gavin cleared his throat and tried again, but his mother grabbed his wrist from behind, jerking the glass and spilling its contents.

'That girl,' Moira said, the words gritting out from between clenched teeth, 'is causing a scene. Get over there and sort it out. Now.'

Gavin gave a forlorn glance at the champagne

soaking into the pink tablecloth. 'What?'

Her hand tightened around his wrist until he felt bones grind. 'I said now, Gavin.'

She bent down and put her mouth close enough to his ear that he could feel her breath, hot on his skin. 'This is what you get, for constantly spoiling her. She's not a child anymore, Gavin, she should know how to behave. I'm telling you now, if she embarrasses me in public one more time, she will regret it. And so will you.'

She let go of his wrist and Gavin jumped to his feet. He followed her glare to the back of the hall, where the buffet had been laid out on long tables. A large group had gathered around one at the end, and more people at the edge of the dance floor were turning to look.

He pushed his way through the crowd, Moira's anger still beating down on the back of his neck. It was his own fault. He should have been watching Jeanette. Making sure she had something to do, something else to think about.

'Excuse me,' he said. 'Sorry, excuse me. If I could just...?'

People moved aside reluctantly to let him through. At the front, they'd formed a semicircle around the buffet table. Around Jeanette. Everybody seemed to have their hands up, holding cameras or mobile phones. A sea of red lights flashed and winked.

'Mind out, mate, you're in the way,' said a woman at his elbow. She was filming on an iPhone.

'Sorry,' Gavin said automatically.

'Wow,' the woman said, shaking her head. She sounded amazed, disbelieving and faintly envious all at the same time. 'That kid can really put it away. I don't think she's even stopped for breath.'

The table had been laid with desserts. Gavin had seen it on the way in; a huge glass bowl of profiteroles, three-tier stands of frosted cupcakes, and

at least five plates holding enormous cheesecakes, Victoria sponges, and strawberry gateaux. Now, the bowl, the cupcake stands and all but one of the plates held nothing but splodges of cream and a few crumbs. On the last plate was a six-inch-high chocolate fudge cake. While he watched, Jeanette cut a large slice and swallowed it in two bites.

‘Wonder if she’s one of those, you know, competitive eaters?’ the woman with the iPhone said. ‘Like you see on the telly. People who eat fifty boiled eggs in five minutes, that sort of thing.’

‘No,’ Gavin said. ‘She’s not.’ He stepped forward and took hold of his daughter’s forearm. ‘Jeanette,’ he said softly. ‘Come on. That’s enough, now.’

She looked at him with wide, glazed eyes. ‘You said I could have cake.’

From behind them came a muffled snort.

‘A slice,’ Gavin said, helplessly. ‘You have a slice of cake, Jen, not the whole thing.’

‘I was hungry,’ she said, and picked up the cake knife again.

The laughter was louder this time, with no attempt at muffling.

Gavin increased the pressure on her arm. ‘Put that down, Jeanette. Now come on, we’re leaving.’

She didn’t respond, but when he took the knife and plate out of her hands she didn’t resist, either. He turned her around, towards the exit.

‘Excuse us,’ he said, heat burning his cheeks.

The crowd eventually parted for them, but he could still hear the clicks and whirrs — and giggles — as he steered Jeanette away.

Moirra stood by the door, holding her coat and handbag. Her head was high, her smile rigid. A muscle in her jaw twitched in an irregular rhythm.

‘I’ve ordered a taxi,’ she said. ‘I’ll go and lie to my sister about what a wonderful time we’ve had. You take that—’ she flapped a hand at Jeanette, ‘that disgusting creature outside and wait there.’

‘Mum—’ he said, but she’d already stalked away.

Gavin pushed the double doors open and

shepherded Jeanette outside. ‘Do you want my jacket?’ he asked, but she shook her head. Even though her arms were bare in the sleeveless dress, she didn’t seem to feel the cold.

Which was just as well, since he wasn’t sure his jacket would actually fit her. At thirteen, Jeanette was already two inches taller than Gavin’s five foot eight. She wasn’t fat, not exactly, but she was definitely... large. The normal reassurances — excuses? — about puppy fat and big bones had provided comfort for a while, but were starting to lose their power. People used to watch her eat with indulgent smiles and approving commentary about good girls who cleaned their plates. These days, the smiles were getting nervous and the commentary usually ended up on the subject of type 2 diabetes and the obesity crisis.

Gavin shivered and pulled his jacket closed. The doctors said she was perfectly healthy, so what was he supposed to do? He wanted to be a good father. He wanted Jeanette to be happy. But maybe Moira was right. Maybe those two goals were incompatible. Maybe he didn’t know what he was doing. Maybe he never had.

He sighed. ‘Why do you do it, Jen? Why do you eat so much?’

She lifted her head and looked at him. In the sickly light of the streetlamp her eyes looked almost yellow.

She shrugged. ‘It’s what I’m good at.’



‘Have you seen this?’ Moira said. She was sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee, untouched, by the side of her laptop. She swung the machine around so that Gavin could see the screen, which was showing a YouTube video.

It was of Jeanette, at the wedding. The camera panned along the devastated buffet table to Jeanette, who stood staring straight into the lens and chewing. At 32 seconds, she picked up a raspberry cheesecake the size of a pizza. At 58 seconds, it was gone.

In the background, Abba’s ‘Dancing Queen’ was playing. An awed voice could be heard over the top of it, saying, ‘Fuck me.’

The video had 734,823 hits.

‘Ah,’ he said.

‘This,’ Moira said, ‘is unacceptable. You need to do something about that girl. Get her seen to.’

‘But Mum, you know Dr Revin said—’

‘I don’t care what that old fool said. There’s something wrong with her.’

‘But—’

‘Are you telling me this is normal behaviour, Gavin? Are you?’

‘Well, I—’

She slammed the laptop lid shut. ‘I’m not going to be turned into a laughing stock by that freak. So I expect you to do something about this.’

‘She’s not a freak, Mum. She’s your granddaughter.’

‘Much as I wish it wasn’t the case, those two terms aren’t mutually exclusive. And if you’d done what I told you to do thirteen years ago, we would never have been in this position in the first place.’

If he’d given Jeanette up. Had her adopted. But he couldn’t. She was his. Maybe the only thing that ever truly had been.

Moira sniffed. ‘Clearly, that little tart knew what she was doing when she left that child behind. A mother knows when something isn’t right, trust me on that one. Not that she was what you’d call normal, either.’

‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘Don’t talk like that.’

Moira ignored him, acted as if he hadn’t said anything. Maybe he hadn’t.

‘This is completely out of control, Gavin. Do you think food comes free? Do you think the supermarkets just give it away?’

‘No, but — Mum, I pay for Jeanette’s—’

She waved a hand. ‘But if you weren’t spending so much on her then you’d be able to pay me proper rent, wouldn’t you? I swear, it would cost less to keep a horse. And at least you could get some use out of it.’

‘Mum—’

She pushed her cold coffee away. ‘I told you to

sort this out, Gavin. I expect you to teach that girl to eat properly. Like a young lady, not some kind of ravening animal. The only time I want to see her with something in her mouth is at the table, eating a normal meal at a normal meal time. Not constantly stuffing her face with whatever she can get her hands on. It’s disgusting, and I won’t stand for it any longer. Not in my house.’

‘But I— She—’

‘For God’s sake. You’re her father. Act like it. Or you can take her to the zoo where she belongs. I won’t have my home turned into some kind of freakshow, so you can either sort this out or you can leave, the pair of you. Do you understand me?’

Gavin looked down. ‘Yes, Mum.’

She smiled. ‘Good boy.’

Jeanette came in and went to the cupboard. She took out a family packet of Wotsits and ripped it open with her teeth. She plunged her hand inside.

‘What’s for breakfast?’ she said, still chewing. Orange crumbs dropped from her lips.

Moira shuddered and pushed her chair back from the table. ‘You’ve got two weeks,’ she said, and walked out.



Gavin checked his bank account. He never spent a lot, but then he didn’t earn a lot, either. Library Assistant wasn’t exactly a high-paying career. His mother was right: after he’d bought the weekly groceries, there wasn’t much left. Certainly not enough to rent somewhere to live in London. Or anywhere else, for that matter.

And it wasn’t as if what Moira wanted was that unreasonable, was it? A family sitting down to eat a nice dinner together, what could be wrong with that?

It was one thing when you were a child, thinking that the world was a wonderful place where you could do what you liked, but Jeanette was growing up and it was time she learned about reality. It couldn’t possibly do her any harm, to learn restraint. Self-control. It would be good for her. That was what parents did — they made sure their children learned what they needed to know.

It was his duty, as her father, to teach her.

But he didn't know how. It wasn't as if he hadn't tried to talk to her. He'd explained about nutrition and good dietary choices. He'd explained about money management and living within a budget. He'd explained about etiquette and social niceties.

Jeanette had listened to his speech with apparent attention, nodded and answered his questions with every indication of understanding. Then she'd gone to the fridge, taken out a packet of bacon and eaten it raw.



There had to be something she didn't like. Something she wouldn't eat. Didn't there?

On Monday he left out cold pizza for breakfast, and put a marmite and honey sandwich in her packed lunch. Jeanette brought her plate and her lunch box back empty.

On Tuesday he tried sandwiches made with peanut butter, tabasco and pickled onion, with the same result.

Wednesday's dinner of gorgonzola, anchovy and mango omelette was eaten without complaint, and when he made an ice-cream sundae on Thursday with alternating layers of minced garlic and sardines in barbecue sauce, she licked the bowl and asked for seconds.

On Friday, while blending soup made from oysters, Brussels sprouts, tripe and Scotch bonnet chillies, he had to stop and lie down. Jeanette finished it off for him, and ate the whole pot.

On the weekend, after doing some research online, he took the tube to a specialist shop in Kensington. There were lines, there had to be. Even for Jeanette. And surely, surely, this would be an uncrossable one.

He just needed to get her to say no, that was the thing. No, I won't eat that.

'These are a good choice for a first insect,' the young assistant said. 'For your daughter, you said, yeah?'

'Um, yes. More or less, anyway, I—'

'She'll love them, don't you worry. Now, you'll be wanting the tank, the cork bark and the heating mat, then, yeah? Remember, these fellas are from a nice warm island, so you'll need to keep the thermostat at about 18 to 25 degrees at the soil level. They're not too fussed about humidity, a quick pass with a plant sprayer once a day should do the trick. And they don't like it too bright, so watch that. The tank'll stay fresh for quite a while, but you should clean it out every two to three months or so.'

'I see,' Gavin said. 'Right.'

She gave him a reassuring smile. 'Don't worry, all this stuff is on the fact sheet. I'll pop one in here for you.' She began to box up his purchases. 'They're called Bert and Ernie.'

'I— excuse me? What?'

The girl nodded at the cockroaches. They had black head parts, striped, shiny brown bodies and fuzzy-looking legs. 'Bert and Ernie, that's we called them. Bert's the big one. Although of course, you don't have to stick with that if you don't want to. Most people rename pets once they get them home. But I think it suits them, don't you?'

'Ah,' Gavin said. 'Right. Pets, yes. That's very... yes.' He handed over his credit card.

When he got home, he set up the voluminous plastic tank in the shed, set up the heating mat and layered it with the bedding and bark chips. He added some of the special Cockroach Chow the assistant had recommended, and a milk bottle top as a water dish.

He sank down onto a mildewed garden chair and watched through the clear walls as Bert waved a feeler at him.

'They're cute,' Jeanette said from behind him, and he jumped. 'Can I hold one?' she asked, turning her hand palm upwards.

'I— well, I—'

She reached into the tank, picked up Bert and placed him on her palm. She lifted him up and brought him closer to her face. To her mouth.

Gavin chest constricted. But no. She wouldn't. She couldn't. Could she?

Bert scabbled on her palm as she cupped her

fingers. Her lips parted, revealing teeth that seemed very white in the dingy light of the shed.

‘No,’ Gavin yelled. He leapt to his feet, the chair toppling over behind him, and gripped Jeanette’s wrist. She blinked at him, her mouth still open.

He pulled on her wrist — gently at first, then with increasing force. ‘Okay,’ he said, ‘that’s enough for now. We don’t want to tire them out, do we?’

Jeanette looked reluctant, but she allowed the cockroach to slide off her hand and back into the tank.

Gavin replaced the lid and leant on it. He puffed out the remaining air trapped in his lungs and let his shoulders sag until his forehead rested on the glass. The coolness felt soothing against his overheated skin.

‘Are you all right, Dad?’ Jeanette said, but he just closed his eyes.



On Sunday night, Moira looked first in the empty cupboards and then the empty fridge.

‘I, er, I’ll ring for a pizza?’ Gavin said. He slid his hand around the back of his neck, trying to knead away the tension in the muscles. His fingertips dug in deep, but created no relief.

‘One week,’ Moira said. ‘One week, Gavin.’

He nodded quickly, then winced as the movement sent a flare of pain through his aching head. ‘Right,’ he said.



He made a peach crumble with half a packet of laxative powder. He baked a loaf of bread with the contents of the Hoover bag mixed in. He made hot chocolate with a splash of washing up liquid. And finally, a casserole of dog food, bleach and motor oil.

Jeanette ate everything he put in front of her, said it was good, and asked for more.

Gavin was the one who found himself, when it eventually hit him what he’d done, kneeling in the bathroom and spitting bile into the toilet bowl. When his stomach felt as empty and wrung-out as the rest of him, he went into the kitchen and finished the

washing-up. Then he sat down, put his head in his hands and cried.

Moira found him there two hours later and looked down at him with disgust. ‘Start packing,’ she said.



‘Some people shouldn’t breed,’ Fern had said to him, in the hospital.

He’d been shocked, then, that she could say such a thing. But now, he thought maybe he understood.

He wasn’t a good parent. He knew that now. But maybe... maybe he wasn’t the only one.

What kind of mother would turn her own family out on the street? Moira knew they had nowhere else to go. Would she rather see them living rough? Cold, heartbroken, starving?

Yes. Yes, he really thought she would. She’d leave her own son to die in poverty, and all because a teenage girl liked her food. That wasn’t a crime, was it?

So he had to ask himself, what kind of a woman could do something like that? And the only answer he could come up with was: an evil one. Someone who probably wasn’t a woman at all, but some kind of monster in human form. A demon. All those terrible things Moira had said about Fern and her family, she might just as well have been talking about herself. In fact, she probably was. It was obvious, now he thought about it. Freudian. What you see in your own heart, you start seeing everywhere.

So now he also had to ask himself, what was he going to do about it? Was he going to let her carry on spoiling his life, poisoning everything with her evil? She’d never liked Fern, never wanted her to be part of the family. Moira had probably threatened her, too, all those years ago — that must have been why she disappeared. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more likely it seemed that Moira had killed her.

Was he going to let her kill him too, now? Kill his daughter? No. No, he couldn’t do that.



He thought about a gun, but he had no idea how you went about getting one. If the TV and the tabloids

were to be believed, there were pubs where you could find people who knew how a fatal mugging, or car accident, could be arranged. But Gavin didn't know where those pubs might be. He thought about a fire, but quickly realised that would be cutting off his nose to spite his face.

He was thinking about the possibilities of drowning, when Moira screamed. He stared at his hands, momentarily confused to find that they weren't actually holding her head underwater. 'What the devil is that?' Moira said, her voice sounding breathless and hoarse.

He followed her gaze and saw Bert trundling slowly across the kitchen floor.

'Oh,' he said. 'The tank, I must have left the—'

Moira poked at Bert with the toe of her shoe and he hissed. It sounded remarkably like someone saying 'Shh.'

Moira folded her arms and looked thoroughly offended. 'Kill it,' she said. 'Quickly, before it gets under the cupboards or something.'

'What? Oh, no, it's just, it's Bert, I—'

Her head jerked around and she stared at Gavin. 'This — thing, this disgusting creature, it's yours? You brought it into my house? My kitchen?'

Gavin's lips felt too numb, too slow, to form words. 'I—' he managed, and got no further.

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' Moira said. She took off her shoe and raised it high.

'Don't,' Gavin said. He bent down and tried to scoop the cockroach up, but he was too slow. Moira brought the shoe down hard, the spiked heel slicing straight through the back of his hand. He hunched over, and vomited his breakfast muffin and coffee in a hot stream onto the kitchen tiles. It mixed with the blood and ran in little rivulets into the grouting.

Moira recoiled, her lips pinched into a tight, thin line. 'Now look what you've done,' she said.

Moira yanked the shoe back up, pulling it out

of Gavin's hand. It took some loose flesh with it. She held it at arm's length as the nude-coloured fabric turned red. 'These were brand new,' she said, 'and now I'm going to have to throw them away.' She shook her head. 'They're ruined, Gavin. Do you hear me? Ruined, just like everything else.'

Gavin groaned and his vision greyed out at the edges. He didn't realise he was falling until his head smacked against the floor and everything turned horizontal.

Moira put her shoe back on and kicked out her foot. Bert lifted into the air, tumbled over in a double somersault and landed on the floor by the sink. He froze, hissed, and carried on trundling towards the back door.

'No you don't, you little beast,' Moira said, and stamped down hard. The crunch sounded very loud in the quiet kitchen.

Gavin let out a puff of air. He'd thought cockroaches were supposed to be indestructible. Supposed to survive anything. Even Moira.

'Gran,' Jeanette's voice shrieked from somewhere above him. 'Gran, what have you done?'

'Stay out there,' Moira said. 'I don't want you treading this mess through the rest of the house.'

Gavin tried to pull himself up and couldn't manage it. His ears were ringing.

'I said, stay there,' Moira said. 'Jeanette, for heaven's — Jeanette? What are you doing? Put that down. Jeanette, I said—' her voice cut off with a strangled, wet-sounding noise.

Gavin closed his eyes. He was so tired. Maybe he'd just lie here for a little longer.

The noises went on.

After a while, it occurred to Gavin that he should probably get up. There were things to do. He hadn't finished making Jeanette her breakfast.

Although it was possible, by the sound of it, that she'd already found herself something to eat.



On the Vagaries of Design & Layout

There are many challenges that face the poor soul tasked with design & layout, whether it be of a book, e-book, magazine, web page, PDF document, or what have you. Each format has its own rules and requirements, and one cannot simply do a straight conversion from one format to another.

Or rather, one *can*, but it leads to evil, or even worse, bad aesthetics.

Each format demands aesthetic and functional decisions dependent on the technology — how it works, how it functions, and how it is used. A physical book and an e-book function in vastly different ways (an e-book is really far more similar to a web site than it is to a physical book).

What you are looking at now is a PDF document, which is an electronic format, but not an e-book (even though e-book readers typically can display PDFs). In a sense, the PDF bears more in common with a printed document, in that the formatting is fixed, whereas a web site or an e-book has a format that changes to conform to the software or hardware that displays the document.

Because *The Journal of Unlikely Entomology* is full of art, we made a decision to focus first and foremost on making a PDF version, rather than an e-book. This offers us a large number of aesthetic choices that simply aren't available in e-book formats.

One of the decisions we made was to format this like a real magazine, which is to say, with a front and back cover, and a series of spreads. The enterprising reader could, should s/he desire, print this document so as to construct a real physical magazine.

Unfortunately, because stories vary in length, art varies in its ability to stand alone on a page or be included on a page with the beginning of a story, and so on, a magazine will often find itself with blank spots. Traditionally, this is not a problem: the editors simply insert adverts into the blank spots (or, in the case of some magazines, the editors choose to insert stories or articles in the unfortunate gaps between adverts).

We have chosen not to clutter our web page, or PDF, with advertising. And thus it is that we have ended up with nothing to put in page 43 of our humble Journal.

We do not, however, regret our decision to avoid advertising. Online advertising is a strange and bizarre world where third party entities insert ads that their computers determine would cause our readers to rush out to buy products. My gut feeling is that, given the nature of our endeavor, the products being hawked would inevitably be highly toxic, not just to bugs, but also to our readers and their children, pets, and the environment around them.

However, this also means that we have no revenue, except what our readers most generously donate to our cause. Should you choose to help us pay our authors and artists, please visit <http://www.grumpsjournal.com/support.html>, wherein you will find a little paypal button upon which one might click.

Again, we give our most sincere apologies for this unacceptable situation, but we felt that you deserved to know why this page is left entirely blank.



B.

by Nicola Belte

Illustration by Athina Saloniti

They'll never replace you, my queen. I will not let them replace you. But I am lonely.

"We'll have no sobbing for old B," you told me, wincing as you propped yourself up and turned to look me straight in the eye. "Life goes on, Ed, and you'd better go on with it." I didn't reply. I didn't trust myself to speak. I took your hand and shook my head, seeing the wilted petals on the disinfected floor, seeing the tape that held your IV in place, curled around and over the cruel point like an impossible hieroglyph; an Omega, an end.



She's pretty, this one, in a skinny, tarty kind of way, all ribs and hips and perfume. Her cheeks are sunken, and her eyes are ringed in heavy black make-up. She keeps smoothing down her dyed black hair, trying to calm the curls that are springing up at the ends. There's a pinch in the air at this time of year but she's dressed like it's a June afternoon, in a short denim skirt and a flimsy black top that's open all the way down the back. She's wearing high heels that she can barely walk in, and I run my finger across my dry lips, imagine her blisters soothed beneath my thumb, made better.

She totters around the bar like she's looking for somebody, circling around the round wooden tables, craning her neck and checking her mobile phone and chewing her black-cherry lips, but I know that it's all

a show. She's just looking for somebody to be looking at her.

"Would you like a drink?" I ask her, when she passes me for the third time. She stops and rolls her eyes. She thinks I'm predictable. She's expected me to offer all along. She needed me to offer. But she's already bored of me, of men like me. She's bored of herself for wanting this.

She looks around to check that there isn't a better option, but it's quiet at this time, after the lunch rush and before the nine-to-five grind is over. I follow her gaze, see the young couple kissing in the furthest corner, him with a blue Mohican, her with half her head shaved; see the middle-aged barman standing at the end of the counter, wrapping cutlery and wiping sticky fingerprints and ketchup off the laminated menus.

"Is that a yes?" I say.

"Depends. You're not a weirdo, are you?" she says, but her hand is already on the bar stool next to me, pressing at the flat foam under the rough fabric, testing the waters. I notice slashes on her arms, small red suns circling her wrists, orbs the same size as a cigarette end.

"All the best people are," I say, and I feel her relax. Her shrug shivers through the air, and she sits down.

"I'll have tequila," she says, picking at a bit

of skin around her bitten nails, “this place could do with livening up.” I slam my glass down to get the attention of the barman. He pours the drink and fetches the salt, and in the distance I hear my drones, beginning to buzz.



“Will that sting me?” I asked, the night we met, pointing at the tiny gold bee pinned to the front of your tassled waistcoat.

“Not unless I tell it to,” you said with a smile. You took my hand and led me away from the party. It was winding down, and people were scattered all over the lawn, the girls dancing slowly in the moonlight with daisies woven into their hair, the men watching, bare-chested in their low-slung flares.

We sat at the edge of the lake, looking up at the stars as the breeze rustled through the sun-scorched grass and the muffled sound of The Doors rippled out across the silver-shoaled water.

“I got it from Crete, the bee,” you said. “I spent last summer out there, painting the caves of Matala.” You shook your head, amused at something, and I raised my eyebrow. “Too much sun, too much acid, too many minotaurs of the mind,” you said, and before I could ask what you meant, you pushed me back and sat astride me.

“Bees are the symbol of immortality,” you said, fingering the badge, staring into the distance, distant, “and of resurrection.” Then you took off your waistcoat and untied your bikini top, and leaned back for me to take you in.

Tan lines criss-crossed your skin in stripes of shade and sun, and you smelt like honeysuckles, like the first scent of spring after a winter that’s lasted too long. You kissed my chest, my stomach; your long, brown hair falling around me, making me feel safe, like a bee-keepers’ veil. You ran your lips across mine and you tasted of beer, and weed. Then you kissed me, properly, and in that second I knew that I’d been dead before, but that I’d never known it. Not until you brought me to life.



“What’s your name?” I ask her, as she chews on a piece of lime and wipes her mouth on the back of her

hand.

“Sarah,” she says, and holds out her hand, amused, like manners are only for old people, like me. I shake it and bow my head. She giggles. I think that the drink has gone to her head. “My mom, she loved Thin Lizzy, you know, the band? That’s what she named me after, one of their songs?” She starts singing to herself and suddenly her face lights up, and her voice is beautiful, like the taste of something sweet that you can’t quite place. But then I remember you, my queen. My stomach clenches and I feel my fists curl, imagine them splitting her lip, shutting her up.

“You’ll make it rain,” I tell her, and bang my glass down and nod at the bar man. *Another*. Her bottom lip comes out and her face furrows, and despite the rage making my body buck and tremble, I force a smile.

“I’m in a band, you know,” she says, oblivious. “Well I will be, once the guitarist gets over himself. Such a prick.” She necks the shot with a grimace, and slides off the stool. “Powder my nose,” she says, and giggles again, “and what does that *even* mean?”

As she walks away I stare at her bare back. I can see where her wings will grow, can already see them pushing against the pale, freckled flesh. She has a tattoo on her shoulder blade, a heart, and some initials. She’d understand the romance, then, this one, she’d understand why.



I asked you to marry me when you were jabbing bright, red pins into a map of Mexico; all of the places that you wanted to visit. I wanted to pin you down, like a butterfly in a case, wanted to pin you to me.

“Marriage makes people miserable,” you said, thinking of your parents in their tight-lipped-silent-seething that made the floorboards hum and their perfect crockery rattle.

“Not us,” I said, and I knew that your wings were weary, no matter what you said. You chewed your lip, considered it, and then you dropped your heart into the crocus of my hands.



At our wedding, I trod on a bee and you fell to the ground like I'd killed you, your pretty lilac dress ('White? Me? Come on') covered in leaves and your bouquet scattered like a ransacked grave.

"Stop it, Bridget," I said as I tried to pull you up, but you were drunk, revelling in the tut-tuts and the dirty looks and the shush of our shared jokes.

"B, get up!" I snapped, flushing red as the confused guests gathered around us, my heart pounding in case this wasn't just another game. You rolled your eyes back in your head and groaned, until I could feel my throat closing up.

"B!"

"Sorry," you said, eventually, your breath hot in my ear as you slung your arms around my neck. "Till death do us part can do that to a person."

"It wasn't funny," I told you later, as we lay in bed, our limbs entwined like driftwood.

"I was nervous, all those strangers, my parents, I—"

"It's ok," I said, stroking your hair. But it wasn't. It would never be. Because I knew then, my queen, that one day I'd lose you.



I have to move quickly. I order her a beer and as the barman turns back to the screen, I take the tablet from my pocket and drop it into the foam. I take a striped straw from the pot on the bar and use it to stir the drink; throwing it on the floor, my heart racing, as she comes back.

"Beer?" she says as I slide it towards her, "I'm meant to be watching my figure." She stands looking at me, waiting for the compliment. My mouth is dry, and I can feel my skin screaming as I stretch a smile across it.

"There's not a thing to you," I manage, with a cough. "You could do with some meat on your bones." I hold my hands together, tight, as her eyes burn into me. She's waiting for more, and I feel the shout gathering in me, but then she smiles, seems satisfied.

"Just the one, mind," she says, clambering back onto the stool, "I'm going out tomorrow and I need to look hot. He'll be there, with her, that slag."

I breathe in deeply, and turn to her. The alcohol has turned her face red, made it soft, loosened her tongue. She rambles on, and pulls herself closer, leaning in, confidentially, her chin propped on her hand, her elbow on the bar. She's almost too close to bear. I can see that her eyelashes are false, can see the glitter running through them, and I can smell cigarettes on her breath.

"She's a right dog, nothing on me, but she's dumb as fuck. Mind you, that's probably why he likes her, him and his mind-games."

"Him?" I ask, my tongue feeling too big for my mouth, my lungs suddenly too small.

"My ex, well...sort of...we're together...even if we're not, we have that connection...that can't live with 'em nor without 'em thing going on? I mean, I fucking hate him...but it's only cus I love him. I dunno...he's all I've got...it's hard to understand."

"I understand," I tell her, and she shakes her head dramatically and lurches forward, about to interrupt, but something in my face stops her, shuts her up, tells her that I do.



After you'd gone, the sun smashed like a broken light bulb. At your grave, I grabbed the pieces in my bloody fist, breathed in the winter until my heart shattered, until my blood slowed.

It's cold now, all the year around. In the middle of spring, thick frost coats the walls wherever I walk. There is nothing inside, my queen. And there is no life. Except in my hives.



"Had a little too much," I tell the barman as she starts to sink down the bar. She's like a puppet whose strings have been cut, with her hair all over the place and her head lolling about like her neck's been broken. I pull her skirt down as it's rising up and her knickers are on show. I was expecting some cheap, sleazy underwear, but she's wearing cartoon pants, with The Count from *Sesame Street* on them, some retro things that must be cool. And I nearly falter, B, I do.

"I'll take her outside, get her some air," I say,

putting my arm around her skinny waist like we're old drinking buddies.

The barman looks concerned, annoyed even, but then the phone rings and he turns to answer it, the pair of us already forgotten.

"I feel sick," she says as I put her into the back-seat of my car and throw an old, tartan blanket over her.

"Just keep yourself warm, sweetheart," I tell her, "and try to sleep. You'll feel better in no time."



I couldn't save you, B. Maybe they can.



She's crazy when she wakes up, but they always are. She punches at her glass cage, her desperate fingers making the polished shell squeak, her mouth the 'O' of a silent sting, over and over.

"Shush," I whisper, and I crouch down and put my finger to my lips. She screams, her eyes bulging

out of her red face, and cries, and it makes me feel like a monster, B, and the things she calls me! I know the cruel shapes that her mouth makes. I've seen it before, with the others, such ugly words from such pretty girls, 'F-you, and F-that', like that's any way to be carrying on.

She kicks at the glass and runs around and around in circles, and then she slumps to her knees, begging, and I'm soft, B, you know I am, so I tell her that I'll make it better, and I will.

I quickly get the pipe. I open the small hatch at the bottom, and let in the smoke that will make her drowsy, make her docile. I learnt this after the first one. I only wanted to hold her, just for one night, to feel somebody close to me, but she made such a fuss.

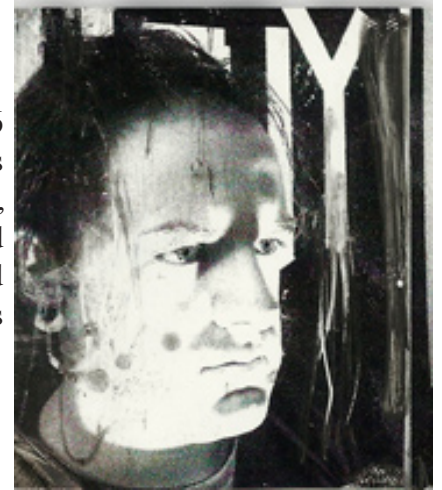
She coughs, and struggles, and fights, but she'll settle. And soon, when it's safe, I'll introduce her to the hive.

She curls up on the floor, her wings tucked in, her tiny legs pulled up to her chest, like a swatted bee on a windowsill or under a bus seat. But alive, B, oh so full of life. Full of terrible, desolate, beautiful life.



Contributors

Justin Aerni was born in Arizona in 1984. His artistic career began in 2006 when he started exhibiting his work in galleries and selling it online. He is also the author and illustrator of such books as *Fighting For Fiction* — 2008, *Nonsense Relevant* — 2009, *Dead Business Men*, a graphic novel in 2009, and *Justin Aerni's Bitter Batter Brains* — 2012. To date Aerni has created and sold over 2000 paintings to collectors worldwide and has been featured in numerous art and culture magazines.



AkuraPare's fractals can be found at <http://akurapare.deviantart.com>

Lew Andrada has a complicated relationship with bugs. He's quite fond of certain insects that provide beneficial services to humankind (butterflies, ladybugs) or those that are fun to watch (fireflies, praying mantises). However, insects that sting (wasps), bite (fire ants), suck blood (mosquitoes), or are overly gross (cockroaches) often leave him breathless from fleeing. These criteria place honey bees in the odd position of being his "frenemies." When he isn't dealing with six-legged critters, Lew works as a research associate at UCLA and enjoys writing fiction in his spare time. His stories have previously appeared in *The UCLA Beat* and *Everyday Weirdness*. Random musings can be found on his blog: <http://emptyroom25.blogspot.com>



Nicola Belte lives in Birmingham, U.K., and is a part-time MA student, part-time factotum and an in-between-time writer of increasingly weird fiction. Her work has been most recently published by *Menacing Hedge*, *The Lovecraft eZine* and *Flash Fiction Online*, all of which you can find at her blog, here: <http://nicolabelte.blogspot.com/>



Nicole Cipri is a writer living in Chicago, who writes a lot about love, food, and monsters. Follow their exploits on Twitter (@nicolecipri) or Tumblr. (<http://wingnuttery.tumblr.com/>)



Rasa Dilyte is a Lithuanian artist and freelance illustrator, now residing in Norway. She works in ink, pencils, watercolour, photography, and other traditional mediums, but her greatest love is drawing. Her work can be found at <http://marchcoven.deviantart.com/>

Sarah Emerson is an artist living in Atlanta, Georgia. Her paintings and installations present viewers with highly stylized versions of nature that combine geometric patterns and mythic archetypes to examine contemporary landscape. Emerson has exhibited her paintings and installations in galleries throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. She teaches Painting and Drawing at Emory University and she is represented by Whitespace Gallery in Atlanta.



Brigitte Fredensborg's photography and fractal art can be found at Shadowness.com/BrigitteFredensborg.



Michelle Ann King writes SF, dark fantasy and horror from her kitchen table in Essex, England. She loves Stephen King, zombie films and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Find details of her books and stories at www.transientcactus.co.uk

Jesse William Olson is a Wisconsinite at heart, though he now dwells deep in Pennsylvania. When he is not writing, he is an English teacher, a sword fighter, a capoeirista, a husband, and the proud leash holder and fecal collector of a gorgeous miniature schnauzer. Several of his short stories have been published and may be found scattered across the internet. Although he finds them fascinating, he does not often enjoy sharing his quarters with live specimens of *Scutigera coleoptrata*.





Cat Rambo lives, writes, and teaches by the shores of an eagle-haunted lake in the Pacific Northwest. Her 100+ fiction publications include stories in *Asimov's*, *Clarkesworld Magazine*, and *Tor.com*. Her short story, "Five Ways to Fall in Love on Planet Porcelain," from her story collection *Near + Far* (Hydra House Books), was a 2012 Nebula nominee. Her editorship of *Fantasy Magazine* earned her a World Fantasy Award nomination in 2012. For more about her, as well as links to her fiction and information about her online classes, see <http://www.kittywumpus.net>

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.



Athina Saloniti was born in Athens, and lives and works in Arta, Greece. She attended the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, where she studied dentistry. Athina worked for a long time with traditional painting and creating Byzantine Icons. Three years ago she began creating digital art in Photoshop, and has been working exclusively in this medium ever since. Her work can be found at <http://chryssalis.deviantart.com>.

Pam L. Wallace has had short stories published at *Daily Science Fiction*, *Shock Totem*, and *Every Day Fiction*. This story is dedicated to Becky, her sister of the heart.



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