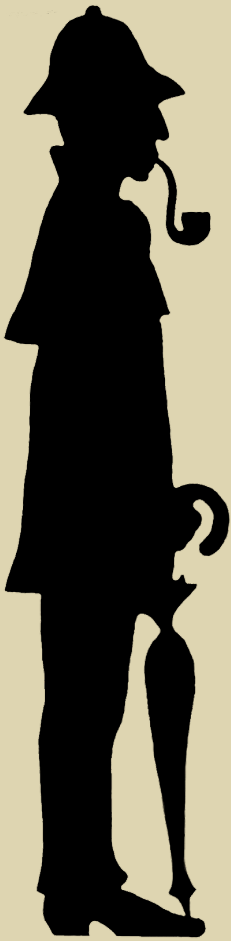
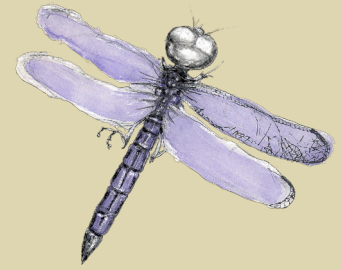


Sir Reginald F. Grump XXIII presents...



THE JOURNAL OF UNLIKELY ENTOMOLOGY

Issue 1 - May 2011

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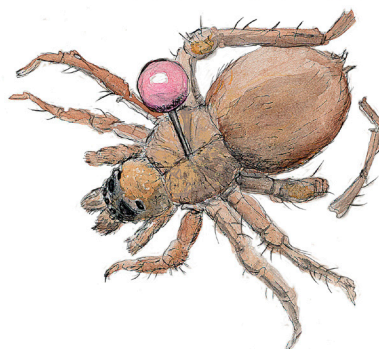
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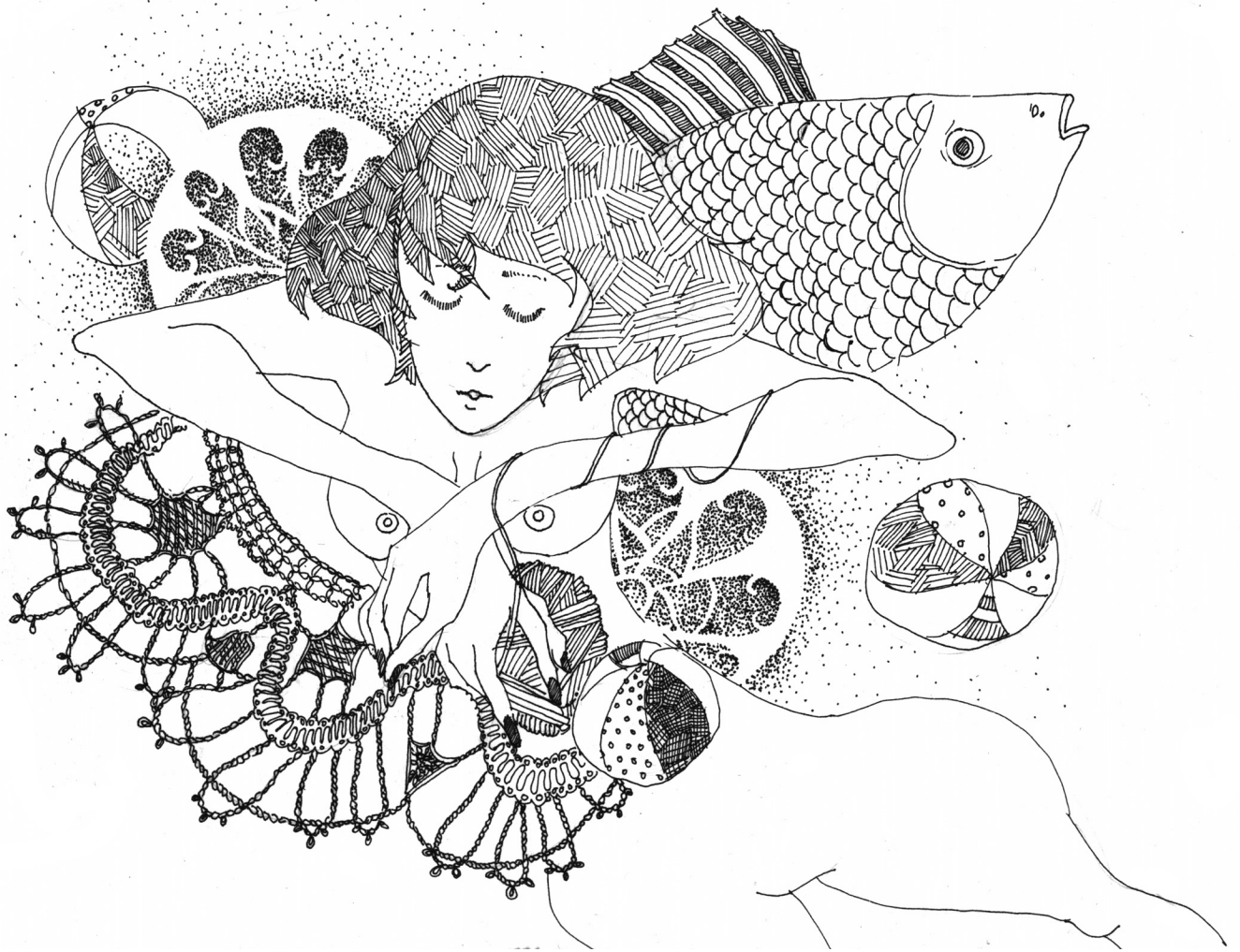
Editors' Note

Dearest friends, both mammalian and arthropod in nature, it gives us the greatest pleasure to welcome you to the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Unlikely Entomology*. What you see before you is a labor of love. Each specimen herein has been carefully collected, and is subsequently presented for your delight. You will find no glass-cased creatures, pinned and pressed, none who met their most ignoble ends in the confines of a killing jar. No! Rather you are entering the rarest of insectariums, holding the most wondrous species yet discovered by humankind. We feel it only fair to warn you, however — some of them do bite.

Here you will find Arachne, weaving for her lost love; a group of school children who are among the last witnesses to a dying world; an immortal cowboy, his most unusual horse, and the scorpion he tries to befriend; a world devoid of both mosquitoes and love; a museum, slowly being devoured from within; the rise of a new kind of humanity, triggered by an earworm of a song; and a terrifying childhood nightmare, made horribly real.

And so, without further ado, and with much thanks to our most generous sponsor, one Sir Reginald F. Grump XXIII, we invite you to step inside and discover for yourself the beauty that skitters and crawls within.





Arachne

by J.M. McDermott

Illustrated by Astrid Budi

*Penelope wove her husband back to life in nineteen years.
Arachne wove greater than this, until the gods in their jealousy
left her with nothing but the application of her art.*

1

If it bends, it can be woven. Hair braids, rivers braid, and fingers fold together in prayer. Cars crash into each other; the metals bend around the engines. With a strong enough machine, cars could be woven into each other — crumple zone to crumple zone, gas lines snaking like Hermes' staff between two twisted engine blocks. I'm too disciplined to stop what I'm doing to doodle the weaving of cars on the naked particleboard walls of this café. In a few weeks, I don't know if I will still have that discipline. I may lose my mind if I keep this up.

I sit in a corner of an abandoned café, and weave endlessly, endlessly, with all the threads and yarns and found things from the empty café. The weave of my own life bent me here. My back is hunched over. My fingers are long and nimble. I never abandon my weave.

Dr. Paris, Karen if we're being friendly, brings me food. She used to be my professor. I haven't been to class in a long time. She brings me new threads, new yarns. She lingers long enough to ask if I've heard Nicole's ghostly voice falling into my weave, yet. I don't answer her. Nicole is gone, and I'm trying to save her. I'm trying to catch her in my weave. Until I'm done, I have nothing to say.

We were art students — Nicole and me — who studied with Dr. Karen Paris. Every Tuesday she encouraged us to go to a café for a public act of art.

The café was run by an alumnus and friend of the art program. She allowed students to take the stage on Tuesdays and try to perform their art. Anything made on stage that night would be left there for auction. People wrote in their bids on a little ticket beside the art. The highest bidder got the art and the student artist got paid for it. Unless no one wanted the art, and then the artist had to come pick it up in three days or it would be thrown out with the trash. Most of the pieces didn't sell.

That's the café where I'm weaving and weaving, and it's all empty now, and if you saw it you wouldn't even know it was a beautiful place to fall in love, because it's so ugly now and all anyone can see is my work spiraling out from my corner, all over the floor, and along the walls, and into the restroom. Karen has to be so careful where she steps when she comes to see me. My weave consumes the space.

I performed once, when it was still bustling, before Nicole transcended. I knitted skeletons out of white yarn. I managed to chain five together before my time ran out on stage. I hung them up, all deformed and strange and chained together. They sold for ten dollars at auction. It was the most I had ever made for a piece.

Dr. Paris, I think, was the one who bought the piece. She had listed herself under her first name, though, so it was just Karen on the little sheet. When I came by to collect the money, I saw the ticket and thought it might be her handwriting. Maybe she had

someone else write it in to hide that she had just bought her own student's art. Maybe it wasn't her. I don't know.

This was the café where Nicole would transubstantiate, or transcend, or become a ghost on her night of making art, but it hadn't happened yet. There were a few dozen tables, a fireplace that was never lit, and art all over the walls. Dr. Paris was here all the time, flirting with the staff. When she saw me there, she bought me an espresso and chatted with me about how I was doing.

— Fine.

— How is your work going?

— Fine. Yours?

— Do try to act excited about your work. Smile, or something, Arachne.

— I don't even know what I'm doing.

— You're missing the point, Arachne. Relax. Enjoy your life when you aren't working. Work is hard enough.

— I guess so. Makes sense.

A long pause, and she stood over me and neither one of us said anything to each other. It was long enough that it was awkward. She looked down at me, and I up at her, and neither one of us had anything to say. We each sipped our drinks, waiting for the silence to stop.

Karen spoke, and it stopped.

— What are you working on, anyway?

— A series of photographs.

— Exciting! What's it called?

— *Remember Your Grandmother.*

— I love generational pieces. I hope you get your family involved.

2

Everyone would be better off if we always remembered our grandmothers. That's what I was thinking when I made the piece. I crocheted a rainbow of threads into a sweater — remember the

myth of Grandma's infamous sweaters — but that's not all I wove into the yarn. I included cinnamon sticks, and whole nutmeg and dried apples because autumnal smells remind us all of home for the holidays, and I wrapped ancient spatulas and pages of cookbooks and bits of silvery wig hair doused in Ben-Gay, and nylons and the costume jewelry of brooches and broaches and bangles and fake pearls and earrings like Christmas ornaments, and sleeves that are too long, a neck that's too small, and bits of dried-up, sugar-free candy woven in like artificial jewels and doesn't everyone just think of their grandmother? Don't we just smell her in the air, and remember her? I think the world would be a better place if we all just remembered our grandmothers.

Nicole thought it was a mess, like a mink coat attacked by vegans.

— You seriously want me to wear this?

— Yes!

— Seriously?

— Please?

— In public?

In a bank, I took her picture as she leaned over the counter and made a withdrawal from her checking account — five dollars, because she only had ten dollars in her account total. Then, to the L-train, where we rode all over the city. She stood holding the ropes while I photographed her. She sat down in a crowd while I photographed her.

— Look like you're remembering your grandmother.

— Did you have to include Ben-Gay if this is for a photograph series?

— Doesn't it smell like her?

— Maybe yours. Mine always smelled like lemon cleaner, and cigars. My grandfather was heavy into cigars.

— I could spray you down with lemon cleaner.

— No.

Nicole was a painter, and like all painters, she believed in the purity of her form. She traced the strokes of her brush all the way back to Caravag-

gio, and had little real respect for the madcap, rogue art of people like me, with my weavings and my photographs, made and found things.

The photos were all taken with a crazy old camera I had gotten off e-Bay. They came out distressed, over-lit, and full of character. I watched Nicole emerging from chemistry beneath the red light. I considered telling her that I was in love with her, but I thought better of it, because maybe she was straight. It's hard to know these things when you want something to be true. She wasn't around when I came out of the dark room, so I didn't say anything.

I guess the pictures came out all right. I got a B on the assignment. The sweater is still in my closet. I hung it up next to a sweater my own grandmother made for me when she was still alive. She was a master of knitting needles. She had sewn me a black sweater with a human skull on the chest, big as a giant's head. I wore that sweater all the time. I learned how to weave and sew and knit because I needed to learn how to repair my grandmother's sweater. I wore it every chance I had.

She had given it to me to keep me warm when I was out late at night with my friends. I was a stoner, and I listened to death metal because the people around me listened to death metal. That sweater was like a calling card, and every compliment I got for it from all the strange people I met late at night, or in someone's basement, or at a club that ignored my fake ID, was like a compliment for my grandmother. They reminded me of her, even when I was out late.

My grandmother was a single mom, in Ohio. She worked at a library and lived with her unmarried sister. My mother told stories of what it was like to have two Jewish mothers. When I knew my grandmother, she was an imp in an electric wheel chair. She joked about chasing down her philandering boyfriends. She knitted strange and obscure relics of yarn — golden teddy bears with menorahs on their chest, mittens with eyes and teeth she called closet monsters, and a sweater my mother wore with an actual, honest-to-god, optical illusion on the chest made out of circles and squares all mixed up. My grandmother had been a librarian. She was funny and sweet and kind. She let me drink coffee with cream and sugar when my mother wasn't looking. When I came out of the closet she patted my hands and said, *Oh? Are you sure? I know a nice boy*

at Temple with very small hands. Feminine hands. Put him in a dress, you might never know. Nice legs, too. What else could I say about my grandmother except this: I want to remember her. I want to remember her forever.

And, I want to remember Nicole, remembering her grandmother in my art.

I kept the pictures in my purse. I wandered around the campus, carrying the photographs. I imagined running into Nicole and gracefully showing her the photographs and she'd be so impressed. She'd say something like *Wow, that's me? Heh, looks good. All right.* Or maybe she'd say, *Fuckin' A! I bet you're going to rub them in Ben-Gay and pumpkin pie spice, right?*

Anyway, I walked around and imagined what she'd say. I didn't run into her that day. I guess she was in the studio. I ran into her when I didn't have anything in my purse to show her. I had to turn in the assignment. She was in a flowing skirt, with a tight tank top and she looked so fucking hot I could have jumped her bones right there, on the sidewalk. Was it love? Was it lust?

— Hey! Where are you going right now?

— Class. Hey, you know those pictures we took?

— What? Oh, show me later. Where are you going right now?

— Class.

— Well, skip it. Come on, I want to show you something fucking eternal.

She took me by the arm, and took me to this office building, downtown. In the lobby, the company had made art purchases of Jacques de Gheyn II. These were all still lifes: flower paintings with tiny, detailed lizards running over the table, with butterflies and fresh fruit and a Portuguese pomegranate cracked in half, red as pulp and so wet you'd think you could reach out and pluck the little, juicy seeds from the canvas. It smelled like fruit and flowers. The artist had captured the veins of the pomegranate and flowers so well that they gave off the beautiful scent.

Businessmen walked past us on their way to work. I think a security guard was eyeing us idly. But, they put it out in their lobby, supposedly for people to see.

It took four bus transfers to get there. We weren't going to leave so soon after only seeing a moment's glance of the paintings. Outside we ridiculed the corporate-art sculpture of cold, disposable modernism that graced the grounds outside the beautiful Renaissance flower paintings frozen in time for a thousand years. We walked around to a lunch cart and blew our budget on hot dogs the size of our heads that would make us sick later.

I considered how I could weave such hot dogs in fatty braids of meat, and wrap them in even larger braids of meat, until I could shape a pregnant woman out of them, lay the form out flat on an abattoir floor in meat, to take its picture.

— Don't just stare at it; eat it.

— I don't really like hot dogs.

— Well, it's not like it's going to get any better with age.

I bit into the meat. It tasted like early death, and stomach pains, and every summer I had ever known in my life where I was at a friend's birthday party and I could eat pork, free from parental supervision, imagining what I'd say to my grandmother if she ever knew. Somewhere up there, she's plotting a Tabasco-powered punishment for her granddaughter's treyf afternoon.

— How does it taste?

— You know I'm Jewish, right?

— Are you?

— Yeah.

— Shit, really?

— This is the best fucking hot dog I've ever had.

— Want mine? It's disgusting.

— No. No, I think I've had enough.

Sick for days and nights together. Crashing in her dorm room, on the couch she smuggled against a wall where there was supposed to be a desk, but she liked the couch better than desks and did more work there. Her roommate had dropped out at the beginning of the semester, and we could spend the night in peace, me in her roommate's bed staring at the way moonlight falls over her face, and then sunlight. I don't know what happened to the desk she was supposed to have, but she never had it and it seemed so natural to lounge

with her on a couch, watching sitcoms in between the hours of our real lives of school and part-time work.

I modeled, sometimes, for quick cash. It was easy work, and I usually didn't mind the nudity. I sat around, posing naked for classrooms full of artists, and I wondered what Nicole was doing right that second. She was a cocktail waitress, so she was usually asleep when I was working.

I could imagine us drifting off together, falling into each other's beds until one of us decided it was time to bear a child, and raising that child, and living a long, wasted life of normal, unexciting bliss and love and happiness. Maybe she'd dump me and break my heart, or I'd do it to her, and then we'd get that same substantial state of heavy, pregnant living — debted up, bound to a household, a budget, a child or two, a mild civic activism, and all the boring shit that is what happens when people are happy — really, really fucking amazingly indescribably happy. Normal shit. Boring shit. Life. The stuff you get when you remember your grandmother. I was naked on a stage, posed classically as if for Donatello. I imagined the normal life that had been so wonderful since the dawn of civilization.

Alas, this is not our love story. We never fell in love. She slept naked and shameless, but we never made love. I don't know if she knew I was gay, or if she was gay, herself. It's not like I carried a fucking sign, you know?

We talked about sex, but both of us had been with men before, and we had better things to talk about than sex, which was pornography to us, not art. We were interested in immortality, she and me, and transcending life.

I told you she was a painter, and her work traced a straight, beautiful brush stroke all the way from Caravaggio.

3

I was modeling in Karen's office, in my grandmother's sweater and a skirt I had made myself from strips of old leather skirts. She was Dr. Paris, to me, right then, and a tenured instructor of undergraduate artists. She had her pad out and carefully angled the blinds to favor me with just the

right amount of sunlight. I was on her couch, lounging back gracefully and staring up at the ceiling.

— Hold still.

— I am.

— You're moving your foot. Are you uncomfortable?

— Sorry. I'm fine.

And the charcoal swooped across the page in loops and whorls and lines. I couldn't see it. I didn't know what I looked like.

— I've had a lot of my students pose for me. I have ten years of sketch books. It's a long term project of mine. Students drawn by their teacher.

— Do you remember their names?

— Only faces. Some of the names, maybe. I remember faces, Arachne. Tell me about your sweater. Did you make it?

I smiled. I shook my head no. I didn't tell her anything else about my grandmother's sweater.

When she was done with the finishing touches, she sprayed the paper with hairspray, and covered it with wax paper.

— Can I see it, Dr. Paris?

— Oh... Maybe later. I'm not done.

I unlocked the door.

— That's it, right?

— Yes, thank you for doing this. I'll be sure to show you the final painting.

I turned to leave, then paused at the door. I looked back at her. She was watching me. She would not stop watching me.

— What is it, Dr. Paris?

— When an artist sees another person, she only sees the surfaces of the other — lines, shapes, colors of the skin. When an artist sees another artist, the energy in the air is electric, and invisible.

— You're imagining things, Dr. Paris.

I closed the door and went to the studio to work a while until I had to go to work. I was trying to condense everything Nicole ever said about be-

ing a cocktail waitress into a single canvas. She was working at a strip club every Saturday, now. She was surrounded by men who thought they had the right to touch her a little, and it was all right to everyone who worked there because it made for great tips and it was better than being a stripper. She moved glasses among the crowd, a hand brushed her leg, or her arm, or pressed against the small of her back, and sometimes other places. I couldn't think of anything meaningful because I loved her too much, and wanted something better for her.

All sketches abandoned.

All imagery lost.

I ran out of time. Tonight was Nicole's night at the café, where she was going to be performance painting.

Nicole had set up a shower curtain in a circle around herself and her canvas, with sultry tango music from an antique record player. She was, supposedly, stripping naked and painting her self-portrait naked from behind the curtain. Every few minutes she'd ring a bell and shove the damp canvas out from behind the curtain to show everyone what she had done so far, along with an article of clothing. We clapped for her emerging artifacts, but we did not know if she was wearing clothes or not.

I assumed she was naked before she started. That was her style. I had woven her long hair into the mesh of a wicker basket while she was asleep, once, and she woke up instantly, angry because I had forced her to wear something when she preferred to be sleeping naked. We had never made love, but did she even know what it did to me when she was nude before me, unmoved and unmoving like a statue? God, she was so beautiful, and so free.

This was her performance. Nicole was painting herself unclothed, standing behind a curtain, sending out clothes that covered whatever region she was painting. Shirt for torso, and pants for legs. Hat for head, and hairband for long, long hair. A bra, and panties. Socks, last of all. Each artifact was joined by the canvas for a moment, with the new paint from the prior piece of clothing gone. The canvas was wet and glistening, as if fresh from a shower. At the end of the painting, she stuck her naked arm out, with the canvas in her hand. She put the canvas on a stand there, and

left her arm out. She spun her hand seductively, like a tango dancer. She reached her other hand out, as if she was about to rip the curtain away in a revealing flash.

People clapped and cheered and egged her on.

The curtain opened, and she wasn't there at all. She was gone. Her painting remained, beside the empty bathtub and the clothes.

Nicole never returned. She had permanently transformed into an emptiness. We could hear her voice, gasping at first, then screaming. Crying without tears and babbling for help, and terrified. People cried out, terrified by this miraculous event of paint and form. It was a spectacular painting.

I don't think she knows what happened to herself, even now. Did she want to transcend so young? I think she would have preferred to fall into her own eyebrow like Frida had done, deep into old age by then.

4

So, the next thing was figuring out what happened to Nicole. We could hear her voice wandering the café, rushing in and out of the bathroom, muttering into the mirrors and reflective chrome surfaces of the equipment, but we couldn't see her or touch her. She didn't seem to talk back to us, either. Her voice lingered on after the flesh had faded out.

The café owner called Karen immediately after the police. The police thought it was just a trick, took a report and left us to our own devices.

Karen came to the café right away. Everyone thought she might help us figure out what had happened. She might recognize some sign in the painting that had remained in the café, or some snippet of historical artists that provided some clue. She told us all about the explosion that had killed Rembrandt's greatest student — how the art was so intoxicating it had a fume to it, and could not remain in this world without an explosion. She knew all about the way the dwarf had poured his height out of his body into these amazing canvasses and posters all larger than life — huge! How the master Impressionists had painted with their very eyesight, until they wore it away completely. The Muslims and Protestants had discontinued such things as realism to protect their painters from that which defiled the way God created

skins and bones.

In the café, Karen circled the bathtub, searching for a trap door. She ran the curtain around, looking for any sign of a trick mirror, or lighting gimmick. She stood in the center, closed the curtain and opened the curtain again. There seemed no sign of what had happened inside the tub.

Karen said there was nothing to be done for Nicole. She had poured so much of her pure form into the canvas that she was doomed to haunt the painting, disembodied. She talked for a while, sometimes, but that faded as she forgot how to speak. Then, she babbled a bit, like an infant. In time, even that would fade. It's hard to talk when you have no lungs. Not every ghost can manage it. As long as we treated the painting with respect, we wouldn't have to fear a poltergeist, or anything like that.

We all thought it was awful, except Karen.

— As long as this painting lives, so does she. She has made herself immortal. Look at this fabulous canvas! To make even one masterpiece worthy of the old masters! And, what a story for docents to tell!

I didn't know what to think. It was awful, but it was also the greatest painting I had ever seen. Nicole's final painting was genuinely, unequivocally amazing, like a nude Mona Lisa, or a Guernica with a woman's smooth lines and curves instead of protoplasmic war. The saints must have been artists, communicating their message to the illiterate masses with beautiful art.

Karen carefully framed the painting, free-of-charge, and hung it in a place of honor over the café's fireplace, where the auction commenced. She said we should treat it kindly.

I leaned in close to the canvas, where the individual brush strokes smeared the paint into form. Beneath the paint, holding it and shaping each stroke like the tightened sheet of Nicole's deathbed was woven thread.

Canvas is a cloth. Paint is lines of stain upon a weave.

With Nicole gone, my obsession with woven things did not diminish.

5

Alone, in the night, I listened to Nicole's neighbors having sex and wondered if any sex was really worth all that noise. None of mine had ever been worth it. But, with Nicole, it might have been.

In the morning, I had class. After class, I went to the studio to work on assignments for class. I had done all these portraits of women with thin, narrow faces, and conservative clothes. Their faces were too small for their bodies. The portraits were drawn flat, like German Expressionism. Dignified women, with dignified, cold demeanors. Under the hands of the women, I jabbed sewing needles into the canvas, with malformed knitting projects — crooked scarves in ecstatic colors, pirate skull and bones, and little sweaters too small for anything but dolls, or too large for anything human.

They were awful. I couldn't stand them. They were jagged. The ideas didn't meld together, and there was nothing I could do about them. I cleared a space in my studio. I started over.

I sketched protoplasmic shapes, like sea creatures being born in loamy water. I painted precise, whimsical shapes. I didn't just throw them onto canvasses. I shaped them into classic iconographic poses. Madonna and child. Mona Lisa. The Last Supper. Christ Blessing. Francis Assissi with the Animals. All of these bestial, animal, water shapes, but sharp at the edges, and no colors at all — just charcoal and pencil weaving together into form upon a blank canvas.

I liked that fine for the moment. I had class again; then I could crawl into bed and sleep until the sounds of other students' bella nocturnes — drinking and shouting and fucking and snoring.

I got up in the dark, turned my computer on. I angled the light to keep it off Nicole's couch as if she were sleeping there. I looked over at her empty furniture. She was gone. I had stolen the key to her dorm room from her clothes at the café, and I had been staying there, because it smelled like my lost friend's body. When she transcended, I had quietly, unofficially moved in until her parents could come to claim her things. I wanted to be near her things. They smelled like her.

I pulled the computer up all the way. I turned on

the lights. I e-mailed Karen, and asked her if we could get together again, for anything.

I was lonely.

Karen e-mailed me back three days later saying she was not supposed to date students, but she was willing to be my friend.

I went over to her house for a dinner party she was throwing. Other professors were there, and some graduate students, along with their requisite significant others.

The first thing she showed me was a real, honest-to-goodness Van Gogh painting of sunflowers that her grandmother had bought back when the Paris family were wealthy industrialists. The painting was hanging on the wall, in the living room. People crowded around it. I looked at it once, then toured the rest of the house, because she had her portraits of students up all over the walls — some dressed, some half-dressed, some undressed. They were technically proficient, but they did not transcend.

She came up behind me and asked me if I was looking for myself on the walls.

— No. I was just... curious.

— I'm almost done with yours, you know. It's drying right now. Would you like to see it?

— If you want me to see it. Will the party miss us?

— Them? Of course not.

So, we went to her studio on the top floor of her house, where she had the most natural light. She had the canvas facing away from the door. We walked over to it. It was covered with a tarp.

— Be honest with me, Rachel. I don't want you to tell me you like it if you hate it. I want you to tell me the truth.

I shrugged. I saw her hands were shaking.

— You're nervous?

— Of course.

— Why?

— I'm always nervous about this sort of thing. Why wouldn't I be nervous? Aren't you nervous when

you show your work to others?

— I guess I am. But, you're a professor. You do this all the time. Haven't you done this a hundred-million-billion times?

She smiled, sadly. She looked down at my neck, and the curve where my neck met my collarbone. She spoke softly.

— This is a bad idea....

— Look at you. You're trembling.

Her knees were shaking, too.

— It's just... I don't think it's good enough. It's not good enough to show you. I'm not good enough. Not like Nicole. I'm nothing like her. I'm terrible.

She touched my hair. She pushed my hair away from my shoulders. Her lip was trembling. She leaned over to me, to kiss my forehead. Then, we hugged a while.

— I'm so sorry you lost Nicole. Can't we just be friends and not have to be artists or professors or students or anything?

— No. I'm sorry, Dr. Paris.

— Karen. Please, just call me Karen.

— I'm sorry, Karen. I miss Nicole so much that I can feel it in the bottom of my feet and the top of my head. I'm empty I miss her so much.

— I'll never transcend the form. I'll never be immortal.

— Why would you want such a terrible thing?

We held each other close a while, and we both wept a little.

Karen was terrified of my gaze upon my own portrait. If she was scared of me, I was good enough.

I remembered my grandmother. I knew what she would do.

Downstairs, I asked anyone if they had been to the café where Nicole had transubstantiated. They looked at me like I was crazy, because now that Nicole's ghost was there — her voice, I guess — screaming in people's ears, and whispering crazy things in the restroom mirror where she had no image looking back at her — well, let's just say the place wasn't as popular

as it was before.

— Karen, we should do something for Nicole.

— I should buy her painting. It's fabulous.

— Don't you care that she's suffering?

— She's luckier than all of us. She's immortal now, a pure being.

I left. Looking back on it, I wish I had broken something priceless, like spilling wine on the Van Gogh. I had this image in my mind of Karen sitting in a chair before her Van Gogh, mentally distraught that nothing she would ever paint or draw or sculpt would ever amount to a single petal of a single sunflower on Van Gogh's immortal canvas. I wanted to destroy it, for her sake. And, to hurt her, too.

I went to the café. It was mostly empty, now. They were down to just one staff member: the owner covering all shifts. She sat reading, alone, waiting for anyone to come in to the store. She saw me, and stood up. She straightened her clothes.

— Where is Nicole?

The owner slumped against the counter again, and waved towards the restroom. I walked back to where I could hear something murmuring, wordlessly. I wondered if Nicole had lost her mind, yet.

— Nicole?

The wordless sounds meant nothing. I don't think she recognized her own name anymore.

— Nicole, listen, I'm going to try to help you, okay? But, you just have to stay here, and hold still. I'm going to get something to help you. I have an idea, okay? Just try to hold your head together. Think of your mother... Mommy... Mama....

Her wordless noise picked up the mantra.

MamaMamaMamaMamaMama

— Remember your mother, Nicole. Remember your grandmother, too, okay? I'll be right back.

I ran to my dorm room. The sweater was in the closet.

To weave her back to life, I jammed hairpins and take-out chopsticks into the matted, stinking yarn. They reminded me of my grandmother. Maybe they'd

work for hers. I poured lemon cleaner all over the yarn until it smelled like dirty, wet dishes left to soak too long. The sweater was like a hideous yeti pelt. I held it up for her.

— Nicole, come here. I made you a sweater! It's your grandmother's sweater. You have to wear it. She made it special. Don't you remember?

I heard her voice in the air, fading and fading....

— Nicole!

Did she fade into the air? Did she run away? Did she fall into the smells of grandmothers and memories of masterpieces?

6

The café's closed down for good. There's only a little furniture left that didn't sell in the classifieds. The landlord hasn't been by in ages. No one wants the place, with Nicole here.

I haven't been to school in months. I haven't even been back to the dorm to help Nicole's parents arrange the memorial service. I won't attend any memorial for someone still alive. I'm living here, on the couch that used to be the place to watch young artists perform, to sip lattes from cups as big as pasta bowls.

I'm in the corner, in my grandmother's sweater. I'm sewing all the yarn bunched up into my sweater and reweaving it and resewing it and unraveling and unraveling to reweave it again. I will capture Nicole. Anything that can bend can be woven and sewn. Voices bend up and down. Screams are like loose

threads blowing wildly from the face of a fan. I weave bells into the thread, and lost guitar strings. I weave anything Karen brings me, and I ask her for more.

Karen comes by, with food, and large water bottles. She places them at my feet, and picks up the trash from her last visit, if it hasn't been added to the weave. Foil is added most of the time, and plastic silverware. I never add paper plates or styrofoam because they are greasy and ugly.

— Look at this amazing creation! Can I have it when you're done?

I wish she would shut up. I'm trying so hard to listen for Nicole. I know she's here, somewhere, fading away.

I remember my grandmother. This is exactly the sort of thing she'd do for me. My amazing creation is an act of love.

We always end up like this, we women in love. We always do. We weave our threads for our lost loves, story after story in the weave — all of the ancient transformations woven into talismen.

Karen said, in class, that Penelope wove her husband back to life in nineteen years. She caught him up in the sewing and unsewing until his lies and misdirections and evasions were no match for her masterful weaving.

I can do this. I will trade my life if I have to. I will transcend if I have to.

I miss Nicole. I still love her.





Love in the Absence of Mosquitos

by Mari Ness

Illustrated by Lynnette Shelley

When Andrea brought her new wife to the pod, the family welcomed her, of course, quite properly. And then, not intentionally, ignored her. They had issues of their own: the main huswife, their pod's Second, was leaving, taking a significant amount of the household income, and one of the more minor husbands needed significant surgery, and then they had all of the other individual and family issues that a pod might have. and Andrea found herself proposing marriage. She explained the relative newness, but stability of the pod; outlined their current eight members; stressed that they were licensed for a full sixteen, but had chosen to grow slowly, yet. They had rooms, many of them; three of their members were musicians; five of them loved cooking; the pod's house overlooked an ocean, and stood on land ringed by steady trees.

Andrea had hoped that her new wife, with her exotic looks, and the brilliant green tattoos gleaming against her dark skin, might prove a distraction, at least, but Vani merely smiled, and did not contribute much to the family conversation. They moved her into a room next to Andrea's, with a deep bay window overlooking the dark streets below, and Andrea helped her hang screens and music and hangings and plants.

After that, she touched Andrea's hands respectfully, and closed the door.

They had met at an art gallery, where Vani had been displaying her three dimensional light and music sculptures, images that had mesmerized Andrea's first wife. Holly had insisted that Andrea and she spend their contracted nights together at the art gallery, watching the sculptures, sometimes hand in hand, in deference to the old art traditions. In those old sculptures and paintings, Andrea's first wife half lectured, half laughed, people touched. Andrea felt comforted, somehow, although she could not have explained why, and ended up holding Holly's hand for even longer than might have been necessary. And so they were touching when they met Vani, who was circulating among the sculptures, her head half tilted, as if to catch any flaws in the music.

It had been a polite meeting, nothing more, and Andrea was surprised when Vani had requested her ID, still more surprised when texts had come a few days later, inviting her for lunch. A friendship formed,

Vani had listened, tilted her head, and agreed. She had ties to other pods, of course, but they were merely sexual and social, no more. She and Andrea had touched hands, their fingers lightly stroking each other. And then — Andrea was to remember this later — Vani did not move on, as expected, to contracts. Rather she smiled and leaned forward.

"You never considered going podless, did you?"

Andrea felt her mouth go slightly dry. "Podless? Well — no. Well. Perhaps, when I was much younger. In my schooling days." She had thought about it then, of course, or more precisely, dreaded it: what would it be like to be found undesirable, unproductive, alone? It had been a relief to meet her wife, and later her husband, to be politely welcomed into the pod, without ceremony.

"I've slept alone, of course," she added, defensively, and then wondered what she was defending against. "I still sleep alone," she added, and it was true: even with a wife and a husband she was sometimes left alone in her own bed. She claimed to others that she cherished these moments, which let her read and dream, but the truth was she hated it; she missed the warmth of another person. It was not entirely why she had proposed to Vani, of course — a fruitless line of thought. She would stop thinking it. She did.

Vani smiled at her, and stroked her fingers again.

“Podless people don’t have to sleep alone.”

“No, but—” How to explain it? “Children,” she managed, and then shuddered inwardly; Vani would begin to think her an incoherent idiot. But Vani smiled again. “Of course,” she said.

But Andrea did not feel any true “of course” about it. “But it’s more— it’s more—” She was turning into an incoherent idiot. She would have to watch her diet. “I like knowing I have family.”

Not her imagination: Vani’s smile was genuinely warm this time, almost relieved. “Naturally,” and this time it really was.

“So,” Andrea said, “you will then?”

A buzz came through: her first wife, Holly, requesting company. Andrea looked up at Vani questionably.

“I would be honored to enter your pod,” Vani said, and then she had formally, carefully, bent to kiss Andrea on the lips.



They had married a week later, outside of the pod, as customary, since Vani was marrying only Andrea, not any of the others, the arrangements made by Holly, who was as efficient in this as she was in all other things. Holly’s other wife, learning that Vani was an award-winning artist, had insisted on vacating her room for Vani’s use, correctly stating that it was one of few in the house that could double as an artist’s studio. All efficient, all correct. Andrea found herself remembering her second marriage, the way Holly had stood beside her as she had signed with her husband, the way they had written the contract to provide for some triad nights for all of them. This was different. Vani had requested, and Andrea had agreed, that the marriage take place by the ocean, on the sand: it added a touch of artistry, Andrea thought, of freedom, although she rather missed the flowers her first wife had given her.

They had spent the first night of the marriage together, alone, in one of the shoreline hotels — Vani had said that hearkened back to even older customs — and then they had entered the pod. Andrea saw Vani, as contracted, at least every four days, occasionally switching times to accommodate her other spouses, who were contracted on different periods. Sometimes

they also met at the pod meals, when the family, under the direction of their Pod’s First, made some attempt to gather and join in general conversation. It was not contracted, admittedly, but Andrea loved these meals, the flow of conversation, of laughter, of careful adult conversation. The pod had no children, although nearly half of them were genetically qualified; they had bonded too recently and lacked the financial resources, but those would come. In the meantime, they had this, and that was enough.

Vani did not spend every night at the pod, of course — she continued her ties with other pods, and even, Andrea suspected, a few podless companions. She was careful not to enquire closely; successful marriages required trust, and Vani had unhesitatingly tied a quarter of her revenue to Andrea’s pod, smiling as she did so.

On those nights, and on the non-contracted nights, Andrea often devoted herself to the pod. And the pod had much to distract them: the financial ramifications of the huswife leaving, and the surgery, and a few job and career changes; house repairs to make, and computers to fix; the lawn and garden to tend, cooking, cleaning, screens to watch. This and her own job kept her busy, very busy, and when she found herself sleeping alone, she found herself falling asleep almost immediately, worn out yet oddly fulfilled.

But marriages needed more than contracted time. She headed over to the room they had given Vani, a room large enough to serve as a bedroom and an art studio. She knocked; as a spouse, she had the right of automatic entrance, of course, but she had never been able to bring herself to use that, even with Holly after fifteen years of marriage. Vani’s silver voice floated through the door, welcoming. She stepped in.

Vani’s room bewildered her: not for the first time, she felt thankful that her pod kept to the sometimes controversial and frequently impractical custom of giving each pod member a separate room. Vani had placed a narrow bed in one corner — she usually came to Andrea’s room on their contracted nights — and above that placed layers of dazzling light sculptures, which endlessly shifted throughout the day and night. She kept her art tools by the large bay window that radiated light each morning.

Each remaining wall had been jammed full of shelves, in their turn jammed full of various intrigu-

ing and odd objects, some new, most very old indeed. Andrea could not identify half of them; they were the sorts of things that fascinated Holly more than she. Still, as always, her breath caught, seeing the fiery beauty and perfection of Vani's light sculptures. She had one in her own room, a marriage gift from Vani, but she never grew tired of them.

Yet every once in a while Vani would turn from her light sculptures, her music, to a much older form of art: pure painting, using the antique materials, the almost forgotten paints. The rest of the pod was slightly hesitant about this. In part, because the paints did smell, however faintly, and some of them were sensitive. But they could have accommodated the smell. The larger concern was that no one, except the rare museum, wanted pure painting anymore, or anything earlier than 2080 or so. That was the date, Holly said, that marked the true death of the artform. Vani was using her paints now, standing in brilliant blue robes near the window, brush outstretched. Andrea approached and touched Vani's fingers lightly. "I do not interrupt?"

"Oh, not at all." Her smile was kindly. "This portion does not need the same concentration."

Andrea peered over Vani's shoulder. She did not recognize the image — some mess of greens, apparently meant to be leaves, dotted with what seemed to be a swath of redness, which upon a closer look, seemed to be small, winged creatures.

"What are you painting?"

"Mosquitoes."

"Mosquitoes," Andrea said, letting the word fill her mouth. It was vaguely familiar to her, from some distant class or other, perhaps.

"Small, annoying insects that once covered the planet in vast numbers — the billions and billions, probably. They bit people, leaving welts and itching, and sometimes spread disease."

Andrea thought she remembered now. "A legend."

"No," Vani said. "Quite, quite real. We have dead ones enough, in the museums, and many fossils. And old images, if you care to see."

"No," Andrea said. She was an architect, an

engineer: she did not care about insects. But Vani did. "What happened to them?"

"They died, went extinct, I suppose you would say. About 150 years ago."

"Radiation?" Andrea said, uncertainly. "The global warming events? Volcanic dust? Solar flares?"

"Nothing so simple," said Vani, dipping her brush into the well of paint, then holding it thoughtfully over the canvas. "Humans."

A long forgotten word returned to Andrea's memory. "Pesticides," she said.

"Not really," Vani said. "Although yes, in a way." She placed the brush on her the canvas, then back into one of the paints, working slowly, methodically, almost as if Andrea was not there at all. "Pheromone re-engineering. The pesticides, as you know, were dangerous. To humans and mosquitoes."

They had said so, in school, Andrea remembered.

"So we rebuilt the pheromones. The molecules that mosquitoes used to find each other, to find mates. And from there, to reproduce. Halt reproduction, we said, and we would end the mosquito problem."

"But extinctions—"

"Oh, this one was not done hastily," Vani said. "They had no true ecological niche, these mosquitoes, and they spread disease everywhere. No, they were not needed. So we tinkered, and rebuilt, and sprayed the new pheromones into the air, and the mosquitoes were confused, and one by one, billions upon billions, they failed to find new mates, and so they died."

The painting glittered before Andrea. She did not like it. She preferred Vani's other work, the work that was always in motion, always surrounded by music. The music that was more Vani. "And?" she said.

"Very little and happens after death," Vani said, and she reached forward to pull the — screen? no, canvas was the word. Andrea felt a certain pride — or smugness — for remembering that. "But they say, after that, that humans stopped loving. Or rather, stopped falling in love."

Andrea laughed. "How funny."

"Yes," said Vani, although she did not laugh.

“Whatever dies, was not mixed equally/If our two loves be one, or thou and I/Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.”

Andrea was confused. “I do not understand.” She was an engineer, not a poet; she liked straight lines and balance, things of beauty and grace, not the chaos of words.

Vani smiled. “Nor do I. Perhaps, with mosquitoes, I used to.” She glanced at Andrea, took pity on her confused face. “A bit of a poem, by a man named John Donne. Sixteenth century.”

“Ah,” said Andrea. She admired the exquisite lines of old buildings, the gardens that often enveloped them, but she had little use for its poetry. “Is this—” and she waved her hand towards the painting — “because you miss mosquitoes?”

Vani laughed. “Not at all,” she said. “I hate it when my skin itches.”



Andrea had dinner the next night with her husband, an astronomer and mathematician. A bit of dreamer, to be truthful, less practical than the other members of the pod. It was something she enjoyed about him. They ate, and he discussed his research, the intricacies of rock systems on the other side of the galaxy, the interplay of cosmic waves and time, the communication of light. They touched hands. They selected music, in careful turns.

“Have you ever read poetry?” she asked.

“Some, I think. Back in school.” He chewed, thought. “Shakespeare, I think,” he said. “A few others. I confess I never much got it. I’ve always been more of a numbers person.”

“As I.”

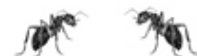
They talked on, through the evening, touching each other’s hands. She was comforted. He showed her screens of the stars, of their predicted, chaotic, mathematical movement, and she shut her eyes for a moment, imagining dancing through space, a tiny dark speck, pulling her energy from the glowing fires around her.



To Andrea’s mild distress, Vani began failing to show up to their contracted days and nights. Holly reminded her that Vani was new to a pod, had been connected to pods, yes, but not formally, and was uncertain of the difference. Adjustments had to be expected. Her husband did not bother with explanations — sometimes, marriages were merely inexplicable — and instead, gathered Andrea close on the nights they had together. She sniffed his skin and felt comforted. She still had hopes of marrying Jesse, another member of the pod: perhaps, now with a husband and two wives, she would be perceived as stable enough to attract his interest. And she had Vani’s sculpture, dancing above her — them — at night.

She ventured out again, alone or with her husband, and met another potential spouse, this one already triple married into another pod. She still had solo days and nights, however, and was not of the temperament to enjoy this; the alliance between the pods would be beneficial to both. Andrea’s husband could even, eventually, form part of the arrangement, they thought. It was all very suitable, and Vani smiled at both of them when Andrea brought her third wife home to meet the rest of the pod.

Vani left some time later, without a formal ceremony. She had married only Andrea, not anyone else in the pod, so the arrangements were simple enough. She left two tubes of paint with Andrea as a remembrance gift. Slightly odd, but Andrea placed them on her shelf anyway, near the keepsakes left to her by other parents, other spouses. She was not sad, of course; no one was ever sad anymore, not really. Even if she could never quite stop thinking of Vani, podless, in some studio someplace, welcoming guests, surrounded by her paints. And even if she had finally broken down and bought a small painting — with real paint — touching its surface from time to time. And even if sometimes, when she looked at the paint, she thought perhaps her skin was itching. But she had no way to be sure.



Love in the Absence of Mosquitoes ©2011 by Mari Ness
The Mosquito © Lynnette Shelley

So Speaketh the Trauma Gods

by John Medaille
Illustrated by Linda Saboe



Ms. Rawlings, the seventh grade social studies teacher, and Mr. Haskell, the eighth grade life science teacher, are trapped in the crawlspace above the cafeteria ceiling. Mr. Haskell, who is insane, mutters, "Consider the aphid, prized for its honeydew."

Ms. Rawlings is furious. They have been trapped in the crawlspace for three days. Her clothes stink and she thinks that she is getting emphysema from all the balls and carpets of dust that lie like diseased gray rabbit skins on top of the white cork paneling of the ceiling. It is hot in the crawlspace, and yet mildewy. It is dark in the crawlspace. There is nothing to eat in the crawlspace. Until yesterday she and Mr. Haskell had been sucking the condensation off the air conditioner

tubes and vents for water, but that had coughed and wheezed dead yesterday and it would never turn on again.

Ms. Rawlings is most furious at the song. That damn Freak Baby. Ms. Rawlings hates the song more than she hates the children. She hates it more than she hates Ronald Reagan Middle School and all the severed arms and legs on its soccer field. She hates Freak Baby more than she hates this crawlspace, which is a horrible and ugly word, crawlspace, and more than she hates Mr. Haskell, who lies prone beside her in the ceiling and whose armpits emit rancid, needlelike clouds of body odor whenever he changes position. Mr. Haskell, whose teeth are bad and

whose mustache is ridiculous, Mr. Haskell who must have been mentally ill or he wouldn't have lost his mind so easily.

Mr. Haskell is not aware that Ms. Rawlings is furious. He lies on his stomach, peeking through the pinhole he poked in the ceiling panel with the tiny screwdriver from his eyeglass repair kit, and he watches what goes on on the cafeteria floor. He would make notes about the goings on if he could, but it is too dark in the crawlspace to read what he would write. Now and then he mutters crazy things.

Freak Baby. Ms. Rawlings hates Freak Baby. They are humming it in the cafeteria, they hum it all day and night. The vibrations rise up to the cafeteria ceiling. It makes the latticework and ducts shimmy slightly, resonating, skewering the hum under Ms. Rawlings' skin like ringworm. At least they're not singing the words anymore, which was worse. They just hum the beat and the chorus, the incessant, dancey rhythm. They would hum Freak Baby forever, Ms. Rawlings knows. They would hum it after the teachers in the ceiling starved to death. They would hum it as the teachers' bodies desiccated and dehydrated, until there is nothing left of them but little, dry moth husks on the windowsills. The children would hum it for a thousand years.

This was all Freak Baby's fault.

"We're going to die up here," Ms. Rawlings whispers.

"We certainly will," agrees Mr. Haskell. "I feel safe in saying we can say goodbye to sperm competition. Pupa. Pupa. Have you ever read *Childhood's End*?"

It had started, the end of the world, three days earlier, on a Wednesday, third period. Ms. Rawlings was teaching world cultures. She was projecting an array of powerpoint slides on the board, showing photos of step farming and Asia. Flooded rice paddies cut staircasewise into the sides of hills and mountains. Ms. Rawlings was thinking of all the mosquitoes in those green, waterlogged, communist jungles.

She told the class, "Step farming represents one way in which humans modify and develop the environment for their own benefit. Who can tell me one way in which culture would benefit from altering the landscape in this way?"

No one raised their hand. The students had been very quiet this period, and all day. Even the compulsive talkers and gigglers were quiet, staring forward at the slides of disfigured, Vietnamese mountains. "Anyone?" Ms. Rawlings said.

Not even the know-it-alls raised their hands, and the know-it-alls always raised their hands.

"Remember," Ms. Rawlings announced, "class participation is fifteen percent of your grade."

The singing started somewhere in the back of the classroom, just a faint, prepubescent voice. It could have been either a boy or girl voice; Ms. Rawlings never could figure out which child it was that started singing. Then it spread, an airborne influenza, from student to student, until it warbled and waved up to the front row. The children sang, in unison:

*I go pump, pump, pump that rump
All the shawties in the party
Want my fine ass flow.*

They sang it dully, without intonation or verve. They were not smiling.

Ms. Rawlings said, "That's enough of that."

The children sang:

*I bounce my nasty biscuit
Too bad if you missed it.*

"All right. Stop that right now," said Ms. Rawlings, and she flashed the class her withering teacher look, the look that never failed. She had worked on this withering look for years, even practiced it in the mirror. It consisted of a pursed mouth and a lowered, hooded, snakelike gaze of deadly discipline, with one eyebrow cocked to strike. It was her look that said she meant business and heads would roll. It always reduced a class to petrified terror. Except for now.

*My legs they be Mercedes
But my bootie's pure Ferrari.*

Sang the class, unterrified.

Ms. Rawlings had heard the song, of course. Everybody had. It had been on the radio for weeks, even on the smooth pop lite station that Ms. Rawlings listened to. She had heard students singing it in the halls before, during passing periods, and she

had coolly growled at them to knock it off and they had. Even the elderly teachers, Mrs. Ackers and Mrs. Bremen, had heard Freak Baby and had spoken of it in the teachers' lounge, of its insipid obscenity. It was, Ms. Rawlings remembered the word, an earworm. A pneumatic parasite of a pop ditty and even the conservative would find themselves drumming its spastic beat on their desks.

Such ubiquitous conqueror earworms seemed to pass in waves like pinkeye and lice through the junior high about every six months, and within a month they were used up and forgotten and she couldn't even remember the song's hook or whatever particularly repeated phrase about glocks or hotties or junk-shaking had offended or amused her. Ms. Rawlings had been sure that Freak Baby would come and go like all the rest of the earworms, that it would be consigned to the abused and grafittied lockers of the students collective memories and that it would not end Western Civilization with a final, eminently danceable assault on decency and virtue.

But still, during that third period three days ago, the students did not stop singing Freak Baby. Ms. Rawlings noticed that their eyes did not appear to be focused.

*My naughty body ass go smack
It big and bangin' as a Cadillac.*

"Children," Ms. Rawlings said. "Students." She did not scream. She knew from long experience that if she screamed they won.

*I rub my bits up on yo man
Got them tasty chops
Make 'em all go 'damn!'*

Ms. Rawlings considered, but only for a second, that this was just a prank. She remembered her own years in junior high when some mastermind ringleader would orchestrate all the students in class to drop their pencils in the same second, making an anticlimactic, wooden clatter. But Ms. Rawlings did not consider the youth of today to be either so well organized or as easily amused as that. Also, they weren't smiling. No smiles at all.

*I go pump, pump, pump that rump
I got that disco butt
I be your chica queen*

*I be your Freak Baby
Freak Baby
Freak Baby.*

Ms. Rawlings backed herself to the hallway door, her hand spiderwalked the wall to its knob. The students stared ahead and sang without emotion. They did not look at their teacher or at the rice paddies gouged in swaths on the sides of foreign mountains. They looked and sang towards nothing or to something far interior. Ms. Rawlings wondered briefly if she was doing something cowardly or immoral, but then she knew she didn't care. She opened the door softly and slipped out into the hallway and closed the door without a click behind her.

Alone in the hall, Ms. Rawlings heard the song, Freak Baby, echoing out in a low, synchronized susurrus. She realized it was coming not only from her class but from every classroom in the hall, possibly from every occupied room in the school. How had they done it, at the same instant? How were they keeping time with each other so exactly?

I go pump, pump, pump that rump.

Said Ronald Reagan Middle School. The lack of laughter was the most disturbing thing.

She heard teachers in their rooms trying to restore order. Some were shrill and hysterical:

"Stop that this instant!"

"I'm going to count to five! One! Two! Three!"

"Okay! That's it! That is it!"

One low, baritone coach voice repeated, "No. No. Bad." Like it was a prayer.

Ms. Rawlings put a hand over her mouth and shivered a little. Freak Baby did not stop, but here and there, throughout the school, screaming rose over it. It was no longer the screaming of reason or the imposition of order and good citizenship, it was a pained screaming. A dying screaming. It was the screaming of adults being killed.

Ms. Rawlings sprinted from her station in the hall, towards the administration office. Behind her, doors crashed open and there was the squeaky patter of sneakers on linoleum, and that song of course. Ms. Rawlings bolted past the classrooms; she saw the insides in her peripherals; the students were calmly

tearing the teachers apart, raising them by their flailing arms and legs and pulling and pulling, like a tug of war until something came off. Quartering, that was called. Little hands reached for Ms. Rawlings' flapping hair and ankles and she slapped them away. The students were dead-eyed and introspective. They did not run or jump. Ms. Rawlings saw that the administration offices were overrun already. Hideous gurgles and wails issued from the vice-principal's office, along with the pump, pump, pump that rump.

Ms. Rawlings was unsure which way to run, she balled up her fists and put one of them into her mouth and squealed like an animal. A hand clutched her elbow and pulled, she chopped at it with the heel of her hand. She said go to hell. But the hand was strong and pulled her, writhing, into a utility closet with mop buckets and jugs of disinfectants. It was only in the closet that Ms. Rawlings noticed that the hand that pulled her was attached to Mr. Haskel and his moustache.

Mr. Haskel told her, "Consider the thrip. Consider royal jelly," because he was already insane.

They listened to the chaos unfolding outside the closet, until the screaming stopped and only Freak Baby remained. Later they felt around in the dark and found the trapdoor to the crawlspace and there they were.

They had waited for some authoritarian force to descend, some group of helmeted men with rifles and hot chocolate. They had waited for the army, the National Guard, SWAT, the Red Cross, anyone, to come. On the first day they had heard distant, warbling sirens and once Mr. Haskel thought he heard a helicopter. Then there were two insignificant sounding explosions and the chatter of what might have been gunfire, and then there was nothing.

Mr. Haskel crawled along the ceiling, slowly so it didn't creak, careful not to put his weight on the flimsy, cork paneling and fall through down into the Freak Baby that was wafting up. He became entangled in pipes and light fixtures and by the first hour he was covered in grease and a fur of dust. He showed Ms. Rawlings a crack he had found between the exterior cinderblock wall and an air duct; they could see the outside world in a pie-slice wedge. The wedge showed part of the shockingly green soccer field outside, and they watched the students carrying dismembered teacher bodies — arms and legs and torsos — onto the

field and heaping them diligently in piles.

"Consider the mortuary bee," said Mr. Haskel. "Very wise. Hygienic. The hive mind tends to be no-nonsense. This is promising."

Beyond the soccer field, where the school grounds abutted the grounds of Gillman Elementary School, divided by a chain link fence, they saw elementary students similarly piling bulky, teacherly bodies on a playground. The elementary school children were not running, not jumping. They plodded at a calm and efficient pace. They stayed in straight lines without being asked or ordered.

"This is happening everywhere," Ms. Rawlings whispered to herself, not to Mr. Haskel. "The whole world is like this. They will never show the last episode of that show."

Mr. Haskel said, "The song has unlocked a disused portion of the human psyche. The portion where we keep the naked mole rat." Mr. Haskel said a lot of things. He spoke for three days. He made quiet observations to Ms. Rawlings and Ms. Rawlings thought about how there would never be any more electric blankets, no more coffee from Guatemala, no more romantic comedies, no weddings, celebrity pregnancies, new cars, bridges, poems, moon landings, or churches ever, ever again.

Freak Baby never stopped. Ms. Rawlings did not notice when the children switched from singing the song and reverted to a burbling humming of the tune. Mr. Haskel pricked his pinholes into the ceiling so they could spy down onto the students. It was the only thing to do besides be hungry and dirty and think about all the things that would never be made again.

On the first day, they saw the students gather in the cafeteria in a great mound. They had lost all sense of personal space, crowding up onto one another without complaint or anger. They began to dance, great looping figure eight shimmies on the cafeteria floor.

Mr. Haskel said, "This is known to beekeepers as 'the waggle dance.' They are divided into specialized members and castes. Consider the siafu of the Amazon."

Mr. Haskel pointed out to Ms. Rawlings, who did not respond, the 'workers,' the 'soldiers,' the 'drones,' the 'nurses.' Amanda Schnell, who had been the

tenth most popular girl in school before Freak Baby, became the 'queen.' She stood in a circle of uncommending middle schoolers and faced off in single combat with several rival girls. They approached each other slowly and made several passes in quick succession like robotic boxers. They lashed out and slapped each other, springing forward and butting heads. Amanda, her blond bangs gone orange with blood and her jumper irreparably ripped, knocked all contenders out of the ring. If she was happy with her victory, she gave no sign of it.

Mr. Haskel said, "Amanda has established her dominance as the virgin queen. Her rivals now become her subordinate workers and slaves and surrender their reproductive rights. They are relegated to sterility within the superorganism. Consider the bull walrus and the silverback gorilla."

Amanda Schnell became the center of the buzzing school, surrounded by cheerleader lackeys and football player drones who formed a tight, protective knot around her at all times and attended to her needs, feeding her with their own fingers, carrying her droppings away.

"Consider Henry Ford," said Mr. Haskel.

Workers foraged off school grounds on raiding parties, carried back massive loads - sacks of sugar, syrups, colas, Pixie Stix, and Pop Rocks. Mr. Haskel called it 'nectar' and advised Ms. Rawlings to consider the leafcutter ant. Students stuck balls of loose leaf paper into their mouths and chewed, then regurgitated white, plastery spitballs, which they spread onto the walls. Soon Ronald Reagan Middle School was jacketed in a blobby, organic wallpaper of pop quizzes, worksheets and emergency contact lists. The workers burrowed tunnels into the gym, the principal's office, the art room. A yeasty, paper-mache stink rose up into the ceiling. The school took on a constant, uncomfortable, moist warmth that made Ms. Rawlings sweat and shiver and itch.

"Consider temperature regulation among the termite mounds of the Kalahari. Damaraland hive construction. Oogenesis," said Mr. Haskel.

Pale, sickly little toadstools began to sprout up on the spittle-damp walls. The workers farmed the fungus diligently and ate it without delight or disgust. Girls, who only days before had had straight

A's and been members of the Spirit Squad, now secreted gelatinous, off-color honey into rubbery, hanging pea pods which dangled glottally from the rounded walls. Ms. Rawlings could not tell where they secreted the honey from, but when she slept she dreamed about it.

Queen Amanda Schnell, who became fat, now squatted, dumpling-like, on the cafeteria floor and laid several glistening, tennis-ball sized eggs on the floor. "When did Amanda get pregnant?" whispered Ms. Rawlings. It was the first thing she had said out loud in two days.

"Parthenogenesis," said Mr. Haskel. "All female, clonal, asexual reproduction. Consider the Komodo Dragon. I predict that within three months this school will be overrun with a brood of little Amanda Schnells. Haploid. Diploid."

"That's enough," said Ms. Rawlings. "Stop talking now."

"Larva," Mr. Haskel continued. "The queen honeybee can lay more than her own weight in eggs every day."

"You will be silent now, Mr. Haskel. I'm going to count to five."

"Red ant queens can live up to thirty years, but male ants live only a few weeks. I suspect all these boys will die off soon."

"One. Two," said Ms. Rawlings.

"Meiosis," said Mr. Haskel.

"Three," said Ms. Rawlings.

Mr. Haskel shut up for an hour.

The nurse bees attended to the eggs. The workers buzzed Freak Baby and carried out their labors. There was a day and a night, but there wasn't any difference between them.

Now, on the third day, Ms. Rawlings is saying that we are going to die up here and Mr. Haskel, in his craziness, confirms it. It is getting hotter and smellier and hungrier and louder in the crawl space. Ms. Rawlings is vibrating with anger pheromones and Freak Baby. Sometimes she finds herself humming it.

They could kick out the air vents, get to the roof and slide down the rain gutter to the boneyard of the soccer field. She could try to avoid the scouts and raid-

ing parties of child soldiers; she might make it home without being caught and pulled apart. She could have pancakes, and there might be enough water left in the pipes for a cold bath and she could die there; she thinks there are enough sleeping pills for that at home.

“Mr. Haskell,” she whispers in the dark. “What would happen if we went down there, into the school?”

Mr. Haskell does not look up from his pin-hole observing station, perched precariously on his belly above the weak paneling. “We would be considered foreign invaders, set upon by warrior ants and dismembered. Consider Napoleon Bonaparte.”

“What if we were to...talk, in some way, with Amanda? What if she let us become part of the hive?”

“Unlikely. We lack the essential chemical parasitism. Consider Varroa Destructor.”

“Mr. Haskell, focus. Focus. Listen to me. What if there was a new queen? How would that happen?”

“Supersedure,” says Mr. Haskell. “A new queen must establish dominance. Among paper wasp colonies, this is sometimes done when rival females eat the queen’s eggs. Or Amanda could be rendered unfit for the queendom. This might be accomplished by removing her arms or legs or reproductive capability. The hive might then activate a subroutine known as ‘cuddle death.’ The workers would crowd around Amanda so tightly that she would become overheated and suffocate. Then competitive females would battle for supremacy and the right to breed. Consider the wily yellowjacket.”

“Hmm,” says Ms. Rawlings. “I see.”

“It is, however, essential that we not interfere with the culture of the hive,” continues Mr. Haskell.

“Why not?”

“This is an evolutionary leap forward towards eusocial happiness. This generation is exponentially more important than ours. Consider a unified global hive. Consider a singular world brain. Consider its continent-sized thoughts and galactic yearnings. Fascinating!” whispers Mr. Haskell.

Ms. Rawlings says, “Yes. Yes. Fascinating.”

She then lifts herself up from her position in the crawlspace, and she crab-crawls to Mr. Haskell. With the heels of both her pumps, she kicks downward at the ceiling tile beneath the life science teacher. The panel groans dustily and breaks in half. Mr. Haskell manages to brace himself with his hands and knees on the metal latticework. He pleads, “Consider the archaeopteryx!” and Ms. Rawlings knees him in the small of his back and down he goes, tumbling the twenty feet down into the cafeteria below.

In the royal chamber, the court of the queen, an invader is detected. Chemical alarms resound throughout the tunnels and the hive goes into a frenzy, an anthill kicked open by evil children. Warriors rush to protect the queen. They find the outsider and latch onto his wiggling extremities and pull, to make him into smaller, less contaminating, parcels which will be expelled. As they do, the contaminant howls, “Consider the obstreperous platypus!”

As the hive busies itself, Ms. Rawlings scuttles through the crawlspace to the trapdoor and down into the utility closet. She opens the door into the hallway which is now soft and tubular and bile-smelling with regurgitated Spanish verb conjugations. Twenty feet to her left are the glass doors of the school, cleanly shattered. Outside is the world and home and whatever has happened out there. Instead, Ms. Rawlings walks over to a hanging honey bladder. She peels its thin, translucent film back with her fingernails and bathes herself in the globular honey that comes out. There are many hundreds of Amanda’s eggs lining the hall, and because Ms. Rawlings is desperately hungry and because she is what she is, she gobbles a dozen of them up quickly. The seventh grade social studies teacher then walks to the cafeteria, where the last of Mr. Haskell’s limbs is being toted away.

Upon seeing another invader, the hive goes mad again, buzzing Freak Baby at a panic pitch, but they are confused as well. This invader smells of honey and life and kin, but she is large and somehow too familiar and she cannot speak or think. Cautiously, the warriors advance on her.

“Wait!” the foreigner screams in some strange-thought non-speak. The foreigner addresses the queen, who stands in the middle of the throng, surrounded by a defensive escort of jittering, furious drones. The queen has grown great these three days, she has ballooned

up and is twice the foreigner's weight. Her abdomen hindquarters ripple with precious eggs. "Amanda, I challenge you for the queendom! Children, I want to be queen!"

The warriors do not understand the yammering and march closer and latch onto her fingers and calves.

"I go pump, pump, pump that rump!" the foreigner yells, speaking. The warriors relay chemical confusion, which smells like bananas.

I got that disco butt!

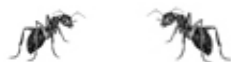
I be your chica queen!

I be your Freak Baby!

Freak Baby!

Queen Amanda emits an acrid, pheromonal cloud which fills the room. The hive calms and its temperature lowers. The warriors withdraw and form a ring around the maybe-invader. The queen dismisses her retinue of drones, and she sloshes her great weight into the ring and faces this strange, rivalrous female, who might be outsider, but might be one of the hive.

The two in the ring square off and circle. They make their hands into hooks and claws and they charge.





Plague of Locusts

by Sylvia Spruck Wrigley

Illustrated by Linda Saboe

"I was nine the year the aliens came to Dünnendorf," Frau Steigner said. She peered out from filmy eyes. Gray-white hair lay limp across her pink skull. "I remember it exactly. It was the year that Frau Tahir had to leave because she wasn't allowed to teach with her headscarf on. At the time, everyone was very concerned about terrorism. We thought that other people were the enemy. My new teacher was Fräulein Sittner who took us on a school trip to the zoo. We saw the monkeys from the Amazon and the zebras of Africa and then I remember that we watched the penguins splashing through the dark blue lake they called the South Pole. I remember the penguins." She rocked back and forth, eyes half-closed. The ancient rocking chair creaked under her sagging weight as if in pain.

Frau Steigner's words were dissonant and harsh: her strong accent obliterated the gentle consonants of their language. It was hard for the children to hear the simple words without thinking her stupid, but Third Teacher told them that it was important to just listen and try to understand. They jostled for position on the bright yellow plastic floor while the old woman's head nodded and shook. Rock sat near her friend Chys, trying to avoid staring at the papery skin of Frau Steigner's wrinkled face. There was dust in the corners of the room and the remnants of a web.

Third Teacher gave the children a warning glance. Once everyone was quiet and settled down, she left with the nurse. Their footsteps clicked against the hard floor of the hallway, disappearing into the distance.

It was frightening to be alone with the old woman. Rock shuffled backwards and crouched near the door, ready to be ahead of the crush if she had to run. She kept a jealous eye on Chys, who had scooted to the front, right up close to the runners of the rocking

chair. Chys wasn't afraid of anything. A few miscreants rough-housed at the back wall: Bubbler and his friends pretending that they weren't interested. When they got too loud Chys turned around and hissed at them to shut up.

"There was a loud boom," said Frau Steigner. "It sounded like a bomb. The adult persons panicked. We, we were not adults. The young persons." She twisted her fingers in her lap as she searched for the words. "The children, we splashed around the zoo lake. We all knew about the Twin Towers in America. We heard about terrorism but we did not think it could happen to us. It was exciting. Soon, the adults began to get themselves in grip and they took us away from the penguins and back to the school buildings. By that time, the television news stations began to talk about the ship from outer space, breaking through the sound barrier and landing in the city. They did not yet say the word invasion. We were told to go home and stay indoors."

Frau Steigner crinkled her nose. "Mrs. Hartman, who used to be kept in the room next to mine, she accused me of trying to cause self-importance when I say that they went to my house first. But it is not so. That is exactly how it happened."

Tinny music wound its way through the window, blasted through an old megaphone bolted onto the roof of an ancient metal vehicle driving past. Rock's mouth went dry at the thought of the chilled water sold by the rusted vans. Even Frau Steigner paused to listen. Her voice was softer when she continued. "You still use the old things. Those musics are from the ice-cream man, who would drive down our street with huge tubs of chocolate and strawberry ice cream. My mother would let me choose a sugar cone or a little paper cup and he would scoop it in." She shifted in her seat. "That

was when we still had strawberries, when we still had zoos. That was before the aliens came and ate all the animals." She exhaled a sigh of sorrow and closed her eyes. The children nudged one another.

"You shouldn't use that word. We're just creatures, just like you," said Chys, showing her sharp teeth. Frau Steigner opened her eyes and leaned forwards. The front few children scuffled back into the safety of the crowd but Chys stayed firm, antennae quivering.

"You came here to hear how it was, did you not?" said Frau Steigner, squinting at her. Her gravelly voice increased in force. "Then you should listen and you should not argue." Rock held her breath.

The resulting silence was broken by a soft clicking: Bubbler tapping his claws nervously against the chipped wall. Frau Steigner turned her head towards the sound and it stopped. She looked at each of the children as if daring them to speak. No one did.

After three slow heartbeats she leaned back into her rocking chair. "The Earth belonged to us. My mother was the first casualty."

"I don't understand why we even keep an old person like her alive," whispered Bubbler. His friends nodded their agreement.

Chys turned and snapped at him. "You shouldn't say that, either! She's the last one." Bubbler glared but held his tongue.

Frau Steigner leaned forward again and the children quieted. "Let me tell you how it was. I came to find my home broken into, the front door smashed. A pot of vegetable stew simmered on the stove but no one was there. I knew then that something terrible must have happened. My mother was gone. I ran through the house, calling her name, trying to find her. Then I found thick blood splattered over the bright green apples hanging from the small tree in the garden. A scrap of blue and white fabric stuck to the grass, a piece of her apron. I sat under the apple tree until my father came home. By that time, everyone knew what was happening. An invasion." She raised a hand to still the children before any of them could challenge her. "Your people, you were invading. You ate my mother."

"We don't eat people," whispered Rock from her position by the door.

Frau Steigner jabbed a bent finger at her. "You lock me up, you poke and stare, you call me a liar!"

Chys jumped to Rock's defense. "We protect you. You are too old and frail to live on the outside, in the heat."

Frau Steigner's voice rose to a high pitch. "You locked us up, you ruined our lands, you ate our mothers!" She pressed her hands to the sides of her chair but she did not have the strength to stand.

Bubbler held a hand up to his head, snapping his pincers in the silent symbol of crazy. His friends chittered. Rock edged into the doorway to look for Third Teacher.

"Don't you understand what you took from us?" shrieked Frau Steigner. "Don't you regret a single thing that was lost when you destroyed our world?"

Fast footsteps clicked along the linoleum hallway. The nurse pushed Rock out of the doorway and grabbed the old woman with her claws sheathed. Third Teacher dashed in behind her, a steaming cup of stewed bones still in her hand.

"She'll be fine," said the nurse. She rummaged in her pockets for a syringe and pinned the old woman to the rocking chair. "Sometimes she has these fits but they pass once she's tranquilized. I think you should probably go now."

Third Teacher nodded her agreement and motioned the children to follow her out. Rock could still hear Frau Steigner screaming in the distance as the class marched across the glowing sand in single file. The heat was blistering after the cool shadows of the building.

Rock positioned herself at the front of the line and tugged at Third Teacher's arm. "Is it true what she said, about her mother? That the colonists ate her mother?"

Third Teacher's smile broadened, her needle-like teeth catching the sunlight. "Ludicrous," she said. "Earthling propaganda. The humans claimed that we would eat anything." She shuddered. "But let me tell you, human dietary habits would make your stomachs seize. You wouldn't have wanted their food, even second-hand."

She eyed the children but only Rock was

listening. Third Teacher sighed and lowered her voice. “Perhaps, I don’t know, one or two humans *might* have been eaten, in the initial rush.” She raised her arms in a shrug. “You must remember that the colonists had been quite some time in the transport. I am sure they must have been ravenously hungry when they arrived. So you can see that it is possible that someone could not have recognized the dominant race of this planet and simply made a meal. But it wasn’t *common* in any way. The chances that her mother was eaten are next to nothing. She’s just repeating the same old lies.” She raised her voice again. “And we certainly don’t blame every human for mistakes made by one or two, now do we? We are tolerant and quick to forgive. What are we?”

“Tolerant and quick to forgive,” echoed the children.

Third Teacher’s smile returned. “That’s right.”

Rock was silent for a moment and then tugged at her teacher’s arm again. “What’s a penguin?”

“They were one of the odder inhabitants of this world,” said Third Teacher, shaking her off. “It was a black and white bird with a big belly. Rather fatty.”

Rock stared up at the bright white sky, squinting her eyes against the blinding sun. “I wish I could see a penguin,” she said. “I think that old lady misses the old world very much.”

“Don’t they all,” sighed Third Teacher. “Don’t they all.”

They reached the rusting station building and filed through it to the tracks. The children clambered into an ancient train. The animals were gone and Rock had never seen the green trees of the story. Oil and iron and steel remained, unaffected by the burning temperatures as the atmosphere disintegrated. It made for a sad memorial, she thought. All browns and greys and dark smudges.

Third Teacher led all the children into a coach for the journey back to the hive. They sat by the gaps of the windows to try to gain a small wisp of a breeze, chattering to each other until the train began to move.

“Did we all enjoy our trip out to see the human?”

The children called out their approval.

Third Teacher smiled at them. “Good. It is our duty to learn about the worlds we inhabit. What is our duty?”

“To learn about the worlds,” they shouted. A landscape of sand and broken steel flashed by.

“Correct. And to that end, I would like each of you to save a copy of what you learned to the swarm. One day, your memories will be the only record left of this world. We must fulfill our duty.”

Rock stared out the window, trying to imagine the world that the old woman had known, a beautiful globe of greens and blues. “I’ll remember the penguins,” she whispered as she stared into the bright-white sky.





Museum Beetles

by Simon Kewin

Illustrated by Seth Fitts

A scream rang then like a bell through the great halls, bouncing down gilded corridors, off stained-glass windows and ornately painted panels like a maddened fly trying to escape the place.

It was typical of Canto, of who he was and what he was, that he merely flinched at the sound. A single eyebrow was raised, a grey caterpillar amidst the larger, grey explosion of hair, but otherwise he might have been deaf to it. He continued with the meticulous analysis of the piece. In a great, blue, leather-bound ledger he wrote in tiny, neat letters, the ink black like the bodies of ants lying there in a variety of deaths. *Early clock. Gold, brass and steel. Quasi-astronomical symbols on the face. Simple escapement mechanism . . .*

Only when the entry was properly completed did he set down his pen, push back his chair with a sharp grating sound, and, all wiry haste, run from the Hall of Clocks.

He was old now. The seventy-seventh and current Curator had been writing his neat, ant-letters for nearly five decades. Still he moved quickly. Years of work with pieces large and small had kept him strong. He ran into the central hall. Giant skeletons filled the enormous space — long, ladder-necks stretching up, up into hazy, golden light that streamed through the ring of small, high windows at the very top of the space. The bone-heads lost in the beautiful, airless glow. Once, a young boy, he had sat and stared up at these huge creatures, wondering about how they could have survived in life when the great hall was the only place big enough to hold them. Now, his mind was all cataloguing and categorization.

Another scream. The mammalian wing. He ran

across the great hall, weaving between the legs of the vast skeletons and into the oak-panelled splendour of the twenty-mile corridor. As a young boy he had ventured far, far down there too. Had explored perhaps halfway along, glimpsing new rooms, new wonders all the way, before his nerve in the echoing dark had given way.

This time he only went a short way down. A group of children were in the seventh Primate Room. Some he recognized, others were strangers to him, their clothes unfamiliar, from one of the northern or western tribes. They stood now in a silent circle around the stuffed body of one of the great apes, standing erect upon a low, dusty platform. *Pan Troglodytes*, catalogued long ago by the fourth or perhaps even the third curator. The head of the animal shifted a little, seemed to move and writhe as if the ape was trying to free a stiff neck after so many years holding the same pose, or as if trying to understand big, new ideas forming in its sawdust brain.

He looked closer, stepping through the ring of children. Insects were devouring the head, writhing in a seething ball that spilled out of the eye-sockets and nose and mouth. They burrowed ferociously, as if each was desperate to get to the centre of the mass.

They were familiar. For a moment, he couldn't place them. He looked around the ring of faces, their expressions horrified, fascinated, shocked. At the back, a young girl that he knew a little stood apart. She alone looked pensive. Her hair was long and rather tangled.

"Any. The Great Beetle colony. On the lower Coleoptery floor. They must be from there. Have you been that way recently?"

"No, Curator." She thought for a moment, her

face very serious. “But that is only one floor down.” She turned and walked quickly away then, clearly intent on going to see.

He smiled. He was getting old. Perhaps, he thought, as he followed the young girl, it was even time to decide who would become the seventy-eighth Curator.



They stood around the large, exquisite, model palace that had housed the Great Beetle colony for so many centuries. How many generations of the insects had lived and died inside the labyrinthine, rambling structure of gold and crystal?

The two of them walked around slowly, looking for holes. Then Anya spotted it — atop the highest dome, a small cupola with a ring of slits to let in the air. They watched as one of the shiny, metallic beetles wriggled its way through.

“Fascinating. After so many years they suddenly find out they can escape. Why now I wonder? Why now?”

“I don’t know, Curator.”

“Why did they suddenly discover they were living in this golden prison?” He spoke mainly to himself. “I must go and check in the archives. See if it has happened before. See if they are dangerous.”

He hurried off towards the door, then turned.

“Thank you, Anya.”

The girl simply smiled.



The archive was the sacred, secret room that only the Curators went in. It was where the index was, the records that made sense of everything else in the museum, that which gave all the objects their meaning.

The walls were high with bookshelves — leather cliff-faces, red for the journals of the Curators on one side, blue for the index itself on the other.

Anya sighed and put the volume down. The chair beneath her creaked in the still, dusty air. She was

tired, feeling the aches of her age, her eyes prickling. She remembered that day more vividly than a great many that had come and gone since. It wasn’t merely the first mention of herself. It was also the first mention of the escape of the Great Beetles. Strange that it should be the same day. Now, these decades later, it seemed as if the Beetles had always been there, scurrying away wherever she went, turning up in every corner and niche — crawling, devouring, destroying. Almost, it seemed, exploring.

She had catalogued the Diaspora carefully, plotting their movements, trying to record what was being lost, trying to stay ahead of them. Now they filled all of the known halls and had probably spread out into some of the uncharted regions. Twenty years ago she had discovered the solar tower, its great, spiral staircase a single piece of polished brass. Doorways lead off to a whole series of unknown rooms full of intricate, strange machinery. At the very top, a small chamber with a circular, glass ceiling, reached after a full day of climbing and exploration. She had pushed open the green, copper door and seen the Beetles scurrying away.

“Curator?” The voice at the door was quiet, respectful. But it must be something important for one of them to come and disturb her.

She sighed. More and more, she liked to be here, amongst the reassuring rustle of the indexes, the smell of ages and the calm. She was getting old. Everything seemed to make sense here. Out there, so much was being destroyed. As fast as she could catalogue and re-catalogue, the objects were disappearing. The Beetles seemed to have worked their way into her consciousness, too. She found it hard to concentrate. Whenever she sat down to work on a piece, there would be movement somewhere in the shadows of her vision. A scurrying that seemed to be almost a deliberate distraction.

And what had she found up there at the top of that staircase on that great day? It was, perhaps, the defining moment of her career, the event she would be remembered for. Now she found that she couldn’t recall any of it. Her knowledge of those finds — glorious. . .dazzling — was fragmented, slipping away from her even as she tried to bring them to mind.

She arose and walked to the door. Her hand was on the familiar, rattling handle when she saw the

movement, tiny but unmistakable on one of the shelves to her left, little more than a candle-shadow flicker.

“Curator? Are you there?”

It couldn’t be true, they couldn’t be here too. She moved slowly to the shelf, carefully lifted down one of the volumes. Ten years’ work of the forty-seventh curator.

The pages were a filigree, just a lacework of tattered scraps. Where the Beetles had been, the words, the meaning, was gone.

In the end, after nearly a day of working themselves up to it, they had to break down the door to get to her. She lay on a carpet of shredded paper; pages from all the books she had hauled from the shelves.

They tried for a time to piece the scraps back together, but it was useless. So they made a pyre of the paper and, none of them speaking, set fire to their dead Curator’s body.



The fires burned brightly in the central hall. The bones of the giants made huge, shifting patterns on the tall, shadowed walls around them. The Curator looked down, back into the fire, moving in a little closer to absorb as much as possible of the delicious warmth. The books burned well, but too quickly. He watched as red leather smouldered and pages flared into flame, then reached behind him for another, ready to throw it on before the fire died.

The hunters had returned with little to show again. Hungry, anxious eyes had glanced across at him as the people saw what had been brought back. Some small, pallid fish from the Turquoise Aquarium, a few dried-out fruit. It was not enough, never enough. They looked to him for answers, of course. But what answers could he give? Food was scarce; they had to forage further and further afield. And everywhere they went, the Beetles were there before them, devouring.

He was sure they were larger than they used to be. Sure that they didn’t used to fight back. When he was young, they hadn’t used weapons had they?

Gun left the group of hunters and came and sat down next to him. They were silent for a while. She would be tired from the long hunt. She would speak

when she found the words. Theirs was an awkward relationship. At some point, he couldn’t say when, this fierce woman, her small eyes like knife-pricks, had replaced him as their leader. In such times, it seemed, they needed strength; not ancient wisdom.

“Curator, tell me. The books we burn for fuel. Are there many left? When I was young I went into the archive and it seemed that they were endless.”

“There are not many left now, Gun my friend.”

The woman, her furs ragged and tattered, nodded her head as if she had expected as much. She was no fool either. Intelligent in her pragmatic way.

“But are there any answers there for us? All that knowledge. . .” She trailed off; her weariness seemed to have come upon her.

The Curator looked into the flames. “The knowledge, the meaning of it all. . .it crumbles away. There is little left now. I am sorry.”

“Very well.” She sighed, seeming to muster herself. “Then I have something to suggest to you.”

The Curator said nothing; his authority was weak now; they no longer needed his assent to speak. He watched as a loose page from one of the books caught fire and burned. A thin line of angry red marched relentlessly across it, leaving behind a curled, crisp wafer of black. The ancient writing on it was destroyed — curious, angular letters, very small and precise. He watched as the words *Simple escapement mechanism* were consumed. He wondered about who had written them. About which ancient, forgotten Curator had laid them down with so much care and thought.

“Yesterday I climbed half way up the neck of the tallest of these giants,” said Gun.

They both knew this was forbidden. “Tell me why,” he replied quietly.

“Curator, I sat here and watched as the day came; saw the light coming through those high windows. And I wondered where it was the light came from. I wondered what was. . .outside.”

“And you thought that you, that we,” he paused, trying to understand these terrible new ideas,” — that we could go there? That there was a place outside of those windows. Outside of here. That we could actually go to?”

“Perhaps, Curator, yes. There is nothing here for us. We cling to life. It is forbidden by all our law, I know, but perhaps we should try anyway. Who knows what is out there?”

“Who knows if there is an ‘out there’?”

“I am willing to climb all the way up and see.”

She was asking for his blessing, his assent at least, although she didn’t really need it. They sat and stared together into the flames for long moments, watched as the books turned to smouldering cinders, shapes and faces appearing and disappearing in the shifting glow.

He imagined himself ascending that swaying column of bones, a precarious staircase leading up to the roof of their world. He looked up into the darkness and found himself wondering what might be up there. What might be out there.

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Out there we will need you again, Curator. There will be much that is new and dazzling.”

“But is it possible? That outside. . .” He spoke more to himself than to her.

“Curator, we used to have such knowledge, our lives were discovery and wonder. Perhaps we could be that again.”

He didn’t reply, but looked up into Gun’s eyes, the fire bright in them. He looked around at the others, then back at Gun.

He nodded.

Far above his head, unseen, a fly crawled across one of the high windows. It came across a crack in the glass and crept through.

Outside, it paused for a moment, before opening its wings.

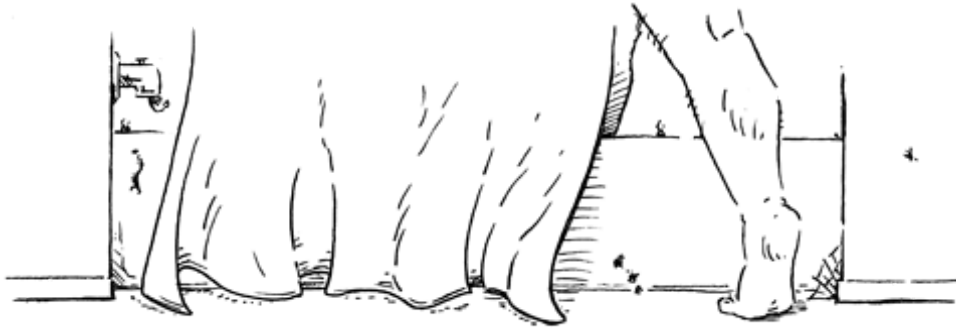


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They Wait

by Steve Barber

Illustrated by Bryan Prindiville



It's dark and it's dank and it stinks of soap scum and chemicals. Dead, rotting skin and bits of legs, carapaces and feelers float in the liquid caught in the elbow trap. There they wait. It's been months; years for some. Still they wait, and they remember.

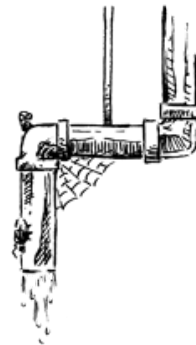


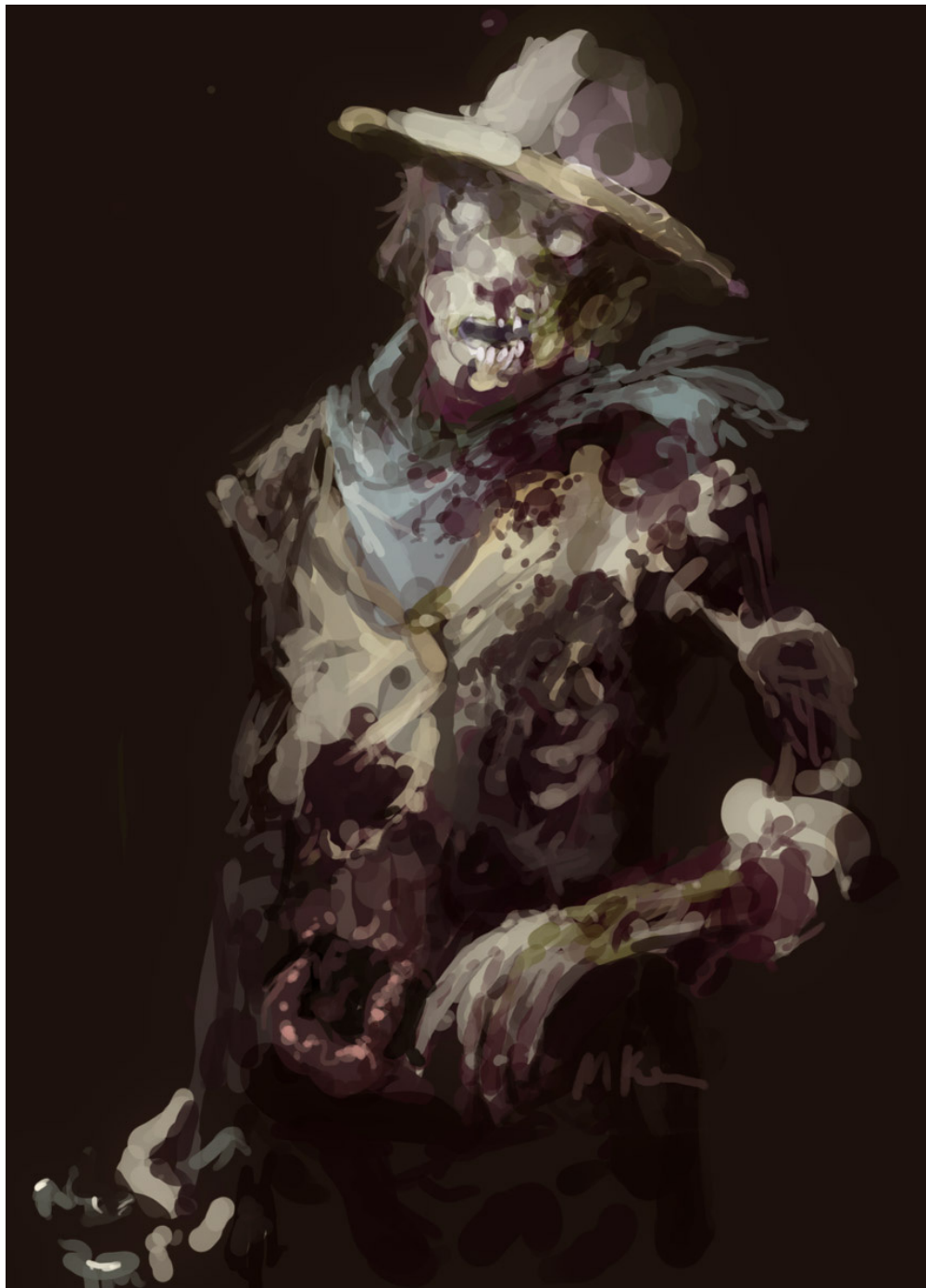
They remember the hard, white ceramic container with the slick, unclimbable sides. They remember the man flushing them toward the drain with a hose full of water so hot that if bugs could scream they'd have been heard for miles around. And they remember swearing revenge as they drifted into the vortex.

The man is old now, and frail, and as he steps into the shower, his knees give way. He falls and cracks his head on the faucet. Blood trickles into the water swirling down the conduit, alerting them to his presence.

Up the drainpipe they come. They surround the old man and nudge him toward the center of the tub where the stream of water catches him and carries him downward.

This can't be happening. It's nothing but a stupid childhood fear; the man thinks as the dead spiders and ants and centipedes float alongside and convey him through the drain to their haven below. Their wait is over. Their revenge is just beginning.





The Cowboy, the Horse, and the Scorpion

by Nathaniel Lee
Illustrated by Martin Koza

Vincent woke up with a scorpion on his nose. He blinked and tried to focus his eyes on the waving stinger. He moved very slowly as he reached for his hat.

“Careful,” said Horse. “You’ve got a scorpion on your face.” He whickered in amusement.

With one questing hand, Vincent found his dirty Stetson. He took a deep breath to steady himself, then, in one swift motion, scooped the arachnid away with the gently curved brim. The stinger plunged down, but caught only fabric.

Horse pawed at the ground. “Did you know they glow in the dark? Shine a black light outside some night and watch them.”

Vincent rolled to a sitting position, holding his hat in both hands. The scorpion was busily extracting its stinger, presumably for another assault.

“Fat lot of help you was,” Vincent said. “Don’t tell me you didn’t see the little creeper coming up on me in the night. I know them eyes of yours.”

Horse shook his mane — pure white, like the rest of him — and snorted.

Seeing little benefit in pursuing the conversation further, Vincent set his hat carefully on the ground and set about the task of breakfast, bringing the previous night’s embers back to full flame and fetching his smoke-blackened kettle and previous night’s bag of coffee.

“There’s a Holiday Inn two miles up the road,” Horse pointed out.

“I’m tryin’ to keep the spirit of the thing, you god-damned lame-brained mule,” Vincent snapped. “What do you care, anyhow? You’d have to spend the

night in the garage pretendin’ to be a motorcycle.”

“Merely cataloguing your oddities for the inevitable mental breakdown. Your psychologist will be interested.”

Vincent picked up his pack and heaved it onto Horse’s back. He buckled on the gun belt that held his twin pistols. He kicked dirt over the fire pit and went to pick up his hat. The scorpion still clung to the brim, waving its claws in warning.

“Tenacious critter, ain’t he?” Vincent pinched the scorpion by the tail and lifted it away. “I like a fellow what ain’t afraid to stake a claim.” He settled his hat on his head and climbed one-handed into the saddle. “Hyup. Let’s go, Horse. Lot of ground to cover before sundown.”

“You’re not keeping that thing, are you?” Horse started trotting across the dusty ground. It was a half-mile to the highway, where he could really open up.

“I think he’s cute.” Vincent dropped the scorpion onto the back of his hand. It stood a moment, stunned.

“It’ll sting you.”

“So? What can it do, a little thing like that? I’m immortal, ain’t I?”

“It could make your gun hand swell up and hurt like hell for two weeks. Just because it won’t kill you doesn’t mean it can’t make you miserable.”

“Ow.” Vincent looked down, where a red welt was already forming. “Well, let’s hope I ain’t allergic.” He chivvied at the scorpion with his other hand. “C’mon, now, fella; I’m tryin’ to be nice here.”

“You can’t train a scorpion, Vincent.” Horse never sounded out of breath, even when he was

running full-tilt. "It'll sting you every time. It's what they do."

"Mebbe no one's ever given 'em a chance to do better."

Horse could sneer with only the set of his ears. He did so now.

"Ow."

Horse whickered again. Vincent picked the scorpion up and put it back on top of his hat brim, where it couldn't reach his skin. He held onto the pommel as Horse picked up speed and tried to enjoy the ride.



"Here we are," said Vincent. "Rattlesnake, Nevada."

"And who was it that was doing the traveling? You don't have to tell me where we are."

Vincent tugged a glove on and tilted his head. The scorpion fell into his palm and immediately attempted to sting it. "Ride's over, little buddy," he told it. "We'll stow our gear and get to business. Gotta get the job done before all Hell breaks loose. We got till sundown, I reckon."

"I think this is my first resurrection trip. Are they usually strenuous?"

"Depends." Vincent slid off of Horse's back and retrieved the packs. He put the scorpion on a nearby rock. "Problem is, see, that the dead ain't here no more, and if they wanna get to here from there, they gotta come through a door. Thing about doors is they ain't selective."

"You're worried about hijackers?"

"Naw, but I think somethin' might push through along with old Eli."

"I'd have thought that the passage between worlds would be more of a semi-permeable membrane, something like the lining around a cell nucleus." Horse pawed the ground thoughtfully.

"Yeah, well." Vincent checked and cleaned his guns. They were very old, but they shone like new. Their names were Truth and Justice.

"You don't even know what that means, do you?"

"What I know is you are the god-damned lippiest demon I ever got saddled with."

"Pun intended?"

"What?"

"Never mind." Horse blinked slowly. "I'm not a demon, Vincent. You would know if I were."

"Might as well be, for all I know about it."

"Water does not ask why it flows to the sea."

"Meanin'?"

"You made your choice when you picked up your weapons."

Vincent spun the chamber, flipped the revolver shut, and tucked it away. "You know what? I'm just gonna go talk to the scorpion some more. At least that boy makes sense."

"Shouldn't we find the grave site and begin preventative measures?"

"I know where I buried the cold-hearted bastard. I can find it again. Besides, I need some coffee."



A short while later, Vincent and Horse stood over a pristine mini-mall parking lot. The setting sun sent their shadows reaching across the asphalt, black on black.

"Sonuvabitch," said Vincent.

"Is he still under there?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"We'd better find out fast."

Vincent shaded his eyes with his hand. "Gee-up, Horse. We'll ask that lady fair over yonder."

A slender girl was leaving the Fashion Bug, waddling behind a tremendous pregnant belly that seemed to belong to someone else. She looked up as Horse slowed to a halt, his hooves clattering on the pavement. Her eyes took on the brief panic and sudden lack of focus typical of victims of Horse's camouflaging powers. Vincent was used to speaking

with distracted and confused people; apparently, it took a fair amount of brainpower to edit a horse out of reality before perception hit the conscious mind.

“Howdy, ma’am,” said Vincent, tipping his hat politely. The scorpion fell off again, but he caught it deftly. It stung his wrist. “Ow. Can you point me to a place where a man could do a bit of readin’ on history?”

“You mean... the library?”

“That’ll do, most likely.”

“The regional branch is down the highway about twelve miles.” She pointed, but her eyes kept wandering back to Horse and flicking away. Vincent left before she could develop a serious mental block.

“It would be better to find an assayer’s office, or the clerk of courts,” said Horse.

“Library’ll be able to show us the way to there, if’n we need.”

“With your particular skill-set, I don’t foresee the research proceeding quickly enough. The sun will be fully set in approximately seventy-three minutes.”

“I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that.”



At the library, a bespectacled twenty-something with a goatee was obliged to resurrect the near-archaic microfiche machine so Vincent could search the newspaper archives. “Are you looking for anything in particular?” he asked. “It’s just... there are a *lot* of newspaper records since eighteen-eighty.”

“Well, mostly I’m lookin’ for a grave site. Fella name of Eli Carter. A real dog’s asshole of a man, not that you’d care. Used to be there was a buryin’ ground down the road a few miles, but it ain’t there no more. I wanted to see if it got moved afore the construction.”

“Hm. Tricky. I’m game, though. Here, check through these and these,” the librarian said, handing over two handfuls of canisters, “and I’ll see if I can pull up anything in the online archives. We’ve got a lot of it digitized. You said this was a rush job?”

“‘Bout as urgent as things get,” Vincent confirmed. “I would not be exaggeratin’ to say that the

immortal souls of the entire town could hang in the balance.”

“Because of an old graveyard.”

“Yep.”

“You ever see *Poltergeist*?”

“I ain’t much for the moving pictures. Ain’t got time, mostly.”

“Huh. Well, I’ll do my best. Microfiche is over there.” The man pointed to a bulky gray unit that hummed softly to itself in the corner. Vincent turned, and the man called after him, “Woah, hey, dude, you got a monster scorpion on your hat!”

Vincent waved dismissal and reached up to his hat brim. “Don’t mind him. I think he’s learnin’. Ow.”

Vincent set his hat on the next table and gave the scorpion sole possession for a time, which the arachnid seemed to enjoy.

The machine whirred and clicked as Vincent fed in the film and scanned the yellowed pages on the screen. He rubbed at his clean-shaven chin as he watched the years spinning past in a blur of smudged ink and moldering paper. “Long road gone,” he mumbled. A housefly bumbled by, fat and lazy in the library’s still air. Vincent snapped out a hand and caught the pest. He deposited the dying fly on his hat and watched the scorpion skitter over and stab joyously. “Maybe I’d be better off if I was like you,” he said. “A few hard-wired behavior patterns an’ gone by the winter frost.” His lips twisted. “Now that I think on it, it ain’t much of a stretch, other’n the difference in life-spans.”

The newspapers ran out with nary a peep about moving bodies or construction on the old boneyard. It just faded out of history, as though it had never existed. Vincent sighed, gathered up his research material, and paused when he reached for his hat. The scorpion stared at him, immobile.

“That fly was a peace offerin’. Friends, right?” He picked up his hat by the brim and placed it on his head. His fingers remained unstung.

Vincent whistled an old song as he returned to the reference desk. “No luck here,” he told the librarian. “Don’t suppose you found anything yourself?”

“Nothing about moving the graveyard, but I

did find a photo of the construction site. He turned his computer monitor to face Vincent, whose brow furrowed as he examined the grainy image.

“Those goddamned fat-cats,” Vincent said. “They didn’t even check. That’s the graveyard, right enough. All the markers was wooden, where there was any at all. Must’ve fallen and rotted and nobody thought to check on what the ground was afore they bought it. Right there,” he tapped at the screen. “They just paved it over.”

“That’s rough,” said the librarian. “So was he a relative of yours? Are you looking into your ancestry or something?”

“Naw. I shot him dead, but the ungrateful bastard’s fixing to undo my hard work.” Vincent squinted out the window, where the sun was half-sunk beneath the horizon. “Speakin’ of which, I’d best get a move on or he’ll manage it for certain.”

“Okay. Good luck with that.” The librarian shook his head as Vincent tugged his duster into place and strode outside. “This is going to make a *great* blog entry.”



Vincent threw his hands around Horse’s neck as they ran down the highway. The noise of the wind made conversation impossible; according to Horse, he could outpace most conventional machines without difficulty, and only Vincent’s physical frailties prevented Horse from going even faster. Vincent simply kept his head down to avoid wind resistance and struggled to maintain his grip. They arrived back at the parking lot in minutes, with only the barest rim of the sun still showing.

“I’ll establish a perimeter,” said Horse. “I don’t have time for a serious barrier, but I can corral the energies for a time. Try to end it quickly, before anything big enough to overload the fence comes through. I don’t really know what we’re dealing with, and the wider the net I cast, the bigger the holes.”

“Y’know, I almost understood that,” said Vincent, sliding to the ground and rubbing his wind-burned face. “I’ve been around this sorcerous mumbo-jumbo too long.”

“I’ve been wondering... I know I am not your first companion. How many have there been?”

“One other.” Vincent didn’t look up.

“What happened to him, if you don’t mind my asking?” asked Horse, beginning an odd sideways canter, scraping his hooves to leave scratches on the pavement. They formed a pattern of odd signs and symbols that glowed faintly with a life of their own.

“Et by a dragon. And she was a her.”

“Dragons are... rare.”

“You see a lot of funny things in this job.” Vincent checked his guns again; fully loaded, as ever. He settled them on his hips, Truth on his left, Justice on his right.

“In the event that a similar misfortune should befall us tonight, I’d like to wish you good luck. And to thank you. I have learned much in my time here.” Horse continued to mark the ground.

“Is *that* the point of all this rigmarole? Learnin’?”

Horse hesitated. “We are treading near to the questions I cannot answer, Vincent.”

Vincent waved him off. “All right, all right. It ain’t my place to know. I just wish I knew who I worked for sometimes.” He paused and squinted to the west, watching the last beams of sunlight. “You been a pretty good horse, Horse. It ain’t your fault you come into the story when you did, and I ain’t been as good a master as I ought to.”

“You are hard on yourself,” Horse noted. His hooves sparked as he completed his circuit. “Perhaps that is as it should be.” His voice and form both faded as the barrier took effect, sealing the parking lot atop the ancient burial ground away from the outside world.

Vincent didn’t answer. He pushed back his coat and waited, ready to draw. The sun slipped beneath the horizon, and night fell almost audibly across the landscape. The streetlamps buzzed to flickering life, surrounded by moths and the swooping forms of bats in hot pursuit. The ground radiated back the heat of the day as the air grew cold, as though the sun truly were under the ground and warming it from beneath. Vincent breathed in through his nose and out through

his mouth, keeping his mind focused. On the seventy-third exhalation, his breath came out in a frosty cloud. Overhead, the stars went out one by one.

Then all Hell broke loose.

The ground shuddered and bucked, the skin of the Earth rippling like a dog ridding itself of fleas. The black asphalt tore apart, revealing a tunnel into darkness. Red and yellow light played in the depths of the hole, in time with a pulsing, high-pitched keening, but if there was a fire, it was without heat. If anything, the hole seemed to draw in all the warmth from the air around it, rendering the cool night air icy. The tunnel's sides quivered like the Earth was gagging on a piece of rotten meat, and the air filled with the smell of an open sewer. One dark hand reached up and gripped the ledge of the broken asphalt. Another followed.

Vincent watched, but he did not draw his weapon. Not yet.

Slowly, as if pulling against tremendous weight, Eli Carter heaved himself back from the dead.

"Evenin', Eli."

Eli tottered upright, his gray flesh hanging in strips from his body. "Vincent," he said. He nodded. Something white and wriggling fell from an eye socket and onto the ground.

"Cold night fer it."

"Maybe so. Don't know as I mind overmuch, considering."

"I reckon you've come to kill me?"

Eli grinned, or at least grinned more than he already was. "And what else have I had to cling to, all these years? What other reason would I have to claw my way to the surface? You put me in the ground, Vincent, but I ain't of a mind to stay there. I aim to settle my accounts before I give up this life for good."

"Don't s'pose we could settle this over cards and drinks. They got liquor places open twenty-four hours 'round here."

Eli threw back his head and laughed heartily. There was a snap as he did, and his head flopped all the way to his spine, even as gobbets of brown and soupy meat fell from the bottom of his exposed

ribcage. Vincent kept his hands still and his guns holstered. Eli reached back with his bony hands and carefully brought his head upright, settling it in place with a squelching sound. "You killed me, you asshole. You went over to the lawmen and you killed me for the money on my head."

"And I regret that, Eli, I truly do. I regret a lot of things. If I had it all to do over again, there's a whole heap I'd do different. But killin' you ain't one of them."

"Traitor! Bounty-chasing scum!" Eli's rotten features contorted, and he leveled an accusatory finger at Vincent. "You ain't no better'n I am, you holier-than-thou hypocrite. You've done everything I've done and worse besides."

"She died, Eli."

"What?"

"You hit her in the head to keep her quiet and she died. Violence ain't an exact science. You gave her too much."

Eli's jaw flapped for a moment until he caught it up and wedged it back in place. "Well, that's a shame, but it ain't like I set out to kill nobody—"

"And what did you think happened to folks after you cleaned out their cash and rode off with their cattle?" Vincent's jaw tightened. "What did you think happened in the winter when they had no stocks, no money to buy food, and too much pride to beg?"

"I didn't... shit, Vincent, you used to ride with me!"

Vincent closed his eyes. "Like I said, there's some stuff I'd do different."

"I don't care about your reasons," Eli snarled. "All I care about is what you did to me. We'll do this proper, huh?"

"I don't want to duel you, Eli."

"Yellow?"

"Nah. I got a job now." Vincent displayed his badge, pinned inside his jacket. The metal glowed like the moon, even in the near complete darkness. The words inscribed on it shifted and flowed, never the same from the moment to moment. "Deputized, you might say. Been doin' it a while now, and it's given me

a new perspective on a lot of things. I'm here to ask you a favor."

"He kills me and wants to ask a favor!" Eli appealed to the bats and mosquitoes as though expecting an answer.

"I'm gonna ask you to go back down of yer own will. I could send you there, but I ain't got the skill to close the door behind you. Not without risk."

"The hell I will! I came back for a reason."

"There's people here, Eli," Vincent said, gesturing to the parking lot and the dark storefronts. "A whole little town of 'em. I don't know 'em from Adam and neither do you — it's a different world than we come from — but they ain't a part of our struggle. Innocent, in this at least. If you stay, they're gonna die."

"Fuck 'em. I came back for you and for me. Mostly me."

Vincent sighed. "Had to ask."

Eli drew his rusted, pitted weapon from his holster, which fell to bits as he did. "Ten paces, turn and fire, and if you burn in the Lake of Fire for eternity, it won't be half long enough."

"Reckon not."

Vincent pulled his pistol and turned to stand at Eli's back, his hat brim brushing against the lank hairs that clung to Eli's skull. Vincent started counting paces. "One... two..."

Eli grinned hideously as he calmly turned around and took aim at Vincent's steadily retreating back. He thumbed the hammer. "Goodbye, trait— *Jesus Christ!*" Eli staggered back as the black scorpion sank its stinger into his one good eye. "Gah!" He snatched at his face and threw the tiny arachnid to the ground. He stomped down with a mildewed boot, and there was a soft and final crunch. Eli flicked the remains into the pit, which belched sulfurous fumes in response.

Vincent had thrown himself into a sideways roll at the sound of Eli's gun clicking. He recovered now and fired a single shot that took Eli in the kneecap.

"Eli, you stupid shit," Vincent said as Eli tumbled to the side.

"God-damned scorpion. The hell did that come from?"

Vincent shook his head. "Just when we were getting somewhere. Poor little fella." He rounded on Eli. "And you, you idiot. Now you gone and done a betrayal and a sacrifice in the presence of an open doorway to who-knows-where? Did your brains rot out of your head with everything else?"

"What are you babbling about?" Eli said, dragging himself away from Vincent's wrath.

The ground shivered, and the light from the hole turned a sickly green-white. Vincent drew his other pistol and dropped to a ready crouch, moving between Eli and the pit.

The ground around the hole flexed. Nearby streetlights sparked and went out, then tilted to the side with groans and creaks. One struck a car with a terrible crash of glass and metal. Another vehicle, caught on a rising hill, rolled over and smashed atop a third. The black asphalt seemed to melt, then harden into a shiny black carapace. One enormous claw ripped free, then another. Six more legs followed in close succession. At the far end of the parking lot, a streetlamp tore out of the ground, flowing into the rising asphalt until it became a wickedly curved stinger with glowing yellow poison dripping in sizzling globs from its tip. The complex mouth-parts churned several feet above Vincent's head.

"Sonuvabitch," Vincent muttered.

The massive, jet-black scorpion, its hide gleaming in the unhealthy glow from the pit, lunged with deceptive speed, pincer snapping towards Eli's skeletal form.

"No!" cried Eli. He fired his ragged gun, the bullets ricocheting from the scorpion's chitin with gray puffs of grave-dust. The claw was undeterred.

Vincent closed his eyes briefly, lifting his weapons to his lips. His mouth moved as if intoning a prayer. His eyes snapped open, and he leveled his guns and fired in a single, smooth motion. This time, rather than the simple bullet that had taken Eli in the leg, Truth and Justice spat pellets of shining blue light that impacted with concussive force, energy arcing out from the holes. Vincent fired four shots, two from each gun, and every shot sent the claw a little further off course, until it buried itself in the ground several feet from Eli. The surface of the claw was riddled with fractures, and the lower pincer snapped off as it struck,

leaking pale fluid. Eli shrieked when it splashed on him and seared away at his arm and torso.

The scorpion shrilled in rage or pain and turned on Vincent. The hovering tail snapped forward, faster than the eye could follow. As before, Vincent was already leaping to the side, but even an immortal's foresight couldn't give his human reflexes enough of an edge. The stinger pierced Vincent's coat at the left shoulder and sent him rocketing backwards until he slammed into Horse's protective barrier. The field flashed brightly on a wavelength no human eye could see, its meager power overwhelmed by the arachnoid presence it struggled to contain. As it faded, Horse came back into view, a pallid ghost against the night.

"You didn't do it fast enough," Horse said. His voice was faint and tinny, as if it came from a vast distance. "The barrier won't take another hit like that."

"Ow."

"Shall I try for a banishment?"

Before Vincent could answer, the scorpion's remaining pincer swept forward and scooped him up. His guns fell from hands suddenly limp and unresponsive. Horse cocked his head as Vincent flew away.

"I'll take that as a yes. I want to note that I'm not at all confident in my chances of success. I'm a theoretician, not an engineer."

Vincent felt the burning pain in his shoulder fade to numbness, and he knew enough to be frightened by that. He struggled to move his hands, to pry at the vise-grip that held him, but only his right responded, and that weakly. His fingers tingled as his metabolism struggled to nullify the venom inside him, but he knew it would be too slow. He saw the delicate chelicerae of the scorpion's mouth draw nearer and nearer, and he felt the yawning despair of his situation.

He was immortal, after all. It couldn't kill him.

But maybe there were some things it wasn't worth living through.

There was a crack of gunfire, and the scorpion's mouth briefly disappeared in a gray ash-cloud. The pincer hesitated as the scorpion scuttled sideways to cast one of its eyes at the source of the interference. Its feet crumpled a car beneath it.

Eli was up on his bad elbow, leveling his gun right-handed at the scorpion's vulnerable eyes and mouth.

"Eli!" Vincent cried.

"Don't get me wrong," Eli rasped, firing off another shot. "I just want to kill you myself."

The scorpion rumbled and surged forward. It raised its mangled claw up high, preparatory to smashing the undead bandit where he lay. Eli's right leg was shattered and his left arm half-melted; he was in no position to escape.

Suddenly, the green-glowing pit flared blue, with hints of orange at its base. "There," said Horse from outside the dwindling barrier, "that ought to do it."

The scorpion's damaged claw was wrenched backwards as though caught in a powerful wind. White liquid and yellow-green sparks poured from it and were sucked into the hole, but the scorpion dug its remaining limbs into the ground and held firm. It launched its stinger at Eli, who was rolling desperately out of the way. The metaphysical drag threw its aim off and it struck nothing but dirt and shards of asphalt. Angered, the scorpion pressed with its other pincer and shook Vincent like an aspergillum. Vincent felt the sharp ridges begin to penetrate his flesh.

"I can't get a lock on it while it's embodied," Horse called. "You need to disrupt its composite structure so the inhabiting entity can be extracted."

"Ungh?" Vincent scrabbled with his right hand, as weak as damp tissue.

"Shoot it more."

"Vincent!"

Vincent looked down, blinking through the purple spots that flashed across his vision. Eli had hauled himself to the barrier and plucked up one of Vincent's guns.

"Catch!" Eli hurled the revolver like a discus.

Half-paralyzed and rapidly suffocating, Vincent put everything he had into a back-wrenching lunge. The hilt of the weapon landed in his right palm, sliding into place with preternatural precision. The touch was familiar, like a lover's, and Vincent was conscious that he had missed the guns even in the

short moments they were gone. He suppressed a small shudder and attempted to focus. He pointed and fired, not caring where he hit, his consciousness fading. The gun cracked, a plain bullet that struck the joint of the arm holding him. The pincer relaxed slightly, and Vincent gasped for breath. He lifted the gun a second time and took careful aim, muttering the words that called it to power. Vincent saw that it was Truth he held.

"Sorry about this," he told the scorpion. "We've all got things we ain't got a choice about."

He fired, and the crackling blue energy smashed through one of the big central eyes. For a moment, the creature's armored thorax seemed lit from within, glowing cerulean from every overlapped crack and crevice. The scorpion went rigid, all its legs flying out, then curling tightly against its belly. Vincent went flying again, passing through the last shreds of the barrier spell to land with a teeth-rattling thump on the unblemished pavement outside.

The shattering of the scorpion's corporeal form left the monstrous arthropod vulnerable to the clutching suction of the pit. Flailing and thrashing with its one good pincer, it clawed uselessly at the ground as the hole opened wide to receive it. The tail shot out once, twice, trying to sting anything, or everything. The scorpion caught at a streetlamp and held with grim determination, even as the metal bowed and the concrete plug tore from the ground. Vincent caught the scorpion's gaze from one of its myriad eyes. He took off his hat and held it against his chest.

The metal gave way. Soundlessly, the scorpion fell, and the ground swallowed it up. Vincent closed his eyes.

There was a soft click beside his ear, and he felt a rusty gun barrel against his temple. "Eli," he said, without opening his eyes.

"Vincent."

"Just wanted to say thanks for the help. You probably saved a lot of lives tonight."

"That it?"

"Still a cold night out."

Abruptly, Eli pulled the gun away and released the hammer with his thumb. "I'm probably out of bul-

lets now anyway."

"You counted?"

"Nah." Eli worked himself to a sitting position. "Liquor and cards, you said?"

"And dancing girls, too."

Eli glanced down. "Don't know as but I might cause a scene out there."

"Horse can probably fix that. He's good at them glammery things." Vincent managed to get to all fours and had to stop. "Horse?"

"Yes, Vincent?"

"How's the hole?"

"You'll survive. I have reminded you of your undying state previously."

"I mean in the ground." Vincent rubbed at his temples.

"Ah. It's still there, but sealed, albeit temporarily. I would call it 'scabbed.'"

"Long enough for drinks and a show?"

Horse snorted with the effort of cogitation. "I would estimate that the leaking energies will become dangerous to passers-by in approximately eighty-six hours. Less if the source of the transdimensional irritation remains in the vicinity."

"Whozat?"

"That's you, Eli."

"Oh."

"You don't belong up here anymore. But how's a three-day vacation sound?"

Eli grinned until his jaw fell off. Vincent picked it up and handed it back.

"Deputized, huh?"

"Long story."

They rode off towards the distant lights, and the wind kept conversation to a minimum. Which was probably for the best.

The Cowboy, the Horse, and the Scorpion © 2011

Nathaniel Lee

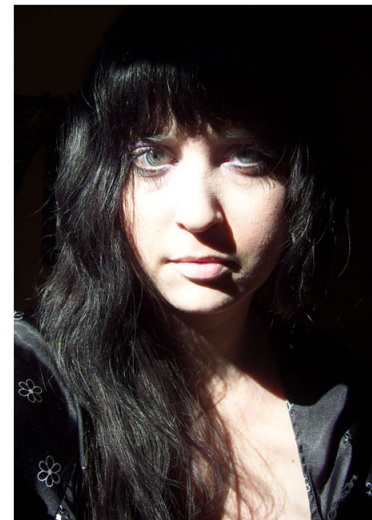
Zombie Cowboy © Martin Koza

Featured Artist: Lynnette Shelley

We didn't really need to look twice to realize that Lynnette Shelley's *The Mosquito* would work perfectly to illustrate Mari Ness's *Love in the Absence of Mosquitoes*. There are, of course, mosquitoes and pod-like forms in Lynnette's piece, which were obvious selling points, but there's quite a bit more. The work captures not only the sense of stylized formality, the static beauty of the world featured in the story, but also a feeling of organic interrelatedness. As with Mari's story, there's an

on your art, and/or of your art on your music. And if so, can you tell us a little about that?

Lynnette: I actually originally formed The Red Masque when I was going through a dry spell with my artwork. I was working a day job at the time, and wasn't really setting aside the time to pursue my artwork. I was also concentrating more on getting the Red Masque up and running and I didn't really have time for anything else. However, several years ago things changed. I left my practical day job to pursue working for myself and having an art career. Since then I work on artwork almost every single day and am addicted to it. I can't imagine stopping at this point. As such, it's inevitable that it has overflowed somewhat into the music. Some of the themes I have been researching for artworks have cropped up again in the lyrics I am working on for the band. Though I still consider my artwork to be



initial sense of simplicity. But the more we looked at both the story and artwork, the more we noticed the subtle elements that made both such rich experiences. So we were quite happy when Lynnette agreed to let us use the piece. We're proud to make her the featured artist for this issue.

Bernie: My first exposure to your art was the cover of the CD *Fossil Eyes*, by your band The Red Masque. And that piece is actually *The Mosquito*, which you were kind enough to let us use to illustrate Mari Ness's story. I'm curious whether you see any influence of your music



Leaps and Bounds

Ink, Coffee, Liquid Gold Leaf, Acrylics and Paper Collage on Paper 36" x 29"

very different from the band's music — for one thing, the band is a group effort, whereas the artwork is an individual creation.

Linda: I see a lot of Gustaf Klimt in the design elements of your work. I was wondering if he is one of your influences. What other artists and/or teachers inspire you?

Lynnette: Yes, good eye. Klimt is one of my favorite artists. Other big influences include Celtic art, as well as byzantine and icon style artworks. I love the various native / folk artworks of various indigenous cultures, and the stylized patterns and imagery found in Japanese art.



The Escape
Mixed Media on paper, 19" x 25"

This artwork is inspired by the old Irish tale of the daughter of the High King. She was a beautiful woman but of free spirit and no man could court her. Her father the King decided that at the next Beltaine, that the first man who could catch her (as she was well-known for being an excellent runner) would be her husband. The daughter went to a wise woman and asked for a potion to make her as fleet as a hare. However, the wise woman was either getting deaf in the ear, or was a trickster, for when the girl drank the potion before the race, she turned into a hare. She was then chased by her father's greyhounds, and being terrified, she ran into the woods, where she was caught in a trap. A huntsman came to check his snares and instead of a meal, he found the princess. The King was true his word, and he married them; the huntsman being handsome, the princess found that being married to him was not so bad a thing.

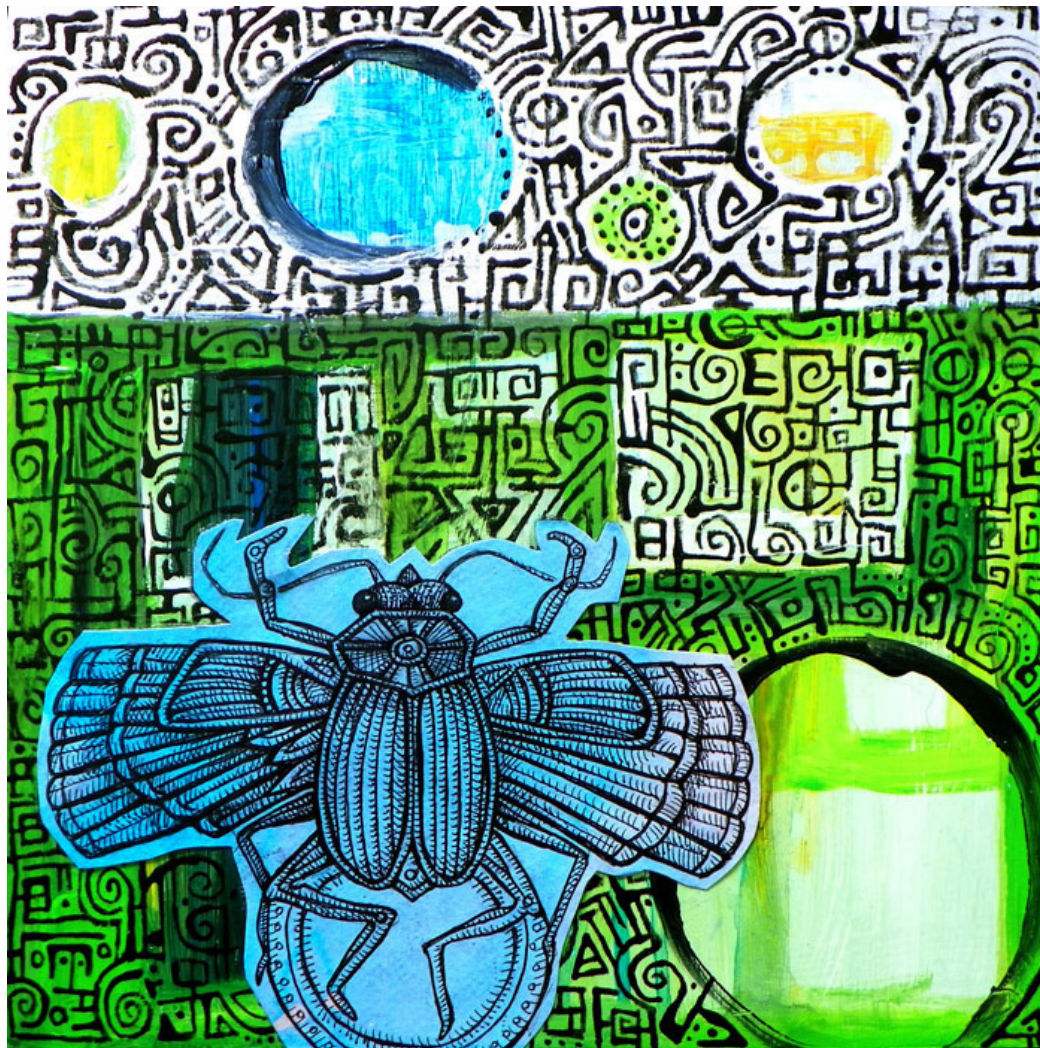
In this version I am trying to emphasize the sexual undertones to the original story, with the lily appearing to both symbolize innocence and chastity as per tradition, however, in other cultures the lily represents sexuality. I took some liberties with the lily and made it a kind of stylized hybrid between a lily and an anthurium, which has a very interesting shape!

The vines in this image are also symbolic to the Celts and is a theme used in their artworks. The meaning is connection and eternity. Vines also often grow in a shape of a spiral, which, to the Celt represents growth, renewal, energy, life etc.

Some artists I admire also include: Gustav Klimt, Vincent Van Gogh, William Blake, Frida Kahlo, Marc Chagall, Henri Rousseau, Edvard Munch, William Morris, Susan Seddon Boulet, Jim Fitzpatrick and Walton Ford.

Linda: Where else do you look for inspiration and to inform your work? Animals are obviously a great inspiration, but I feel there are added elements of mythology, geometry, and even textiles...as if your images are richly woven...tapestries, if you will.

Lynnette: I do love looking at textiles, tapestries, stained glass and mosaic tile work as well. Some of my pieces I design as if it were a mosaic or stained glass. I actually had a piece recently ("The Dryad") which I collaborated with a stained glass artist for a show and she created a stained glass artwork based off of my design. We exhibited both my mixed media painting and her stained glass artwork together at the same show. Many of my artworks are inspired by mythology and folktales. Sometimes I'll read the story and decide to do a piece based off of that idea. Or I may decide I want to do an artwork with a certain animal in it and I'll research stories and fables about that animal and see what gives me ideas. Occasionally I've made an artwork and found out AFTER I finished the artwork that it relates to a specific folktale, so I'll incorporate that into the title. For example, my artwork "Three Ravens" was created because I wanted three ravens to interlock in a triskele pattern (a symbol in Celtic art) and then later realized there was an old folk song about Three Ravens.



Totem II

ink, acrylic, coffee, red wine and paper collage on wood panel, 12" x 12"

Linda: I'm always interested in hearing how artists work. Can you tell us a bit about your process, your choice of materials, and so on?

Lynnette: I generally work in a variety of media, usually on the same artwork. Generally I sketch in the composition first with a rough outline and once satisfied with this I then paint or ink in the colors or lines. Some paper-based pieces I stain the background with tea or coffee or red wine first and then work in ink over top. Other pieces are on wood panel and I use acrylics on them with some ink drawings collaged onto the wood. If you visit my blog at lynnetteshelley.blogspot.com, I often post works in progress on there, where you can see my artwork being created from initial sketch to the finished piece.



The Sun Wheel
Mixed Media on Paper 19 x 25"

This new piece represents life / energy / creativity. The sun wheel is an ancient symbol with Indo-European roots, and represents the sun. The sun represents life to many cultures and with the birds and the wasps both flying/solar animals (as well as representing the euphemism "the birds and the bees" for procreation), this artwork represents creation and life energy.

Bernie: I understand that it's a busy month for you. The band had a gig earlier this month, and I you've got some exhibits this coming up soon. Can you tell us where else we can find your work, both in the real world and online?

Lynnette: Currently I have three art shows going on in May (the 28th Annual Immaculata University Art Show in Malvern, PA; Annex 24 Gallery in Lancaster, PA, and the "Gods and Goddesses Group Art Show at C'Est le Vin in Richmond, VA), plus I am also represented by Countryside Gallery in Newtown, PA. If you go to www.lynnetteshelley.com/exhibi-

[titions.html](http://www.lynnetteshelley.com/exhibitions.html) you can see all of my current shows. Otherwise, you can view all of my artwork online at www.lynnetteshelley.com and select from the various galleries available on the menu. You can also visit my facebook fan page for announcements on various upcoming events as well:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Lynnette-Shelley/244313711115>

Bernie: Thank you. It's been a pleasure speaking with you.



The Union
Mixed Media on Paper, 19" x 25"

Contributors

Steve Barber:

In his early years, Steve Barber longed to become a shepherd, but never fulfilled his dream. Now, a bitter and lonely old man, he ekes out a miserable existence by collecting returnable bottles, and selling single cigarettes to small children. Occasionally he writes stories. Steve lives in Ann Arbor with his ancient Chihuahua, Haggis, and blogs about inconsequential stuff at <http://whatdoyoumeanishouldstartablog.blogspot.com>.

Astrid Budi:

Astrid Budi is a freelance visual artist based in Jakarta, Indonesia. Her childhood dream was to be a comic artist. Right now she's busy doing illustrations and storyboards for TV commercials in her home country, but she still hopes to some day realize her dream. She enjoys drawing girls and children the most, and thinks black and white are two of the most wonderful things in the world. Aside from drawing professionally, in her free time she mostly travels and watches a lot of black and white movies of any kind. You can contact Astrid via email at cara.macree@gmail.com, or just browse through her rarely updated personal works at <http://www.astridbudi.com>.

Seth Fitts:

Seth Fitts is a southeastern U.S. artist who currently resides in Georgia. He graduated from the University of West GA in 2003 with a BFA in Painting.

Seth's body of work explores the realms of the human condition, the soul, the spirit, and imagination. Seth works in mostly traditional techniques of art making, combining them in mixed media applications. The substrate that is used varies due to Seth using reclaimed material in addition to wood, paper and canvas.

In addition to being a fine artist, Seth is an illustrator currently working on a few children's book projects which hopefully will come to fruition within the next couple years.

Simon Kewin:



Simon Kewin writes fiction and poetry. Some is fantasy, some SF and some can't make its mind up. His work has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. He lives in the UK with Alison and their two daughters Eleanor and Rose.

He is currently learning to play the electric guitar. It's slow going, frankly.

His web site is <http://simonkewin.co.uk>, he blogs about writing at <http://spellmaking.blogspot.com> and is also to be found on Twitter as @SimonKewin.

Martin Koza:

Martin Koza is an Austrian art hobbyist specialized in sci-fi illustration and character art, and creator of the space opera webcomic Our Intrepid Crew.

Art Gallery: mk01.deviantart.com/

Comic: kirsia.hwcommunity.com/.

Nathaniel Lee:

Nathaniel Lee is a large collective of microscopic cells and bacteria in the rough shape of an oversized sock monkey. He is managed in a lackadaisical fashion by a lump of fatty tissue that thinks it's a lot cleverer than it is. He lives in North Carolina with his wife and obligatory cats, and publishes a 100-word story more or less daily at www.mirrorshards.org. You can also find him on Facebook if you have a strong desire for more inanity and complaints in your life.



J. M. McDermott:

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

John Medaille:

John Medaille has been published on *Escape Pod*, *Pseudopod*, *Labyrinth Inhabitant Magazine* and *The Three-Lobed Burning Eye* and is working on a short story collection called: *Hideous Tales of Doomed Spacemen*, *Demonic Cameras*, *Protoplasmic Flesh-Eaters*, *The Supernatural*, *U.F.O. 's*, *Interdimensional Beasts*, *Evil Children*, *Misunderstood Robots*, *Telephone Calls from Beyond the Grave*, *Mayhem*, *Murder AND THE MACABRE!*

Mari Ness:

Mari Ness admits that she would be happier in a mosquito-free world. She has a weekly blog reviewing classic children's literature over at Tor.com, and keeps a personal blog at <http://mariness.livejournal.com>, or you can follow her on Twitter at mari_ness. She lives in central Florida.

Bryan Prindiville:

Bryan Prindiville has worked as a Sr. Graphic Designer & Illustrator for the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) since late 2000. In his free time he has created or partnered in the creation of a number of webcomics including *Bassetville* and *Hello with Cheese*. Traditionally published work can be found in *Bad-Ass Faeries 2: Just Plain Bad* and Tee Morris' *All a Twitter*. More information and work are available at his sketch blog, <http://bryanprindiville.com>.

Linda Saboe:

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. 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.lindasaboe.com.

Lynnette Shelley:



Lynnette Shelley is a Delaware native who moved to the Philadelphia area in 1999. Having a great love animals, fairytales, and world mythology, Lynnette fuses these influences into her strikingly unique illustrations. Her artwork strikes a primal chord in many viewers, with almost Jungian associations to the colors and shapes. Her animal art and creature illustrations are both primitive and sophisticated, and have been likened to images from an undiscovered ancient civilization or culture.

In addition to her fine art pursuits, Lynnette also co-founded The Red Masque in 2001. The Red Masque is an original avant rock band which is signed to the RER USA label out of Colorado.

Lynnette currently lives and works out of Ambler, PA.

Sylvia Spruck Wrigley:

Sylvia Spruck Wrigley was born in Germany, spent her childhood in Los Angeles and now lives in Spain where she writes within striking distance of the Mediterranean.

You can find out more about her on <http://www.intrigue.co.uk/>.



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