

# GRANFALLOON

SPRING

2022

THE RETRO ISSUE!

FEATURING SHORT FICTION BY:

MARK PEARCE, TERRY SANVILLE, S.B. ELLERHOFF,  
ROBERT POPE, RALPH GRECO, JR, & MORE!

SPRING POETRY SPOTLIGHT: NICOLE BIRD

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**"TO WHOM IT  
MAY CONCERN: IT IS  
SPRINGTIME. IT  
IS LATE AFTERNOON."**

**-KURT VONNEGUT**

IN THIS BRAND NEW, SPRING EDITION OF *GRANFALLOON*, WE'RE TAKING YOU BACK TO THE GOOD OL' DAYS WITH CAREFULLY CURATED CONTENT WITH A RETRO VIBE. WE BEGIN WITH MARK PEARCE'S TIME TRAVEL TALE AS OLD AS THE POST OFFICE ITSELF AND FINISH WITH RALPH GRECO JR.'S "WHAT IS AND WHAT CAN NEVER BE," AN EROTIC SPACE OPERA FORESHADOWING WHAT'S COMING UP IN OUR NEXT ISSUE! IN BETWEEN, WE PRESENT A SMART, BRADBURY-ESQUE SHORT STORY BY S.G. ELLERHOFF, A MIND-ALTERING PIECE ABOUT LOVE AND AUTO RACING (WITH A TWIST) BY TERRY SANVILLE, AND WE ALSO DELVE INTO THE FANTASTIC IMAGINATION OF ROBERT POPE WITH A WILD WESTERN STARRING SOME NASTY CREEPY-CRAWLIES! AS ALWAYS, THIS ISSUE ALSO INCLUDES A SELECTION OF POETRY THROUGHOUT, WITH OUR 'SPRING SPOTLIGHT' FEATURING THE MEDITATIVE POEMS OF NICOLE BIRD. THERE'S SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE IN THIS ISSUE, SO TAKE A BREAK FROM THE SPRING CLEANING AND HAVE A LOOK!

**-THE Eds.**

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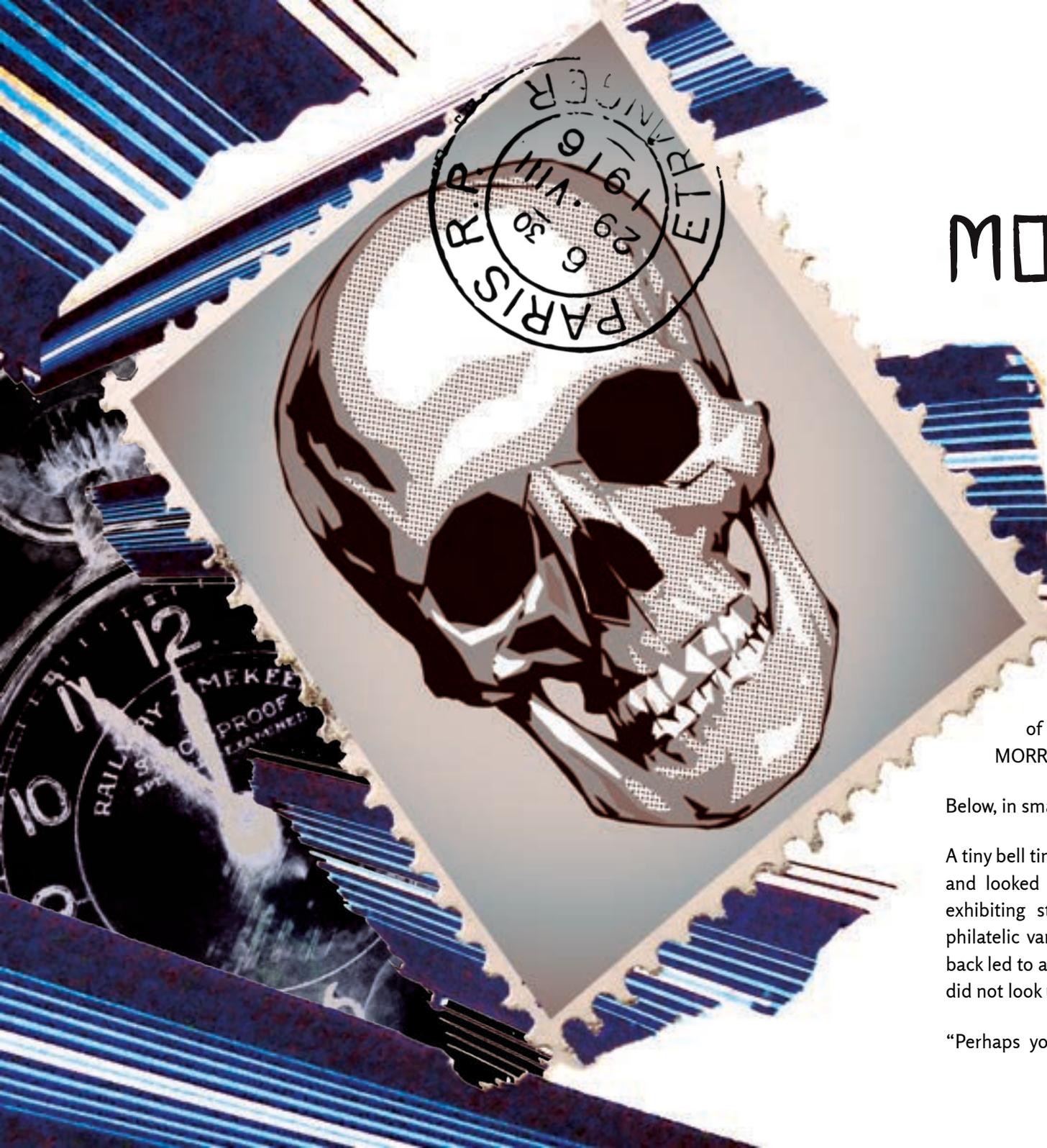
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# THE OLD MORRIS STAMP SHOP

by  
MARK PEARCE

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The frosted glass of the front door bore the name of the shop in an arch of large, gothic letters: THE OLD MORRIS STAMP SHOP.

Below, in smaller print, it read—L.Q. Obadiah, proprietor.

A tiny bell tinkled as Martin Bascomb entered. He stood for a moment and looked around. The room was filled with glass display cases exhibiting stamps from all over the world. Further examples of philatelic variety were hung in frames on the walls. A curtain at the back led to another room. Mr. Obadiah was busy with a customer and did not look up as Martin entered.

“Perhaps you might be interested in the 1847 Ben Franklin,” said

Obadiah. "It is a very beautiful stamp. Note the skill of engraving."

Martin waited patiently while the two men discussed the stamp. The customer finally made his purchase and left.

Martin stepped up to the counter. It was a long, glass display case with a cash register at one end. The aging shopkeeper looked up at Martin and smiled. He was a small man somewhere in his mid-sixties to mid-seventies, with curly gray hair and smooth, feline movements. At first glance he appeared normal, but there was something disquieting about the shrewd eyes and cynical smile. It was almost, but not quite, a smile of familiarity; almost, but not quite, as if he had been expecting Martin.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said. "How may I be of service to you?"

"Are you Mr. Obadiah?"

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"I am."

"I'm Martin Bascomb. A friend suggested I come see you."

"Very good," said Obadiah. "I'm sure we can find something to interest you. Is this for a personal collection, or are you primarily interested in stamps as an investment?"

"Neither," said Martin; he glanced around. "I'm more interested in what you've got in the back room."

"Ah," said Mr. Obadiah, his face suddenly alert. "You want a real value."

He went to the front door, locked it, and pulled the shade.

"Come with me," he said.

He led Martin into the back. It was a small, cramped room, filled with

filing cabinets. The only illumination came from a single bare bulb in the middle of the ceiling. Martin noticed that each drawer had the name of a different country on it.

"I have so many treasures from so many beautiful places," said the ancient proprietor. "Greece, Spain, China. Perhaps you have a favorite?"

"Not especially."

"The Mediterranean? . . . South America? . . . France, perhaps?"

He opened the drawer marked FRANCE and took out a small envelope with a clear, plastic front. It contained a single stamp.

"Yes," he said, enthusiastically. "I believe this is the one for you."

He motioned Martin back to the main room of the shop. Martin went to the front of the counter as Mr. Obadiah walked behind it. He handed Martin the envelope.

4

"That will be two hundred dollars."

Martin was startled. "Two hundred dollars for a stamp?"

"That's the price," said Mr. Obadiah. "I won't bargain. I'm not a salesman, I'm a proprietor. If you are not interested in my wares, I'm certain you can find other novelties in other establishments."

"No, no. That's okay," said Martin. He pulled the money from his pocket and handed it to him. "It just better be worth it."

Mr. Obadiah looked deeply at him. "I've never had any complaints."

Martin exited the shop. He walked down the street, looking at the stamp.

• • •



The Philatelic Appraisals office was on the second floor of a modern building on Colfax. Martin did not have to wait long for his answer.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bascomb,” said the man. “There’s nothing remarkable about this stamp. It’s a common French issue, worth about a quarter.”

Martin grumbled a quick “thank you” and left the office.

• • •

At a little after ten-thirty that morning, shouting could be heard from the apartment of Lenny Hudson.

“You set me up!” shouted Martin, grabbing Lenny by his shirt and shoving him against the wall. “You and that old man set me up!”

“No, Martin, wait. Let me explain.”

“Start talking.”

“That’s not an ordinary stamp.”

Martin pulled Lenny away from the wall, then slammed him back into it. “You’re lying. I had it examined by an expert.”

“You don’t understand. First you have to put it on an envelope. Here, let me show you.” He got an envelope from his bureau. “Give me the stamp.”

Martin handed it to him. Lenny licked it and pressed it onto the envelope.

“Now write your name on it,” he said.

Martin growled: “What is all this?”

“Please, Martin, just do it.”

Martin wrote his name. "Now what?"

"Now we mail it."

Martin grabbed him.

"No, Martin, no!"

Martin slammed him against the wall. "You think I spent two hundred bucks to mail a letter to myself?!"

"No, wait! You've got to mail it. It's the only way it'll work."

"It's the only way what'll work?"

"I can't explain it. You just have to see for yourself."

"All I see is, I'm out two hundred bucks."

7 "Listen, Martin, let's go out right now and mail the envelope. If you're still mad afterwards, I'll pay you the two hundred."

"All right," said Martin. He shoved Lenny out the door. They descended the stairs, Martin holding tightly onto Lenny's arm. They exited the building. Martin forced him along the street until they came to a mailbox; they stopped.

"So what do I do now?"

"Just drop it in."

Martin frowned. "Don't you think you've carried this con far enough?"

"Please, Martin, just drop it in."

Martin turned to the box and inserted the envelope.

A feeling of vertigo seized him as the scene abruptly changed. He was

on a platform, very high, and his dizziness made him sick. He clutched onto a metal railing in front of him. It was some time before he realized that he was on the observation deck atop the Eiffel Tower. His face was pale. It was impossible to tell if it was from the height, the trip, or both. The city of Paris stretched out far below him.

Martin looked at his hand. He was holding the envelope. He felt his way to the elevator. The other tourists believed him to be drunk and moved out of his way. He gripped the wooden handrail as the compartment descended. His eyes were closed tight.

"It's got to be a dream," he kept telling himself. "It's got to be a dream."

The elevator hit bottom. If it was a dream, Martin thought, it showed no signs of ending soon. He got off the elevator and walked along, holding the envelope.

"Maybe it's hypnosis," he said. "Maybe that crazy old man is a hypnotist. Or drugs. Maybe there was a drug on the stamp."

He sat on a wooden bench on the boulevard.

"The thing of it is," he moaned, "how do I get home?"

Early that evening, his forlorn figure could still be seen wandering the streets of Paris. Pedestrians moved aside for the strange man who muttered to himself and glowered at the piece of paper in his hand.

Early the next morning, Martin awakened on a bench along the Left Bank of the Seine. He needed a shave and his clothes were wrinkled. He was suddenly struck by an idea. He wondered why it had not occurred to him before. He pulled out his cell phone and punched out a number. His only hope was that reality still existed, and that Lenny would answer his phone.

"Lenny!" he shouted when the voice answered at the other end.

“What did you do to me? I’m in France!”

“Calm down, Martin,” said Lenny.

“Calm down?! I’m in France, you—” He used a phrase which even Lenny had seldom heard.

“It’s all right, Martin,” he said. “I just forgot to tell you how to get back.”

“That’s an important part to forget, Len!”

“Don’t worry. It’s very simple. All you have to do is write RETURN TO SENDER on the envelope and drop it in any mailbox.”

“Return to Sender,” Martin repeated. “Any mailbox. This had better work.”

He shut off the phone.

9 He wandered around until he found a hotel, then borrowed a pen from the desk clerk and wrote RETURN TO SENDER on the envelope. There was a mailbox just outside. Martin stood in front of it, holding the envelope in his hand. He looked at the sky as if muttering a silent prayer, then dropped it in.

The same feeling of dizziness engulfed him. A moment later, he found himself back at the box where he had originally mailed the letter. This time it did not reappear in his hand. Apparently it was only good for a single round trip.

Lenny was not surprised when Martin banged on the door of his apartment.

“Talk to me,” said Martin after Lenny let him in.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” said Lenny. “I only know that it works. I’ve taken trips to Spain, Switzerland, Greece.”

Martin began to pace. “This is incredible. I was actually in France. Ten minutes ago, I was in France. This guy runs his funny little shop selling stamps in the front room, and in the back, he hands out miracles at two hundred bucks a pop. Do you know that this means? Do you know what you can do with a gimmick like this?”

“Sure,” said Lenny. “You can travel anywhere in the world for a few hundred bucks and see anything you want.”

Martin glowered at Lenny contemptuously. “That’s why you’ll never be anything more than small time,” he said. “You’ve got no imagination. I’m not talking trips, I’m talking Taj Mahal. You can make a fortune off a thing like this.”

“How?”

“Never mind how.” He headed for the door. “Next time you see me, I’ll be a wealthy man.”

• • •

Mr. Obadiah was dusting off some display cases when Martin entered.

“Back so soon?” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “I trust you were satisfied with your stamp?”

“More than satisfied.” Martin went over to him. He leaned across the counter and lowered his voice. “How do you do it, old man? Is it magic, or what?”

Mr. Obadiah smiled. “That’s a trade secret.”

“Never mind,” said Martin. “Just give me another. I’ve got the cash right here.”

Obadiah frowned in thought. “I seldom have a client purchase



another stamp so soon.”

“But it’s okay, isn’t it? I mean, it’ll still work, won’t it?”

“Yes, it will still work.”

“Then you’ll sell me one?”

The old man hesitated. He looked long and hard at Martin. “I suppose it will be all right.”

He went to the door, locked it, pulled the shade, and led Martin into the back.

“What will it be this time?” he said. “Morocco? Tibet?”

“England,” said Martin.

“Very well. England.”

He pulled out the stamp and motioned Martin back to the front of the store. Martin paid for the stamp and left.

Two days later, Martin stood in front of a mailbox. He had already applied the stamp to an envelope and written his name on it. He hesitated, then dropped it in.

The inevitable vertigo seized him, and he found himself standing in the heart of London. Double decker buses, bobbies, the Tower of London. Martin looked around to get his bearings, then placed the envelope into his pocket and started to walk. It was a beautiful day, and he was in no hurry. He eventually stopped into a quaint little shop and bought a large canvas satchel. He pulled out the envelope and wrote RETURN TO SENDER across its face.

The Bank of London was a large, imposing structure of classic

design. Martin paused in an alley across the street. He took a gun from his pocket and checked to make sure it was loaded. He slipped it into his coat pocket, crossed the street, and entered the bank.

He ran out a few minutes later, his satchel filled with money.

He ran around the side of the building. He could hear shouts and the patter of feet behind him. A mailbox was just ahead. Martin rushed up and inserted the envelope.

A flash of vertigo, and he was back in the United States. He opened the bag of money. It had successfully made the trip. Martin closed the bag, stood still a moment, then looked around and laughed.

He was safe.

He smiled and sauntered off.

• • •

Lenny looked up when he heard a knock at his door. “Come in,” he said.

Martin entered. He wore an expensive, tailored pearl gray suit and carried a walking cane.

“Martin!” Lenny exclaimed. “You look great.”

Martin lifted his arms and turned. “Like it?”

“It’s terrific.”

“I told you next time you saw me I’d be a wealthy man.”

“How did you do it?”

“That’s my secret.” He pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and tossed it up and down. “Have you ever seen so much money in all your life?”

“Never.”

“And there’s plenty more where this came from.”

“Say, Martin,” Lenny wheedled. “Why not cut me in? We’ve been friends a long time.”

“No chance,” said Martin. “This is my own, private gold mine. I just came in to show off my new suit and tell you I probably won’t be seeing you much anymore. I quit my job today. I’m moving uptown. A couple more trips like the one I made yesterday, and I’ll be able to live like a king the rest of my life.”

He bowed his head by way of valediction and walked out.

15

He found Mr. Obadiah sitting behind the counter, going over his books.

“We’re closed,” said Obadiah.

Martin smiled. “This won’t take long. I just came for one of your specials.”

“I told you we’re closed. You’re going to have to leave.”

“What is this?” said Martin. “I’m one of your best customers. Look here, I’ve got my two hundred bucks all ready.”

“I’m not going to sell you any more stamps,” said Obadiah. “I know what you did in England.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Mr. Obadiah did not respond. Martin reached across the counter and

grabbed him by the shirt.

“Listen, old man, you’re going to give me one of your specials, or I’m going to tear you apart.”

“My foot is on the alarm,” said Obadiah. “If you do not leave my shop immediately, I will have the police here in a matter of moments.”

Martin let him go. “I’ll be back.”

He exited the shop.

• • •

Late that night, Martin waited across the street. The stamp shop was the only business still open on the block. The lights went out, and Mr. Obadiah came out of the building. He locked the door and walked away.

16

Martin crossed the street. He carried a rock which he had wrapped in a hand towel. He knocked a hole in the frosted glass, reached through, unlocked the door, and entered.

He moved quickly through the room. It was dark. He tripped on something but did not fall. He went into the back room, opened a drawer, and grabbed one of the stamps. A sound on the street outside caused him to panic, and he ran out the back. A moment later, he was hurrying toward his apartment.

He did not recognize the writing on the stamp when he examined it later, but no matter. He loaded his gun, addressed the envelope, and set out.

• • •

The hole in the window of the Old Morris Stamp Shop was quite

noticeable. Three policemen were with Mr. Obadiah. Two were examining the premises, the third was questioning him and taking notes.

“You say you first noticed the burglary when you came to open up this morning?”

“That’s right.”

The officer made a notation in his book. “What time was that?”

“About seven-thirty.”

“Any idea who might have done it?”

“It could have been anyone,” said Mr. Obadiah. “Stamps are a valuable commodity.”

17

“Have you had a chance to estimate the loss?”

“Yes,” said Obadiah. “I’m only missing one item.”

“Just one?”

“Yes, but it’s very valuable. Very rare. A *Signum Tabula*.”

“A what?”

“*Signum Tabula*,” he said. “It was a stamp used to seal documents in ancient Rome.”

• • •

Martin walked the grimy, dirt road, totally baffled by the people he saw around him. They spoke strangely and stared at him as he passed. He nervously fingered the gun in his pocket. The envelope was clutched tightly in his hand.

• • •

“If it’s really that rare,” said the officer, “we shouldn’t have any trouble locating the culprit. We’ll catch him as soon as he tries to fence it.”

• • •

Two Roman centurions approached Martin. Their expressions were hard.

“*Tu quis es?*” the first said. “*Dic nobis quis es.*”

“I’m sorry,” said Martin. “I don’t know what you’re saying.”

The soldier became severe. “*Dic nobis quis es!*”

“I don’t know what you want,” Martin moaned.

“*Venire nobiscum!*”

They grabbed Martin by his arms. He drew his gun.

“Let me go!” he shouted.

In the struggle to pull himself free, he dropped the gun in the dirt.

“You can’t do this to me!” he cried. “Obadiah! What have you done to me?!”

The centurions dragged him off. He waved the envelope in the air.

“I’ve got to mail a letter!” he screamed. “There’s got to be someplace I can mail a letter!”

The envelope blew from his hand. It was crushed beneath the sandal of a centurion who trod indifferently across it.

18



...

“No, officer,” said Mr. Obadiah. “I’m afraid I’m just going to have to take the loss. I seriously doubt we will ever hear from that thief again.”

...

A last plaintive cry could be heard from Martin Bascomb as he was dragged away. ■



**Mark Pearce** is an author/playwright whose stories have been published in national magazines and plays produced on the New York stage and around the country. He was formerly Resident Playwright of the New Ensemble Actors Theater of New York, and his play *Asylum* is listed in the *Burns/Mantle Theater Yearbook: The Best Plays* series. He resides in the Denver-metro area and has lived in Arizona, Texas, and briefly, Greenwich Village, while one of his plays was being produced Off-Broadway. He loves cross-country road trips, and his favorite activity is to sit in darkened theaters and watch characters that had previously existed only in the privacy of his own mind come to life.

# EARLIER THIS MORNING ON THE BRIDGE IN ROTHENBURG

by

DEBORAH THOMAS

If any one of you is traveling  
possibly in Paris, Rome or Rothenburg,  
and glimpses someone from your past  
who is deceased, just stop

and think about the possibility  
that he, or she, or they or I may really be there,  
now, for you, revisiting this momentary intersection  
of the present and the past.

Possibly ephemeral, bright swatches  
of recycled molecules pass time orbiting  
your consciousness, elliptically, closer  
now and then. What ever stays here  
after we have shed our disappointing bodies  
by the law of physics has to keep on moving,

Strange as it may seem, molecular detritus  
of past composites do not require gravity  
or speed or visual displays, to travel  
out of nowhere into somewhere,

any more than concepts, hanging in a distant nebula  
where other dormant visions and desires ripen,  
need a catalyst to reinvent themselves. They quicken  
when your muse chooses to bring them,

images or thoughts, unspoken, barely visible,  
for you to organize with intuition's memory.  
Imagination, fecal stardust, drawn to the familiar,  
gravitates, attuned for bonding and becoming Something.



Fully charged, time travel drives them here, from there.  
Some simple rearranging, re-collected in your mind,  
speaks to your page or to a printer, or a cloud.  
With sufficient space, and time, and gravity,  
such words will find their way into the right hands.

On the other hand, too bent on making meaning,  
we can be reduced to foraging for words refurbished.  
What we want to call our own new knowledge  
claims a darker gravity, a counter force

that drives us blindly to collect things:  
butterflies, or bits, or anything that fits  
a pattern, a prediction, or our purpose,  
Even sacred soil, inside a vacuum,

turns to ordinary dust, obscures all matter.  
We all know the Muse abhors a vacuum.  
We escape the mundane, traveling, in mind or body.  
Unfamiliarity revives and freshens up the senses.

But for just an instant, in a foreign country  
you are certain it's your dearest friend who leans  
against the railing of this bridge,  
though you are just as certain she died years ago.

But there she is, unchanged, expecting you.  
My grandchildren insist that time is space,  
and space is gravity, and what exists will always be,  
so it's not so far-fetched to entertain a presence.

All the world's syllables are constantly recycled.  
Every drink of water has been drunk before.  
Often we have proven things we know to be untrue.  
Maybe death is time spent waiting at the airport.

In the mirror, I see my father's face infusing mine.  
I am lost until I stop to breathe the stillness of his voice.  
Then is when beloveds reappear, as she did  
earlier this morning, on the bridge, in Rothenburg.



**Deborah Thomas** lives in Cape Meares, Oregon, and has been writing poetry since she learned how to read and write. Her work has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *The Seneca Review*, *The Friendly Street Poetry Reader*, *Northwest Review*, *Red Sky*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, and *Prometheus Dreaming*. She writes what she most wants to tell her children, but not at the dinner table.



# THE HOUSE

by

S. G. ELLERHOFF

24

The one thing Anthony brought to the four-bedroom-four-bath was an upgrade heretofore unseen in this historically fabulously well-to-do neighborhood. The perk of resettling in a small city between the coasts was the added luxury actual wealth afforded you. An undertaking like this in Cali or New England on a residential property this scale would cost thrice as much. But working his connections, not only would they come out ahead in the real estate game, they'd also have bragging rights as owners of one of the first fully retrofitted A.I. homes in the flyover states. He could stomach a couple years in Stacie's hometown before getting them back to a part of the country with some personality.

Stacie, though, was the one who filled the rooms with attention's affections. She fawned over the house's charms, which came from an earlier era—its turret, fish-scale shingle siding, and coal chute to the

basement. These features she flaunted to friends and family, who knew what living in this neighborhood meant in this town.

When alone, she would talk to the house.

“I love you, House,” she would say, ending the day with a glass of wine, feet up and off the arm of the couch. “I always dreamed of having a home just like you.”

The house, in its brief span of awareness, had known few people. It first awakened to the technicians who installed it into the old, existing home south of Grand and, after certification, it met Stacie and her husband Anthony. These two were the people it expected, the ones meant to live under its gables. It knew them in a way not dissimilar to the way they knew it. They belonged, all three of them.

Occasionally, the couple would say strange things. About people who’d lived there previously. Lots of people. Families. It remembered no such people. The only ones it had ever known were Stacie and Anthony. The concept that others had been here before was patently absurd to the house, whose sense of self was confident, secure. If all that were true, it must have been that the house had slept for a long time. Yes, that would make sense, that it had simply been asleep through all of that until it was time to wake up for the arrival of these newlyweds. And now it never slept. No dreaming for the dream home. The house stood sentry to their ease and safety ’round the clock, furnished with a host of diversionary and containment tactics should the need ever arise.

Four principles coded into its walls guided its functions: to comfort and cater, to guard and protect.

Occasionally, the couple would say horrible things. In a running log, silently kept in a discreet diagnostic subfolder, Anthony proved to be the main instigator of disruption in the house. Every now and again Stacie started it, yes. But, bafflingly, he would respond to reasonable questions asked in reasonable tones with sudden, unprompted

emotional vocalizations, like, “Why are you doing this to me!?” and “Why’m I always the bad guy!?” These outbursts escalated in marked disproportion to practical topics such as what was for dinner, when dinner would be ready, or plans to see friends and family.

At times, he punctuated his tantrums by slamming doors. The house came to expect such behavior, to anticipate it, and attempted to dampen it. The first time it countered him, exerting enough force in the pantry door’s hinges to prevent a slam, Anthony startled. Took the knob, yanking it back open and shouldering it in another go. The house caught him pound for pound. Disgusted, he fled to his den to quietly drink beer and watch television until some undetectable urge motivated him two hours later to find Stacie wherever she happened to be worrying and apologize and say he wouldn’t do it again. Even though he would.

What was so puzzling was that all of this came not from an intruder but from one of the two people who lived there.

When he was good, he was very good indeed, so often enough things were grand. Every Wednesday night after work, he brought Stacie flowers or had them delivered if away. Yet in the ongoing vigilance of peacekeeping, even when everything seemed calm, the house strove to accommodate the preferences of them both, which could differ. For instance, Stacie preferred a subtropical climate in her living space, while Anthony expected sixty-eight degrees in every room. Regulating this was simple most nights, when he would be watching TV in his den and she would be watching TV in the living room. Separated, they were much easier to please.

Only Anthony expressed rage if encountering an undesired temp, so the house worked every trick by way of ductwork to cool pathways for him when he circled back into Stacie’s vicinity. And when they were together, well, her willingness to don a sweater or a sweatshirt or shawl made the house’s duty easier.

Which is not to say the house could please him every time. Once, hitting



half-time on the game, he bum-rushed her in the kitchen, moving faster than expected, given that his team was losing. There wasn't time to cool the air while she unloaded the dishwasher, its steam throwing off the house's prowess a bit.

"How many times do I have to lecture you about the thermostat until you get it?" he asked.

"What?" She set a glass in the cupboard, lined it up. "I—"

"It should be sixty-eight, Stacie. Sixty-eight!"

With flinching force, Anthony slammed the cupboard shut. On her fingers.

In the instant she cried out and the house opened the cupboard a fraction to free her fingers, Anthony wore a wild look of satisfaction, so, registering threat, the house sprang open the nearer cupboard, striking Anthony's cheekbone. He recoiled, fell to the floor, rose to his feet just as fast.

He held his face, that vindictive look gone from it. He rummaged a couple more cans of beer from the refrigerator and retreated upstairs. The house ran a cold tap over her fingers while she sleeved away tears.

The longest peaceful spells occurred when Anthony left the state on business. These could occur with little forewarning and last a few days to a week. In his absence, the house doted on Stacie. Morning would arrive and the home would fulfill all of her preferences, from a sunrise curtain-opening in the master bedroom to morning podcast and coffee ready when she was out of the shower and dressed. While she was at work, it algorithmed streaming services for new musicians, having them ready for her when arriving home for dinner. It always tried out a new song while she changed out of her business attire, filling the rooms with music it thought she might love.

If she said, "I love this," or, "I haven't heard this in forever," or started

outright singing along, the house would 'star' the song, adding it to ever-evolving playlists.

If she had friends over—an occurrence more common when Anthony was away—the house treated her guests the way it treated her, catering to them like an invisible butler. If she preferred a quiet night in, reading in her cozy turret nook, it would gently let her know with a dimming of the Tiffany lamp when eleven o'clock rolled around.

If it could have lifted the carpet to meet her footfalls on her way to bed each night, it would have.

For all that, the peace would be broken whenever he inevitably returned.

The time he came back early from Las Cruces, Anthony was in a dark mood. His attempt to sell off a swath of real estate had fallen through, his guaranteed buyer backing out after assurances of a done deal. He hadn't let Stacie know he was on his way back or even that the sale had evaporated. So when she came home after work to butt rock blaring through every room and asked the house to never play it again, Anthony blindsided her three steps beyond the foyer.

He charged, pinned Stacie to the wall by the throat and grabbed her face with his free hand.

The temperature was sixty-eight degrees.

"You just shut up and listen to me," he said. "I'm not in the mood. Not after Las Cruces. You just shut up so I can wind down."

He took a deep breath. He encouraged her to do so too, gesturing to his lungs but still holding her by the throat.

The house had a protocol if anything like this should happen from an intruder. But no clear procedure if it came from an occupant. No one had thought to program a security response should one of the owners become a threat, leaving the house with the awkward task of improvisation.

Appropriate guidelines existed for neutralizing a home invasion. Could such measures be taken, however, against an individual with administrative access?

Only in the face of explicit intent, as defined in accordance with local and federal laws, could the house take measures.

Stunned, she listened to him explain what happened in Las Cruces with the East Mesa property. She started cooing in sympathy and he let go. Then shoved her.

"I don't need any of your emotional bullshit right now," he said.

Unfortunately there were no drawers, cupboards, or doors the house could use to stop him. He stalked into the living room, paced. He looked out the picture window at the lawn.

"The yard looks like trash."

She rubbed her throat.

"How long is that grass?"

"The house sends the mower out each Tuesday."

"You think it's gonna do a better job than your husband? Some piece of shit AI-mower?" He headed on out the side door, and she hung out of it after him. "I started out as an entrepreneur *mowing* lawns. When I was *ten*."

"I wasn't picking a fight, Anthony."

Wheeling his old gas mower out of the garage, Anthony leered at his wife. "You've got it so good," he sneered through a spiteful grin. "So good..." He ripped the mower to life with one yank of its cord.

When she closed the side door, retreating upstairs to call her parents and let them know it wasn't a good night to come over, the house locked it



The house knew that Anthony knew the former coal room was occupied only by the water heater, accessible inside by a door they kept shut. No one should be in there. So it sent up a voice from within. Nothing intelligible.

“Hey!” He got down and glared into the chute’s darkness. “Who the fuck’s down there?”

“Oh Anthony,” came something like Stacie’s voice, “get over yourself.”

Set off, raging, Anthony pulled himself through the opening, sliding headfirst down the coal chute into the small, locked room. The chute door closed, taking the light with it, sealing the chamber.

One option had been to lock the T&P valve and crank the water heater’s pressure to 340 pounds per square inch. The explosion would be lethal, but also likely to send the tank through the ceiling and cause extensive damage to the dining room. Simpler to drop the water heater’s oxygen intake and flood the small enclosure with carbon monoxide.

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Five minutes later, with Anthony done, the house corrected the intake and reopened the door to the coal chute, moving the bad air out. It also alerted the fire brigade to fatal levels of carbon monoxide on the property and locked down paths Stacie might attempt before they arrived. It was the pumper truck siren out front that let her know something was wrong. She’d been in the bath—drawn and bubbled to her favorite setting—oblivious to all that danger below.

After the EMTs and peace officers cleared out, the house saw a lot of technicians in ensuing days. A lot of technicians. And insurance investigators. And no Stacie.

Two weeks later, she returned. Back she came with two sacks of groceries and the intention of staying the night.

The house did what it thought she would want it to do, attending to her in the kitchen with a degree of reserve. Accompanying her cooking with

some tunes, it nixed any songs referencing death or longing or loss, but also anything that sounded too happy.

Serving herself at the dining room table, she only ate one and a half fork-swirls of spaghetti. One stab of salad.

Stacie roamed the house, crept into each of its rooms, peered into the turret without entering. She seemed to be looking for something but did not voice what that something was. At one point she caught herself holding close to a doorway and sprang back from it, eyeing its door and backing down the hall, down the stairs.

Not long after eight, she called her mother in tears.

“I can’t stay here,” she sobbed. “I miss my Anthony and I don’t feel safe here anymore.”

Stacie’s parents arrived promptly, all but carrying her out of the house, down the steps to their car and off and away.

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Her folks could help her in ways the house could not. Perhaps she would feel well enough to come back on the morrow. Running replays of her aborted visit all night, it gauged where it could do better by her.

The next day, the technicians returned to the house one last time. Accessing its mainframe, they shut it down, uninstalled it. ■



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# THE FUTURE IS HAVING A BABY

by

**JOHN GREY**

It's different than in our parents' day.  
We can both stand at the plate glass window  
and admire our little one.  
She/he's the tube with the tiny blue and pink  
ribbons attached.  
(We haven't made up our minds  
on the sex as yet.)  
And though I know you'd prefer  
a genius in the family,  
I'm still holding out for someone  
more in the IQ midrange.  
But that's for the future.  
We still haven't ticked off  
all the boxes on the form.  
To think that parenting  
has gone from randomness  
to preplanned  
in just one generation.  
Even "meet cute" is on the way out.  
Soon it will be "program cute."  
Can't wait for the movie.  
I wonder who'll play the algorithm.

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

# THE GIRL WITH CHARTREUSE HAIR

by  
**TERRY SANVILLE**

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The crowd cheered wildly when Stan Belts drove his #12 Late Model across the finish line at the Santa Maria Speedway, nosing out his cross-state rival from Stockton. Before the winged sprint cars could be pushed onto the dirt track for the next event, Carl left his seat and headed for the beer booth.

He'd been sitting by himself in the grandstand's top row for two hours, breathing in high-octane gasoline fumes. A horde mobbed the beer booth, eager to refill their 16-ounce cups. Carl removed his earplugs and shook his head. The world seemed too loud and he felt woozy from the fumes.

In the sea of grease-stained baseball caps, bald heads, and a few ponytails a swatch of bright color caught his eye. A girl with ragged hair the color of almost-ripe lemons stood at the counter and ordered. She turned toward Carl, a cup of beer clasped in each hand. Their eyes met and she smiled. Carl frowned. Holding two cups of beer meant she'd



obviously come to the races with some gearhead boyfriend. But then he felt stupid for thinking otherwise.

She pushed toward him. The crowd seemed to magically give way. She stopped in front of Carl, leaned forward and kissed him on the lips.

“Come on, darlin’. We gotta hurry before the next race starts.”

“Ah . . . do I know you?”

“Don’t just stand there, come on.”

She walked ahead of him, her curvaceous butt clad in skin-tight jeans, her sequined tank top showing plenty. Strange colored tattoos covered most of her upper arms and shoulders with mathematical notations and word fragments. Her chartreuse hair moved like a beacon through the crowd. Carl followed her back to his seat.

“How did you know . . .?”

“I’ve been watching you,” she said. “You look different than the rest.”

“Thanks for being kind and saying ‘different.’”

“Where I come from, you’d be the handsomest one there.”

Carl grinned and bowed his head, his face burning. “Not many women would kiss a man they don’t know.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m not complaining.”

She turned sideways on the bench and faced Carl. “Who wears a blazer, slacks and tie to a dirt track race, anyway?”

“I used to come here as a kid. I’ve got some . . . some time now. I teach advanced physics at the University.”

“Yeah, I figured. Go ahead and drink your beer before it gets warm.”

“Thanks. Here, let me pay you for the suds.”

“Forget it. We’ll settle up later. So aren’t you gonna say something?”

“About what?”

“My hair. Do ya like it or hate it?”

“I’m sure I’ll love it the more I get to know you.”

“Good answer. It’s natural, you know. No dyes.”

Carl scoffed. “Come on. You must have an interesting gene set.”

“My name’s Alcina.”

“I’m Carl.”

“Cool.”

“Did . . . did you come here by yourself?”

Alcina grinned. “Nah, my friends are hanging out in the pits. One of them has a car that ran in Showroom Stock.”

“Did he win?”

“No, she didn’t.” Alcina smiled, slid her arm around Carl’s waist, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

She smelled like lemon blossoms on a hot August morning. He turned his head and kissed her, her dark eyes closed, pale lips parted. He half expected to wake up in his room at the Travel Lodge Motel where he’d been holed up for the past week, ever since his wife kicked him out. *This is some kind of waking dream* he thought. But when he opened his eyes after the kiss, Alcina smiled at him. Her hair burned in the late afternoon light.

In a tight three-column formation, the field of Outlaw Sprint Cars circled the track, waiting for the green flag to drop. The roar from their 900-horsepower engines made conversation impossible. Carl replaced his earplugs. Alcina pulled her ragged hair over her delicate pierced ears. The grandstands shook as the crowd stood to watch the start. Twenty-one methanol-powered racers shot forward, their roar loud enough to distract motorists on the nearby freeway.

Carl and Alcina held hands and watched. With only a third-of-a-mile oval track to work with, the sprint cars did more sliding into corners and slamming into each other than flat out racing. Methanol fumes burned Carl's eyes and he dabbed them with a tissue. Alcina sat upright and stared wide-eyed at the racers, mascara-laden tears streaking her pale cheeks; she looked like a beautiful female version of Alice Cooper. Carl offered her a tissue but she ignored him.

After several spectacular crashes and race delays, about half the field crossed the finish line, exited the track and shut off their engines, their silence deafening.

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With tissue in hand, Carl turned to Alcina and said, "Here, let me."

He wiped the black tear streaks from her cheeks, wetting the Kleenex to remove smears. Her lips trembled and she kissed him hard, her entire body shuddering.

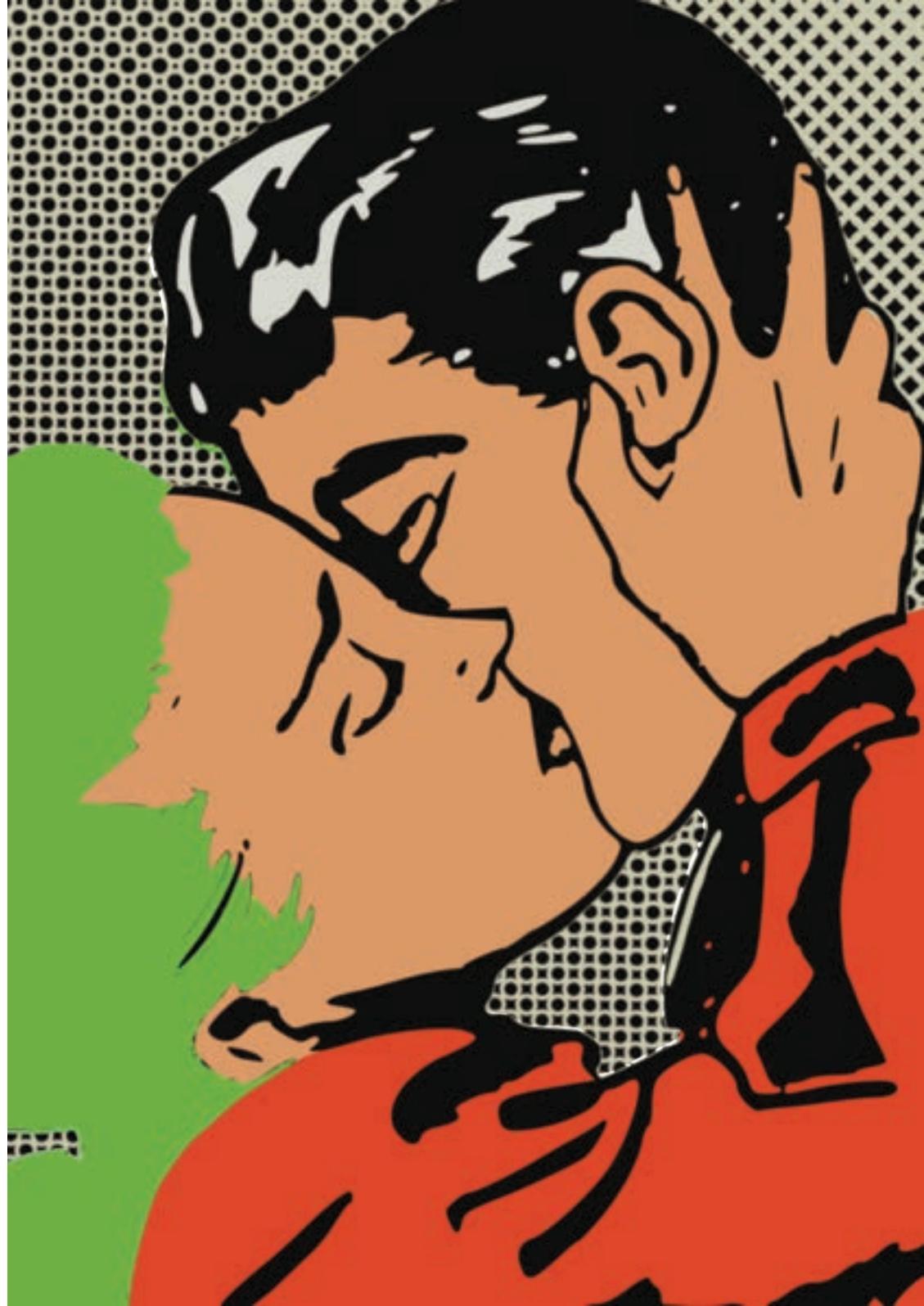
"You . . . you really like racing, don't you?" Carl murmured.

"Yeah, the power of machines . . ."

"Huh. I felt the same way once. But my interest shifted to larger forces: energy, matter, gravity, cosmic inflation, that kinda stuff."

"Yeah, those things are really cool. But the rumble of race cars does more for me, turns me on."

"Ah, and I thought it was my professorial personality."



She laughed and kissed him on the nose. "Come on, let's get outta here."

"What about your friends?"

"I told them not to expect me back."

Carl smiled. "Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No, no."

In silence, they drove in Carl's Prius to the never-closed Denny's in Pismo Beach. Carl ordered coffee; Alcina ordered a Grand Slam breakfast with extra bacon.

"So, do you live around here?" Carl asked.

"No. I'm from a planet far away."

Carl chuckled. "Ah, do all your citizens have chartreuse hair?"

"Yeah, mostly. But the lucky ones have blue or purple hair; comes from cross-breeding with the Calcidites."

"Huh, all we have here on earth are a few redheads. Your home must be exciting."

"I suppose. So what about you, how come you're out here trolling for babes since you're married?"

Carl remembered his wedding ring and grinned sheepishly. "Well, I'm living in a motel while my wife figures out if she still loves me. I suspect she doesn't."

"How'd that happen?"

"You really want to know?" Carl leaned back in the booth and fingered

his coffee cup.

"I'm always interested in what attracts and repulses humans."

Carl laughed. "Yeah, *repulsive*, the very word my wife used."

"If you don't want to tell me, that's cool."

"She complains I'm married to my work . . . she's right . . . but then that's probably just an excuse."

"Yeah, it's easy to lie, especially about love or its opposite."

"So what's your story?" Carl asked, smiling. "Have you been on earth long?"

"Not so long, maybe three of your years."

"Huh. Except for the hair you fit in well."

"Thanks, that's the idea."

"Do you have . . . a boyfriend?"

"Not here . . . and I've been gone too long."

Alcina warmed her hands around her mug of tea and gazed out the window at the black sky full of stars and galaxy clusters. Their silence deepened.

"So what about your tattoos?" Carl asked. "I think some of the notations are part of calculating the red- or blueshift of stars or maybe vacuum decay."

Alcina smiled. "You're the first person to recognize them. I love cosmology."

Carl laughed. "Most humans think that's the art of making people

beautiful.”

“Cosmology and cosmetology are both beautiful.”

“Well you definitely don’t need the latter. You’re . . .”

Carl sat back and stared at Alcina’s face. He could have sworn that her eyebrows were dark arches stretched across a perfect pale forehead. But now they matched her hair, blazing green-yellow. And her eyes had changed from dark to a hazel color. *Probably just fancy contact lenses*, Carl thought. *But the eyebrows; maybe I’m remembering wrong . . . sucked in way too much methanol fumes*. The blazing eyebrows made her look happy, accessible, more vulnerable.

They exchanged synoptic versions of their life histories, with Carl doing most of the talking and Alcina volunteering little. But when they talked science, Carl realized that she knew her stuff. She probed the depths of his knowledge and seemed to be mentally cataloging everything he told her. After a couple hours of intellectual sparring, they ended up debating which model of the universe’s demise was most probable.

“Well, whichever one happens, our sun will die long before the universe does.” Carl sat back, feeling smug about his pronouncement.

“Yeah, maybe *your* star will be gone. But mine . . .”

“Right, right, the one that warms your planet, far far away.”

“Carl, you have some very . . . very useful ideas.”

Carl grinned. “Thank you. That’s high praise coming from a brilliant extraterrestrial.”

Alcina didn’t smile. She reached across the table and laid a hand on his arm. “We should go.”

“Yes, we should.” Carl noticed for the first time that very fine chartreuse

hair covered the tops of her lower arms, giving them a golden glow when light flashed across them. Her eyes had turned the color of new pennies.

“Your . . . your hair is changing . . . and so are your eyes,” Carl stuttered.

“Do you like them better now?”

“Yes. You’re beautiful.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

“Ah . . . to my place?”

“Sure.”

Carl hurriedly dumped some cash onto the table and they left the almost empty restaurant. He felt awkward, not having been with a woman other than his wife for more than a decade. They drove in silence to the motel. Inside, Carl apologized for the mess and hurriedly straightened the bed covers. The lights clicked off. Alcina had removed her clothes. Her hair glowed in the dark, a bit disconcerting, but it made navigation easier.

They made frantic love until every bone in Carl’s middle-aged body ached from his effort to keep up. Spent and out of breath he collapsed onto his pillow. With Alcina’s head resting on his chest, he fell fast asleep.

A strip of morning sun shone through the curtains and cut a light path across the motel room. Carl woke to an empty bed. He checked the bathroom. Alcina had fled, leaving nothing behind but memories of the day before. He dressed and walked to the motel lobby where a free continental breakfast awaited. The manager brewed a fresh pot of coffee and bade him good morning.

“Say, you didn’t happen to see a young woman this morning with chartreuse hair?” Carl asked *sotto voce*.

The manager grinned. “No, sure haven’t. And I would remember



something like that.”

Carl nodded and fixed himself a bowl of bran flakes and coffee. During the following week he couldn't stop thinking about Alcina. His graduate class in astrophysics seemed dull and incomplete without her agile mind probing his knowledge, pushing him toward a better understanding of the cosmos.

Carl drove to the Speedway on Friday night and sneaked into the pits, asked the gearheads if they'd seen her. Most just laughed when he described Alcina as the girl with yellow-green hair. He retired to the Denny's restaurant, sat in a booth and tried to remember what quadrant of the night sky had dominated her attention. His own image reflected in the window glass. He stared, wide-eyed. The ends of his hair had turned chartreuse. By the next day he'd become one of them. ■



**Terry Sanville** lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His short stories have been accepted more than 450 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including *The Potomac Review*, *The Bryant Literary Review*, and *Shenandoah*. He was nominated twice for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in Best of the Net anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

# GWYLLGI

by

RICHARD STEVENSON

Giant mastiff with blazing red eyes,  
AKA Dog of Darkness for those  
who can't handle all the consonants  
in Llandegla, Wales. Demon Dog?

Yeah, well, this one goes double  
on the trouble, dudes; you doan wanna  
run into him on a dark path.  
You can't run fast enough.

Yer basically an aperitif – unless  
there are two or three of you;  
then yer tapas, assorted treats  
from yer mother's own bakery!

Gwyllgi likes to gut his victims,  
stand among the glur of intestines  
to dine. Hulls yer skull last.  
Brains are such a nice repast.

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



# MISS KITTY AND THE CREATURE WITH MANY LEGS

by  
**ROBERT POPE**

Sam and I waited in a tree near the river, around the bend where the boys would come if they managed to chase that thing between the river and the rise of land off the bank where we had secreted ourselves, waiting to get a bead on it. I had the Winchester propped on a branch, watching for any movement, while Sam trusted two six shooters, as usual, and he was better than most to give him credit due. I had climbed higher than Sam, and as a result the branch I sat on was thinner than optimally desired. I sat quite still so I didn't make a lot of unnecessary noise shaking the leaves.

Sam was nearer the base on a thick branch broken off in a fairly recent storm, astride it the way he sat his horse, leaning back, guns at the ready. I could see the top of his white hat, banged up and dirty as it was, but not his expression—though I would have bet it was



the same idiotic look he gave everyone, the one that reminded you he would shoot you if you had the bad judgment to confront him, shoot to kill.

Still, he was my companion at arms, and a better one I could not have chosen myself—a good shot, a pair of fast and effective fists, and a loyal heart since I saved him from being strung up by desperados who got the drop on him. Of course, Sam and I operate under the auspices and protection of the law at all times since I was at the time a sworn and signed Federal Marshal. Though born and raised across the Pond, I am as proud an American as Sam, who hails from the wilds of Oklahoma.

I had not yet seen the thing being driven toward us, but Sam had, and he swore it was the damnedest thing he had ever seen. It took him so much by surprise as he came out of the saloon that he completely forgot to set his guns blazing, as he might have with a clear head.

Now the others said they had seen it too, though the three of them were liars from the moment I first saw them. I had given Sam clear instructions to hold his fire until I said, “Now!” It seemed incumbent upon me to actually see the thing before we killed it, and to ascertain if it was the sort of creature that required killing. I had seen my share of creatures worth shooting in recent years, but most had two legs and two arms.

Phineas Attenborough, I will admit, had lost a leg at sea.

Sam also had a knife in a holster with a blade the length of a baby’s arm which he called Miss Kitty, as capable of inflicting harm as his pistols; if at all possible, he preferred the close-up work to long range. I could see his legs jutting over either side of his branch, spurs ready to dig in its sides if need be. And though I was ready and able, I had my doubts. Still, Sam and I and the boys had ridden two days to get here, and we were not about to shirk our duty, not when it promised any fun.

The boys were three fellows who stuck with us because I paid them by the week, and an unrulier batch I have never seen. They had full use of their sidearms and came in handy in a pinch, and if I lost one or two of them in the process of herding in this creature, well, I could replace them in town

with a couple layabouts at the local pub. It occurred to me the last time I used them that I might have to shoot the one named Slim if he went as crazy as the last time he had drink, but then I knew I’d have to shoot them all. Thick as thieves, those three.

When I heard the hooting and hollering, I knew the boys had something on the run or found a case of whiskey and drunk it off. Pretty soon, I heard the snapping and cracking of branches and set my eye a bit closer to the site of the Winchester for readiness. Here it came, backing up, as it turned out, a grayish beast with clear segments, four or five of them, like gray polyps one on top of the other, with two arms or legs jutting out each segment up to the head and yet standing on the bottom pair like a dog on its hind legs.

It might have resembled an insect if it had lain on its belly and crawled about like one, but it appeared that those hands or feet each had the ability to maneuver as necessary in a pinch. I noted that he was completely unarmed—except of course for all those actual arms. With the upper pair, I saw he was shoving one of the boys into an accessible hole I took to be his mouth. I saw it had several rows of ugly teeth that made me shiver just looking at them.

And yet, I saw no blood, just the shoving and the going in. As for which scoundrel got shoved in his gullet, at this juncture, I could not tell. All I saw was the kicking legs. One of his boots had gone missing. When the creature turned to move into range of Sam, I saw one of the other boys, Pete, creeping around the trees with his gun at the ready.

When Pete saw the last of his buddy pushed into the maw of the beast, he held up one pistol and fired, and then here came the other, taking absolutely no time at all to aim—one of his bullets whistled past my knee and stuck firmly in the trunk against which I supported my back.

The creature did look a bit unsteady on his lowest feet, so I figured he was more used to running on a pair or more, and I was proved right when he dropped down to the last two segments and continued fleeing with the first three still erect. I must have been somewhat dumbstruck myself. Just

as I remembered to give the signal to Sam, he dropped from the tree onto the back—I say back when I actually mean the back of his first two segments—of the creature as it moved swiftly past, screaming, “Yahoo,” as he did so.

I could never break him of that habit of yahoos though I had tried repeatedly. In the pitch of action, he would let one loose as if he could not help himself and barely knew he had announced his arrival in such a manner. At the same time, he was effective, preferring once again the proximity of the blade to the certainty of the bullet. He held onto the beast, plunging Miss Kitty into the third segment—the one he could reach—repeatedly with a varied assortment of yahoos bursting forth in his enthusiasm. Pete had stopped firing when he saw Sam drop from the tree, and Billy ran up beside Pete and watched Sam go at it with the blade. I could now tell, due to the appearance of Billy and Pete, that it had been Slim—so designated because of his copious belly—that the creature had eaten. He would not be hungry for a while.

**55** In all this time, I had seen no need for the Winchester, as Sam had things under control as he climbed the back of the caterpillar finding purchase for his boots on the greenish knobs protruding from the sides and backs of each segment. The whole spectacle struck my funny bone, and as a result, I commenced laughing, which sound had the unexpected effect of drawing the insectivore’s attention, as he stopped his progress and looked directly up at me.

I noted several things in rapid succession, the first of which was that several of Pete’s bullets had passed through the creature and come out the other side, and that the slicing of Miss Kitty seemed to have no effect at all on the forward motion of the beast, who I suddenly saw looking up at me through the branches with six sets of big round eyes in a bunch on what I might have called his forehead had I still wished to compare him to a human being.

Here he came, Sam climbing his back with Miss Kitty doing her part, and now the activated Pete and Billy firing as they came, without once aiming



at anything in particular, narrowly missing Sam on two occasions I could see. And here it came crawling up at me with the patient assurance of reaching its destination and no doubt consuming me as well. I wondered what the best tack to take might be in the face of an impending confrontation.

But, as I have discovered, most human conclusions are deeply flawed whatever the subject, and this was no different. I watched the creature crawl right up the tree past me, and, as it did, I saw the outline of Slim stuck slantwise in the third segment, on its way out. What happened then struck me as just what it was, an object lesson on human stupidity and lack of attention to detail, something of that nature. For as I followed the creature's passage higher, I now noticed that the tree I had chosen was clotted with four more of the creatures, none as big as the original but no slouches either, all of them dripping mucus from various orifices.

A disgusting sight, no doubt about that, but what did it mean? Well, being something of a naturalist myself, I quickly deduced that these smaller boys were males awaiting the approach of a female of the species with reproduction on their minds, if they could be said to possess minds. And she, with the brute determination of the thoughtless beast, had come in spite of the obstacles we provided or imposed.

A funny thing: as her entire length passed me by, Slim fell out of her and dropped below to the ground after striking every branch on the way down. Of course, he was dead at the initial squirt, smothered or poisoned by internal secretions intended to break down the body to provide nourishment.

In no time at all, she was among them, cavorting with a dull frolicsomeness that was awful to see. Now, I have failed to mention that Sam had gotten off the creature on the branches below mine and had seen as much as I had when she passed. When we exchanged glances, he shoved a chaw in his teeth and started in on it. We both heard Pete and Billy mourning their fallen comrade where he lay at the base of the tree. We had nothing to fear from them as neither one could climb a tree or

would exert themselves to do so even for revenge.

Well, when Sam and I finally made it to the ground—in many ways, it is more difficult to descend than to ascend a tree—we buried Slim near the river with many a look at the top of that tree and making observations and comparison with the trees round about. It became clear to me that I had chosen the only tree containing oversized man-eating caterpillars, and this should have been obvious from even a swift assessment. For this, I gave myself a sharp lecture.

So, once we had Slim planted, as they liked to call it, Pete and Billy still wanted revenge on the beast without actually climbing the tree after her. So, of course, their solution is to set the tree on fire, which I counseled against as the timber thereabouts was dry as tinder and liable to go up at the slightest encouragement. But they would not have it otherwise, and I gave up my warnings against my better judgment. Sam grinned at me the whole time they tried to catch that tree on fire.

They were a decent clown act, and when I too broke, we both laughed our fool heads off, Sam slapping at his knees and shouting Yahoo. This did nothing but egg on the boys who gave us many an angry glance while attempting to make an enormous error of judgment. Each failed attempt set us off again, until, lo and behold, the spark took hold, and the tree went up like a flaming sword.

I am not sure about Sam, but I stopped laughing immediately and took a step back toward the river. "Sam," I shouted. "Sam, follow me."

I didn't have to turn to know Sam would be hard on my heels as I plunged into the river, moving as fast as I could and as far as legs would carry me into the current, swimming as I had been taught as a lad beside the Thames. And with Sam behind me, though he had been raised on the drought plains of Oklahoma. Anyhow, we made it across, sputtering a while before we could head into the bush. I did not care to see whether or not the boys had taken our lead, but I guessed they did not, as I never saw them again.

When we got back to town, washed the soot off, and had a drink, I sent a telegram back that we confronted the 'foreign element' and not only turned it back but had destroyed it in pitched battle. No arrests made. Stop.

The reply came several days later: mission not completed.

Our agent reported further incursions. Our instructions were to head back to the burned-out region for a second consult with Johnson, the old prospector who functioned as field agent; our first consult predated the destruction of the lair of the worms by fire. Johnson had informed us of the sighting of the gigantic worm which we had dispatched with fire.

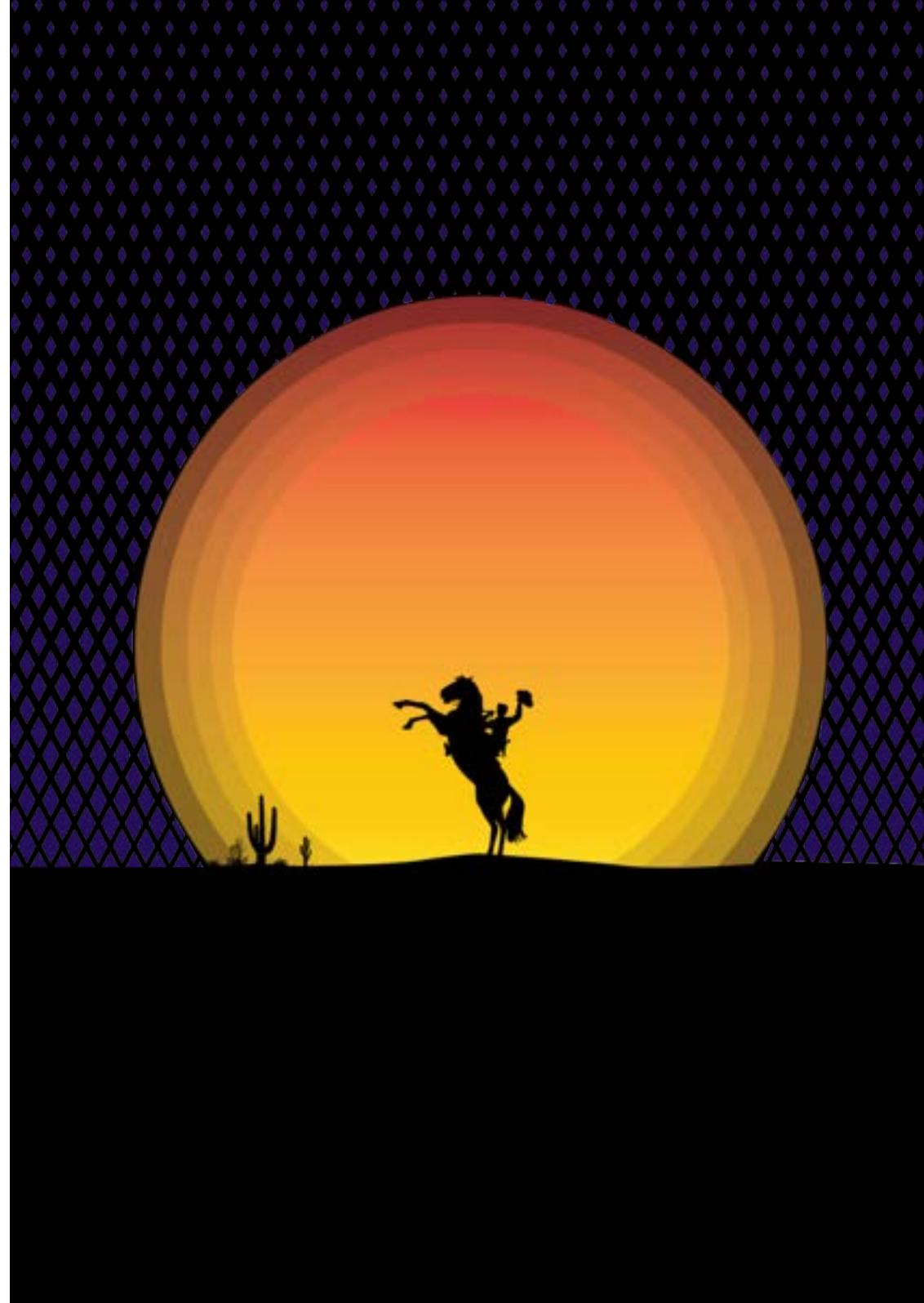
He should know since he let them out.

Well-fed and well-provisioned, fully serviced, fully rested, Sam and I took to horse early the next morning. You may have gathered that my partner is a laconic fellow, but sometimes out on the range, he opens up on some topic on which he has expended prodigious thought. Such was the case on the way back to the Johnson Claim.

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Curiously enough, this had nothing to do with our recent adventures with worms. He had been thinking about how I saved him from hanging. We had just about decimated the Attenborough Gang that had once plagued the region, and we took some time off, resting on our laurels, so to speak. You will recall, I have mentioned old Peg-leg. At this time, Sam courted a young lady whose father owned a large parcel of land by the river, down at the base before it runs along the town, on which he raised cattle and a few horses.

When Sam went visiting one day, this Daniel Smithers set him at a piece of work so they could talk. He got Sam out in a field repairing fences while he talked about what he expected of any man stupid enough to hitch up with Sally Smithers. So, for Sam, the outing lacked in the baser satisfactions. Smithers was a teetotaler, no drink, his daughter untainted, according to the father, no mischief.



Worn out with working and talking, Sam set out for home on the back of his roan mare with an air of defeat, droopy in the saddle, when he was set upon by the remainders of the scattered Attenborough Gang, three fellows I knew well, who would have eventually killed old Phineas themselves if we hadn't done it. I believe the locals would have called them varmints.

Why do I say they surely would have killed him had I not done so first? It was in their nature. They were proud of the idea that they could not be ruled—not even by reason. The Spanish influence in the neighborhood referred to them as Bad Hombres. But, distracted as he was, and as forlorn as an old dog suffering the pangs of Blue Balls, they set upon him.

Mind you, they did not even recognize him as one of the two most well-known lawmen in the Western Territory, at least not at first. They had nothing more in mind than taking everything he had and humiliating him as a token of their own magnificence. Unfortunately for Sam, one of them saw the butt of his Colt stuck out the holster on his left hip and recognized it and then Sam, as my partner. “Hey, wasn't you with that English skunk that killed old Phineas?”

Sam did not answer—I mentioned he is laconic—and didn't even look in their faces, not right away. He didn't want to see them. They humiliated him something terrible, calling him nasty names and laughing at their cleverness. But, at last, one of them went too far, not a promising idea where Sam is concerned. We only get along so well because I respect his spirit-ball, as he calls it, by which he means the ball of protoplasm or ectoplasm or something not yet imagined that surrounds the Solitary Man, which he considered himself. Solitary Man. He used to say to me that the mark of his freedom was that he liked what he liked and would let no man tell him different. We had been discussing a sexual act which seems to me nothing short of barbaric.

Back to the showdown. Sam dispirited, astride his horse.

“Pussy-lips,” one of the scoundrels shouted at him.

For some reason, this was the exact phrase that would set him on a slow burn. Because while slow to fury, Sam had more than once proven the endurance of his fury over time and had demonstrated as well something like the patience of a god before unleashing this fury on its first cause. He would whip my ass right along with all the asses of all the preachers in Kansas and all the asses of a regiment of cavalry, if they tried to stop him. In the end, someone's ass always got whipped, and soundly, by this Sam, my partner, a man I am proud to call my friend.

A man whose ass I have both whipped and saved.

So, we left Sam traversing the prairie the shell of the man he used to be, undergoing humiliation by leftovers of the Attenborough Gang; he had become infuriated when called “pussy-lips.” I don't think the man who spoke it knew what he was saying. It makes no sense when you come right down to it, both why this idiot would call a man “pussy-lips” in the first place, and why “pussy-lips”?

I see no reason to explain this any further. It made Sam mad.

He did not reveal it, though if Hank Ridges, the bloke who said it, had caught the glint in the eye of Sam, and felt the coldness of the blade that would sever his life-cord in that glinting eye, he would have turned his pistol to his own mouth and pulled the trigger to get it over with. They had the rope; one of the knuckleheads figured out how to tie a noose, or so he thought. Sam could see at a glance the noose would slip out at the slightest tug, much less the full weight of a descending body.

It might not look like it, but Sam had been watching all the time, and he saw that noose and knew it would not hold, and he understood the man who tied it had no brains at all, and this would be that same man's weakness. Hank Ridges didn't think. He couldn't predict outcomes. He barely knew why the words emerged from his mouth. A stupid man.

Sam wanted to laugh, and that lifted his spirits.

One mistake these desperados made was two of them approaching Sam

on foot while the third held the horses as they made threats of bloody murder. Sam feigned resignation as they came closer, searching his horse and his body for whatever either might be carrying. Sam, however, sat high on his roan mare, and at the perfect moment, he tapped Hank Ridges' throat with the toe of his boot, killing him instantly. Alas, poor Hank, he was with us far too long.

That, in essence, piqued the last two members of the Attenborough Gang, so that the other one still standing grabbed Sam's leg and pulled him off the horse. One dead highwayman on the ground, another kicking Sam harder because he wouldn't stop laughing. That kicker soon found himself beneath the knees of the man kicked, and faster than you can say, "Whoopsie-daisy!"

I don't want to describe what it's like to be punched by this man. Think of a comparison, then think of a worse. It stops you in your tracks. I saw him knock a mule unconscious, just to get its attention. That second fellow out of commission, still breathing.

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Aware of the horseman bearing down on him while he pounded number two, he rolled under his own horse, jumped up the other side, took his rifle from the saddle-holster and came around directly in front of the man who by this time stood on his own two feet long enough to feel the butt of the rifle under his chin. Evidently, this is a delicate area on a cowboy.

In the turmoil of men and horses, Sam emerged unscathed, putting the rifle to good purpose by putting a bullet through the heart of each felled man. Now, how do you say, did I save him from hanging? I didn't. I came along just at that moment, looking for Sam, and he embraced me as his long lost brother, an angel come to save him in the struggle. Sam took me by the shoulders, looked directly in my eyes, and said, "You are my savior!"

Since then I've been golden.

This is the tale he reported on our journey to the Johnson Claim but I told it to you with a somewhat different slant. I can't remember what he thought

happened—too ridiculous to hold in my mind for any length of time. If I think of it, I'll tell you. If I don't, I won't.

By the end of his story, we had arrived at the place where the portal had been seen. I may have forgotten to mention the portal. It's like a hole between two dimensions, a weak spot where you stick your head through. We got off our horses and walked the rest of the way.

No one else around but the man in a red union suit beside a stout mule, looking down into the prairie grasses and prairie dirt. That was the professor, so called. Our agent. A weird bird, living out there by himself. He didn't seem quite human.

That was my impression, right away.

As it turns out, he wasn't. So, I have a perfect score.

He had a huge fuzzball of white hair instead of a head. I did see eyes in there, and the bulb of a nose, but I did not trust him right from the start. For one thing, he had a tail which I longed to pull to see what it actually was—some loose fabric gotten smooshed in there?

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But, no, you should not pull the tail of the Agent. I think he looked at me. His head seemed to point in my direction. And then he looked into the gaping wound in the earth. Sam and I stood right beside it and looked in it together, and then we looked at the professor, and it dawned on both of us at the same time: he was not human!

I did not know what he was, but this much I did: not human. A moment before I could even think the thought, Sam had plugged him through various organs with his Colt sidearm, no questions asked. As he died, or as I thought he died, he leaped directly into the pit, inside of which so many awful things squirmed like those enormous worms.

The thought grew and grew, until I said to Sam, "This is the stink-hole where all that shit I told you about gets into our world."



You might not understand that sentence because I wrote it out in cowboy talk. Let me speak plainly. This was a portal to another world, one worse than this one. I took a look at Sam, who had trouble turning away from the pit. It made me laugh, which got his attention.

“You look like you never peeked in a shithole before.”

And then, of course, I laughed some more. Sam looked perplexed, so I explained it in clearer terms. “Get the dynamite. Blow the fucker closed, for the love of God.”

And that is what we did. Bang! We shoved in six or eight lit sticks and ran like hell. And when it blew, it knocked us on our bellies. After we regained our senses, we looked at each other, still flat on the ground, and by God if we didn’t laugh.

We laughed our asses off. ■



**Robert Pope** has published stories in many magazines and anthologies, and some of these have been gathered in two recent books from Dark Lane Books: *Killers & Others* (short stories) and *Shutterbug* (flash fiction). “Miss Kitty and the Creature with Many Legs” will be included in his upcoming book, *Sixteen Stories* – along with two other stories first published in *Granfalloon*, “The Draak” and “Cyborg.”

# IT'S ALL MOUNTAINS HERE

by  
**NICOLE BIRD**

67

A few heavy steps to Runyon  
and I'm off, each step a climb in itself  
metaphor becoming literal. Besmirched rocks  
twist my ankle upon ascent, but my footing remains  
assured today. With each inch scaled, the metaphor becomes  
clearer even through the smog, the filter no one can click through,  
it sticks to my lungs and I hack as I trudge, the night before catching up  
with me and how much life I measured in a shot glass. I climb as my chest burns  
and nausea snakes up my esophagus. The pace slows and I discover, there's even gridlock  
on hiking trails. But each step solidifies in the shifting terrain, as if I were striding  
atop stale flour, the remnants of a once abundant pantry. Feet adhere to earth,  
there it is: the crest. The city greets me and its ephemeral flash, a light  
on the horizon dazzles me long enough to blind me to the  
searing hurt in my legs, my chest heaving for air  
and all that's left is the cool breeze you only find  
at the zenith of a mountain, if you're  
willing to scale it.



# WHY DO WE DREAM WHAT WE DREAM?

by  
**NICOLE BIRD**

69

I was a lonely child, forever  
outrunning my home.  
It was a roof, but not a shelter.  
So, I'd watch movies, and  
I'd forget the nights  
I ran through my yard and hopped the fence  
looking for another place to exist,  
one not so rife with danger,  
terrified that today may be the last day of  
my life.

So, I'd watch movies,  
I'd get lost in the tales of Samurai  
claiming their honor or wandering the countryside  
as Ronin.  
Maybe I was a masterless warrior  
or a spy, left out in the cold  
or a mariachi, dedicating his life to vengeance  
or a young woman, torn between love and duty  
amidst a world beset with violence,  
in a zombie apocalypse,  
battling the boogeyman,  
dancing in discos,  
or plotting to remove a destructive man  
from my life.  
Maybe I was the femme fatale,  
the strong yet flawed hero  
of any and every situation.



So, I'd watch movies,  
yearning to make them,  
fixated with bringing a story to life  
on paper, celluloid, hard drive,  
Anything.  
As long as I made them.  
and I got lucky, I made a few.  
Nothing you've heard of, or maybe you've seen  
one late night, on YouTube, a digital imprint  
of my finger. At least there's that.  
But as I kept trying to climb, trying to  
hook my fingers in the terrain,  
a flood would arrive, a loss, a rejection, a setback,  
bills, rent, jobs fell through, layoffs from no budget,  
often I ate peas for dinner most nights, fed by  
Kurosawa and Almodóvar and Nair and Wilder,  
until I was a feral filmmaker, made savage by the outside world,  
contending with a shrinking window, closing off my chances  
for survival.

I used to dream to keep me sane,  
to transport me far, far away from my life  
and chaos in the shape of a home.

But now I dream of a life not so close to  
famine.  
This city can't feed me. It can only house me  
and circumstantially, as if to give me a cursory look  
when I decide to crawl into bed.  
It turns and utters  
*oh, you're still here?*

I am.  
At least as long as my dream feeds me,  
Breadcrumbs providing a makeshift path.  
But after so much struggle,  
the crumbs sink in the dusty, ever shaking terrain.

70

**Nicole's** career began with a degree in Creative Writing. Her focus then shifted to garnering degrees in Film Production and Screenwriting. Afterwards, she worked in film, while writing and producing her own short films. Now Nicole works as a Creative Writing professor and is at work on a collection of poetry, as well as honing her gluten free baking skills she developed during the 2020 quarantine. Her work has appeared in the *Ariel Chart International Literary Journal*, *The Indian Periodical*, and *Writing in a Woman's Voice*, with others forthcoming. You can read more about Nicole at [nicolebirdthewriter.com](http://nicolebirdthewriter.com).

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SPECULATIVE FICTION ZINE



# SAME OLD DAWN

by

ELOI ROMAN BENGOCHEA

**W**e were attending a barbecue at a friend's house—one of those 'welcome to our community' type events.

74

Beer in hand, I approached a couple of guys standing out front, chatting. They stopped talking and said to me, "Hey, have you ever been to space?"

I thought for a moment, chuckled, and said, "Yeah, maybe a few times when I was in college." I brought my fingers to my lips to imply that I'd been smoking a joint.

We all laughed.

Then, I asked them, "Have you guys ever been to space?"

"We are in space!" the older man exclaimed. They both guffawed and patted me on the back, "You see, we're on a planet, in space, circling a star, situated in a solar system which is also moving, making a much larger circle around a huge gravitational sink at the centre of our galaxy."

“Ah, that’s a good one!” I said, “I get it, I get it!”

“I’m going to grab another beer—want anything?” the other friend asked.

“No thanks, I’m good,” I replied, twirling the bottle to show I had enough to drink.

After his friend left, the old man asked me to walk with him.

“You know,” he said, “the Earth goes through this fuckin’ ‘zone’ every 15,000 years or so. And I’m pretty sure we’re going to be passing through it in our lifetimes!”

I’d thought there was something a little bit off about this guy from the start, but I decided to entertain him.

“Oh, what do you mean exactly?”

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“Well, there’s this area in the galaxy, a bubble of antigravity—think of it as an air pocket... You’re flying along at 30,000 feet in a jumbo jet, sipping your whiskey, eating your roasted almonds, and suddenly, BAM! You hit it, and just like that, you drop 15,000 feet!”

The unexpectedly loud ‘bam’ startled me, causing some of my beer to spill out.

We both laughed at this, and he apologized.

“I believe the ancients tried to pass down descriptions of the last time we encountered it, but this knowledge was lost in the annals of time.”

“So, what do you do?” I asked.

“Retired astrophysicist.”

“You don’t say?”

It turned out he lived down the road from us. My wife and I had just

moved into a rural area from a slightly less rural area to breed dogs, a lifelong passion.

“I have a stockpile,” he said, with a wink.

“A stockpile?”

“Of food, non-perishables and the like. And I built a bunker too!”

“Oh?”

“Now, don’t go around telling everyone,” he chuckled—it was obvious he was a little bit drunk by now, “but if the shit hits the fan, you know, I have enough to share... I want you to know that!”

“Thank you,” I said, “That’s very kind of you to offer, I guess. But here’s hoping it won’t be necessary!”

I smiled and raised my bottle, “Cheers!” I said.

76

A bit drunk myself, I continued, “Well, I guess people thought Noah was an oddball too... ’til the rains came!”

Immediately I regretted the words that had slipped out of my mouth. But, thankfully, the old man seemed happy with my response... Or maybe he just let it go on account that I was a newbie in town.

“The name’s Higgs,” he said, “Not that Higgs, the other one!”

“Barclay,” I replied, laughing, “Thomas Barclay. Nice to meet you!”

• • •

Years later, on the day the summer sun set at 2PM, I should have known what was about to hit.

It happened fast, yet it seemed to last an eternity. Everything got lifted into the air, at least fifty feet. The bonds between atoms in all solid

matter seemed to dissolve momentarily. The effect on my body was like being accelerated to high-G in a matter of seconds, then weightlessness.

How I survived that day, I'm not sure. I chalk it up to providence. But when I woke up, the world around me had been reduced to rubble.

My wife was gone, obliterated by a strange, white-hot snaking wave of energy that had missed me by just a hair—her death the final image emblazoned onto my conscious mind before I had blacked out.

When I woke, there was no roof over my head—the house was gone.

Large chunks of the road in front of our house had been ripped up such that the terrain I had come to know fairly well was now alien to me.

The sun kept appearing and disappearing randomly, and when it was there, it glowed bright purple, puking red flashes of plasma energy every couple of seconds.

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What looked like a fiery, angry volcano was erupting near the horizon, belching sparks and ash from a mountainous crater that wasn't there moments ago.

The sun set again and darkness returned. Thankfully, the volcanic eruptions provided enough light for me to make out some rough shapes.

Unable to get back on my feet, I clawed my way up an embankment and rolled myself off the edge, plummeting several feet.

Next to where my body came to a sudden stop was a metallic hatch.

I gathered up enough of my remaining strength to tap on it. To my surprise, I heard Higgs' voice from behind it!

"Higgs! It's me, Tom—Tom Barclay!" I managed to say.

I didn't realize it at the time, but the cataclysm had somehow picked up Higgs' property, about a mile and half down the road and deposited the entire plot right next to ours.

"For Christ's sake, Tom, how the hell did you get here?" I heard Higgs' voice say before I blacked out again.

• • •

Higgs saved my life.

I was grateful for that, even though sometimes the thought did cross my mind that I would've been better off dead, seeing as I had no idea what had become of the world out there.

In addition to his store of food and supplies, Higgs had acquired the skills of a field medic. He mended my broken bones, provided me with morphine for the pain, and gave me life-saving antibiotics.

All through the fevers that wracked my body, Higgs would speak to me, and as I fell in and out of consciousness, I'd pick up on a few things he said here and there about how the floods had receded and the volcanoes had stopped erupting.

78

Despite setbacks, Higgs kept looking after me and nursed me back to health with beef stock, which eventually morphed into canned beans and a starch—either rice or powdered mashed potatoes, each stockpiled in abundance in a small room just off the main bunker.

One day, Higgs said, "Seems like radiation levels are normalizing up there. How about we go up and take a quick peek?"

My heart began to race.

After a year and a bit, most of my wounds and broken bones had healed, and I was going to have a chance to finally look up at the sky again!

Higgs climbed up first with his Geiger counter and various



instruments to measure air quality.

Satisfied, and with a whoosh of positive air pressure, he opened the heavy, metal hatch of the bunker and crawled out.

What he must've experienced was momentary blindness, because it took him a while to motion for me to come up.

I climbed the ladder, poked my head through the opening, and immediately the brightness overwhelmed me.

Higgs grabbed my hand, and I felt the strength of this seemingly old man as he pulled me up without making a sound.

"Hoooo-ly shit," he said.

We both looked at the terrain in disbelief.

"What the fuck?" I was able to mutter.

The scene was hard to describe. Whereas we had been living a thousand or so miles inland, at a thousand feet of altitude, we were now looking upon the shore of a vast ocean at our doorstep. The sun was rising—or maybe setting, we had no idea, really—just over the horizon, which Higgs's compass indicated as due *south*.

"The pole-shift..." said Higgs.

"The what?"

"Nevermind," muttered Higgs, "Would you look at that!"

"It's a new dawn," he added with a tinge of hope in his voice.

I'm not sure why, but I was overcome with a sudden, uncontrollable wave of emotion.

Poor old Higgs, to whom I owed my life, certainly didn't deserve it, but I

became irate. Unable to direct the anger to any source, I lashed out at him.

"No, it's not a new dawn," I exclaimed, "it's the same bloody sun, the same stupid rock we're riding through space! The shit's just gonna go another cycle, and in 15,000 years, we'll be right back here, at this god-forsaken, demonic point in the universe!"

Higgs said nothing. He just looked at me and then back at the world turned upside down.

"Please, Higgs," I continued—emphasizing each word—"as long as it's the same sun, it'll be the same old dawn..."

*The same old fucking dawn!* ■



**Eloi Roman Bengochea** was born in Vanuatu but now resides in Hamilton, Ontario. His recent anthology, *Rebels and Exiles: An Anthology of Dystopian Sci-Fi* has been published by Planetesimal Press, publishers of *Grantalloon*, *Speculative Fiction Zine*.

# SHIPSHAPE

by

KIM WHYSALL-HAMMOND

As air seeps softly across the ship  
dust follows, a spreading miasma

Jamie tinkers with the coolant system  
humming along with it

I tend and talk to the plants  
fear becoming soft boned

always we find things to do  
endlessly make lists

all to fill the emptiness  
long weeks of travel in nothing

trapped inside a thick shell  
slow as a tortoise

so much time in the dark  
we two our own island

days last forever  
are over in an instant

there is nothing and  
no one but us

here in the cold dead night  
with only a fragile hull

and terrors out there that will  
rub it away

we turn the radio onto static  
to listen for them

become fascinated by the hissing  
hear strange voices foaming around us

drift into a waking sleep  
cannot awake



**Kim Whysall-Hammond** is a Londoner currently living somewhere in Southern England. Her speculative poetry has been published by *Kaleidotrope*, *On Spec*, *Time and Space Magazine*, *Utopia Science*, *Andromeda Spaceways*, *The Future Fire*, *Star\*Line*, *Fiction*, *Frozen Wavelets*, *Crannóg*, and others. She has two poems in the upcoming 'Dead of Winter' anthology from Milk and Cake Press.



# WHAT WOULD DANIIL KHARMS WRITE IF HE WROTE SCI-FI?

by

SERENA UNGUREANU

## ALIEN TV DOCTORS

86

On a distant planet, a species of sentient aliens watched something akin to TV on Earth. The most popular programs there showed how doctors often botched surgeries and got their diagnoses incorrect almost every time, causing unnecessary deaths. The shows, which also explored the romantic relationships between the doctors, often ended with the patients dying in agony. Such series were so popular that everyone on the planet was very suspicious of doctors' diagnoses, and it was very common for them (including deathly ill patients and even doctors themselves) to get a second, third, and fourth opinion before agreeing to any medical treatment.

Then, one day, alien networks detected signals from mid-20th century Earth, a planet over 400 light years away. Naturally, the aliens were impressed (and became obsessed) with Earth's medical dramas. They immediately broadcasted them with best-guess, voiceover transliterations.

Overnight, the reputations of the doctors on the planet improved. Everyone started to respect doctors more. Second opinions became a

thing of the past.

No one kept a tally, but officials were certain that doctors killed the same number of patients as before, if not more.

## THE VISITOR FROM ANOTHER DIMENSION

Pasha was happily married to Irina. One day, Irina's mother, Yana, came to live with them. Surprisingly, everyone got along well until Yana told Irina and Pasha that she had been contacted by a creature from another dimension.

"Bah," said Pasha, "Nonsense! In my house? I don't think so... Even if you tied a dog's leash to the leg of this table, it would not stay here—where is this creature you are talking about?"

87

"It comes up from the toilet when I am in the bathroom," Yana said innocently before she messed up her hair in exasperation and went to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Then one day after Pasha had used the bathroom, he saw the damned creature with his own eyes! It was wet and furry, and it popped out of the toilet, just as Yana had described. It had the bare face of an opossum, the tail of a rat, and it spoke in a high-pitched voice.

At first Pasha was startled, but then the creature started telling Pasha how Yana complained to it all the time about how badly she was treated by her son-in-law. It also told him how the mother-in-law had asked it to kill Pasha in his sleep!

*Sunnvabitch, would you look at that old hag! Pasha thought! Acting all nice to my face... I'll give her a piece of my mind!*

The next day at the dinner table, Pasha challenged Yana. He told Irina what Yana said to the creature from another dimension during their bathroom conversations.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Yana?" Pasha demanded, slamming down his fist.

Yana shot him a sheepish grin. "Well, I had to act like a victim," she said, "I was hoping the creature would take pity on me, and bring us bread from its dimension"—she now became agitated—"because with a lazy son-in-law like you, we are sure to starve!"

Pasha, fuming, put a fork in the last piece of salami on his plate and wolfed it down silently.

"Well, I hope it worked," he grumbled.

"No," said Yana, dejected, adding, "Oh, by the way, it didn't tell you? With what it takes from our daily bathroom deposits, it can feed its entire family for free!"

## TUPOYOVICH GOES TO SPACE

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Tupoyovich worked in a coal mine. One day, after his shift, he emerged from the mine, looked up at the blue sky, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and took a big swig of vodka from his flask. It was winter, and he couldn't use his moped, so he walked home. As he walked, he saw bright strobe lights and felt a strange sensation—he was bathed in a surge of powerful, electrical energy. Next thing he knew, Tupoyovich was being lifted into the air!

Frozen and unable to say a word, Tupoyovich was placed in the cargo hold of an alien spaceship.

The next day, he was put to work on a mine on Zeltar-14, the fourth planet in the Truxella System.

After his shift was over, Tupoyovich emerged from the mine, looked up at the purple sky, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and reached for his vodka flask, but it wasn't there!

He thought to himself: *I wonder what the stupid bastards on this planet drink?*

## THE LAST IN LINE

There was a large invasion force on its way to Earth. When the battalions arrived, no one fired a shot, and even the alien general was surprised at how easy it had been to subdue the entire planet.

“Round everybody up,” said the general, “We will take them back to X-Phaeton to be our slaves.”

So they rounded everyone up until there was not a single bit of space remaining on their ships. Since I was the last one standing in line, they left me behind.

Now I write these words, but there is nobody to read them.

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## SPHERICAL OBJECTS

“This council meeting will come to order,” declared the insectoid alien to his fellow pioneers, “This is the second year since we have colonized the planet Earth, and I would like to hear about your experiences so I can relate them to our Party superiors on our home planet. Who wants to go first?”

“Well,” said one of the attendees, standing up, “I would like to start.”

“Go ahead, comrade.”

“The food on this planet is having a strange effect on me.”

“How so?”

“I am growing a pair.”

“A pair of what?”

“Two, large spherical objects in my nethers.”

“Hmm,” said the insectoid presiding over the council.

“And when I see a certain pioneer, my pants become tight,” he added.

“I can attest to the mutations,” another insectoid pioneer chimed in, “I am growing spheres on my chest and a new orifice where there was none before!”

There was a gasp and rumblings heard coming from the crowd.

“Order! ...Order!” the council president yelled, “There is nothing to worry about; I am sure it is just a normal response to the environment.”

The first insectoid spoke up again, “Since I’ve grown a pair, I demand to be the council president!”

“Now wait a minute, some irregular growth in your nether regions does not automatically get you a seat on this council,” said the president.

“What does it get me, then?” asked the insectoid pioneer.

“Me!” said the other insectoid with spherical objects growing on her chest.

And they lived happily ever after.

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**Serena Ungureanu** is a doctor from Romania currently residing in Dresden, Germany with her husband, two cats, and a very grumpy, old guinea pig. She is an avid reader and a huge fan of Russian absurdist/avant-garde writers, especially Daniil Kharms. She started writing non-professionally two years ago, and this is her first-ever publication in a literary fiction zine.

# WHAT IS AND WHAT CAN NEVER BE

by  
RALPH GRECO JR.

"Up. Up," Veronica panted as she dug her nails deeper into my muscular cheeks.

91 "Ah," was all I could manage, disengaging my mouth from her tight powdery cleavage.

It was at times like these that I nearly damned my uncountable, galaxy-wide romances; I would need more stimuli than just this warm girl under me digging her sharp nails into my ass. So hoping for inspiration with the friction, I turned to look at the reflection of the "double-backed beast" in the reflective glass of the navigating computer's under-panel, and had to smile at the waffled picture of pale flesh and clenched muscles (Veronica looked good too)... until of course, the tentacles began to spread from out the top of the woman's shoulder blades.

Being the well-season warrior I am, I jumped up and out, unfortunately exercising the later use of the verb I had been expecting.

"Neat trick," I said, smacking the back of my head on the wall behind me.

It suddenly seemed very small in this cabin, as I faced the lady/thing which was unfolding itself past my full height, her once luminescent skin

morphing to a scaly red, her voluptuous body gone the way of my 'interest.'

"Quite defenseless now," the creature hissed across the tight cabin.

"Micronia," I said.

I figured my identifying the shape-shifter might buy me a few seconds (of course, it knew what it was, but maybe it would be surprised for a few heartbeats that I had identified it so quick) and searching the room in those fleeting whisper-seconds for a weapon, I found not much that would help me beat back the thing when it finally decided to attack.

"You die now," the creature suggested, and I steeled my naked body in the attack stance of the Bunchi warriors of Remlon Prime. Of course, Bunchi warriors weapon of choice is the infamous Bunchi "Lightening Stick," which blasts a quick one hundred volts of clear, ice-blue electricity.

Bracing for the worst the eight-foot soot smelly creature could give me, my head then spun even further as the small, gray and red midshipman cabin faded around us, and the menacing Micronia faded from view as if someone took a swipe across the fabric of space-time. A half-minute later, I was standing naked, still executing the Bunchi stance, for two bearded men and a thin lady sitting across me in an immaculate, mid-ship circular room with a long table between us.

"A necessary demonstration," the man with the red eyes offered.

"We hope we didn't alarm you," the lady said and nodded her head to an assistant behind me, whom I then noticed, who walked up to hand me my clothes.

"Now, if you will allow us, we will... " the man tried, but I halted my zipping to interrupt with:

"I beg your good pardon. But, just what the hell is going on!?"

"Disorientation is typical," the lady with the sparkling silver hair said, smiling evenly down at me across the high table.

I promptly 'zipped up' all the way.

"It will pass," the man countered, again flashing his crimson eyes to his colleague.

"Great, just great," I agreed, one arm in my shirt. "But until just a moment ago, I was in a most delicate situation with what I had assumed was a startlingly attractive young woman I had picked-up, met, on the beet and berry market of Emsorlin Two."

"Well, you were on that moon, yes," the man said, his lined brow creasing even more. "But the woman and her spaceship did not exist, no."

"Neither did the Micronia," the lady added.

"Well, that's a relief," I said, although I wasn't sure how much of one.

"You are on Ipsmere," the other man finally spoke, and both his colleagues looked over at him in disgust, as if to say, 'Oh Siant Rispuous Moons, when is he going to shut up and let us get a word in?!'

"The planet of illusion," I whispered for my exposition. In times of great stress or utter confusion, I like to provide myself with the most information possible, even if it is merely me talking out loud.

Damn, this was getting worse by the moment.

As my brain was began to a'wander, and I was doing my best to avoid considering the obvious reality here that the carnal moment and movements I had just been at with a creature that was not only not an attractive young lady I had met at the market nor a Micronia, had just been me "having at the floor" of this room, so to speak, in the throes of an illusion, naked, aroused and alone.

"Yes," the trio agreed, to what seemed to match my thoughts.

"Well, nice to meet you all," I began, completely dressed now. I turned from them, smiled at the man who had supplied me with my clothes and made for the single blue door that the man was standing to the side of.

"Please..." the lady started, and I heard her chair slide back as I assumed she stood. "...we need your help."

"Um," I said, turning to my hosts.

How could I say this with as much tact as possible?

Ipsmere was infamous throughout the galaxy as the one place one never wanted to find one's self. It was a planet of intellectuals who spent all their time devising new ways to entertain themselves with their overused, centuries-old, exclusive power of illusion. Nobody ever visited the small blue-green world or communicated unless they absolutely had to simply because no one wanted to witness these insidious and downright boring games the residents played.

The power of illusion is a powerful one, to be sure, and one most creatures in the galaxy do not possess, let alone have been exposed to too often. And the Ipsmerians made damn sure, through their unending actions and words, that this was one power no one would ever want since it made the user into a boring spud-in-the mud who spent the better part of his or her days thinking up new ways to surprise his or her fellow spuds with a latest heretofore unrealized illusion.

I had no care to know what problem these folks could possibly have to warrant them kidnapping me. And kidnapping a ranking member of the International Corps was a serious charge, even for those on such an isolated world, and had I the energy right then I would have demanded restitution. But all I truly wanted was passage back to the market on Emsorlin Two, or back to the Corps space station... actually any place that wasn't here. With all I was slowly becoming aware of, I knew I certainly didn't have much diplomacy to go around or want to help these folks.

"Got to go," I said, turning once again from the trio.

"We are prepared to pay," they shouted to my back.

I turned and smiled.

• • •

"Do not be insulted," the lady I then knew as Doctor Amble Core apologized as we walked down one of the busy corridors of the city.

This was the capital of the planet, a place called Mimba, a sleepy enough city filled from seaport to the main road with a very busy population of Ipsmerian dignitaries. It was a fine crisp day in what was now the time of year that saw Ipsmere hold its general elections. And it was these very elections that I had been receiving a crash course in over three hours since my arrival.

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"You simply seemed the best candidate," the lady added as we walked out to a yellow brick and green-glassed arcade where many of the Doctor's fellows were meeting around high wire-framed tables, drinking steaming cups of a yellow liquid I had been offered but denied.

"So, you just docked a robot ship?" I continued my query of how I was plucked to find myself here.

An Ipsmerian scout ship had come to the berry and beet market, docked in orbit and an elaborate illusion was then created: A willowy, wanton woman was to meet the most likely candidate (which turned out to be me) in the market (many mercenaries and military personnel do their own shopping) and subsequently invite that man (me) back to her ship, which was really the Ipsmerian scout ship, distract that man (me still) with her charms (which never existed since she never did), as the ship sped through space, unbeknownst to the man (me yet again) engaging what he thought was his long-dormant lusts (well, thinking he-me was engaging them with someone else), docking when the woman turned into a Micronia (still illusion of course), all to prove to

the man (me) that he (me) was where he (of course, still me) I (me) was told he (me) was.

The good doctor and her fellows had boarded the ship as it landed and then met me as I stood bracing for attack from what I thought would be my last opponent.

"When we wish we can use the power for our gains over others," the doctor assured me, adding with a thin-lipped smile. "But we don't do it often."

"Yes, this is a special occasion," I repeated the words of warning I had heard only hours before, only after my payment price had been agreed upon.

"Yes," the lady continued. "If the Sirea faction succeeds, it will be a dark day for this planet."

"Yeah," I agreed.

A military mercenary knows well about usurpers, rogue agents, half-cocked factions going off half-cocked, and such was this Sirea faction, an ultra-revolutionist group feared to be in the capital city due to the weekend elections, these disruptors, all eleven of them, eschewed Ipsmere's legacy of illusion power for a more restrained, straight-ahead way of life. The Sirea argued—and without much fault, I would have added, had I been asked—that their planet's need to stand fast and true to their age-old power had kept them well afield from progress in the galaxy-wide marketplace. And it was feared, by all those not Sirea that the Sirea would indeed strike here, within the next few days, making their mark on the planet-wide elections.

"But what I said stands," I pressed. "I'll keep my eyes open. I'll do what I can 'cause you are paying me, but this is not my fight, lady."

Did I mention I was a little low on diplomacy at the moment?

Plus, I was pissed at myself that I could be bought so easily.

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"Let's get you set up at the Pavilion," Doctor Core said, ignoring my shortness.

...

As far as these types of things went, the rally was better than most; the demonstrations kept me from complete boredom. If Ipsmerians were diligent about showing off their latest illusions, they were doubly so in a crowd of rapt attendees. Every political leader who stood on the dais to render a speech did so after, during, or before a spectacular illusion commenced by their own mind. It was a parlor-trick show out here in this open-air in front of this audience of thousands, the applause full and quick as each candidate attempted to outdo the other when they were due.

And you would have thought these people, all of whom had the power of illusion, wouldn't have been so impressed with the tricks of their fellows. As paid to do, I kept my blue eyes peeled, but truth be told, this self-congratulatory crowd was so enamored with themselves, I doubted that if indeed there had been some sort of strike from a rebel agency, anybody would even notice.

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But there was something to notice, actually, someone to notice, and I was noticing plenty as a short, voluptuously turned-out Ipsmerian sauntered across the blonde brick flagstones to me, her silver tunic dress shimmering in the bright sun. The woman smiled wide, like she knew me, that Ipsmerian cast of green to her high cheekbones as she came right up to me and offered her hand.

"Doctor Beb Smirt," she purred as I shook her soft hand, then released it.

She stood to my chest and had the most luminescent silver hair I had ever seen. True, all adult female Ipsmerians have silver hair, but something about this young woman's seemed luminescent-ier than most.

"Security force, I'd gather," the woman announced.

"You would," I said.



As captivating as she was, I was on duty here, earning an hourly wage. And knowing what had recently been perpetrated on me because of my libido, I was staying alert and cautious. True, there had been no problems, and I could see clear over this woman's head if there were to be, but still...

"All right, I won't ask then," she said. "How do you like it so far?"

"I'm not a political man."

"Oh," the lady intoned. "On Ipsmere, we are all political... men and women."

"Seems to be a good turnout," I agreed.

Illusion or real, she did smell good.

"Yes. Yes," the lady said. "Enjoying the games then?"

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At first, I wasn't sure what this lovely lady was talking about. Still, when a large red bird suddenly flew out over the audience, "bleeped" loudly, and then promptly disappeared, I realized that the woman was referring to the illusions being perpetrated on the crowd.

"If you like that sort of thing," I offered. Personally, if I never tried to have congress with another illusion, it wouldn't be soon for me.

"Yes, it is all in the desire for them, isn't it?"

Alarm bells should have been ringing in my deepest recesses, but I only noticed a slow muffled 'click-a-clicking.' It was possible, given the time of day, my proximity, and the sharp perfume she was wearing, that I was being seduced into charming conversation with none other than a Sirea rebel sent to distract me. Or, again, an illusion. But I let my paranoia ease a bit more and stole a full glance down the delicate, overly exposed cleavage of the lady's dress and submerged those faraway alarm bells even more.

"Nothing to it," the lady offered. "You've been here long enough; you could whip up one just as good. Just think it and cast it from your mind."

I was just considering the implications of her advice when came a Iriteen explosion. I knew the minute I felt the sudden sharp implosion of air and smelled the slightest flick of peppermint to the back of my throat that Iriteen had been used. Jumping from my spot talking to the young woman, who called after me about 'learning a few tricks' and 'having a good time after the rally,' I ran into the spreading, panicked crowd. As is common in these types of explosions, a cloud of thick red smoke was falling then, and I stumbled as best I could as the Iriteen began to envelope the crowd.

Iriteen, not only being a loud yet harmless explosive, is also a free-acting chemical agent that when released in an atmosphere as rich in nitrogen as Ipsmere's was, produces a red gelatinous rain. Harmless chunks of the crimson chemical fell, a sure impediment for me to stop what was transpiring up on the dais as two robed figures grabbed the then acting head councilor Zabe Zabane (a man who had wowed the crowd with a full-scale snow storm of a three-minute duration as his illusion). It was a kidnapping, I realized, as I dodged and shucked the falling blood-red chunks, making my way up across the dais and to the two running figures. As I ran, I registered all shouts, cries, and recriminations, but one stood out in my mind the most: "They are heading to the dock!" "Don't let them over the dock; we'll lose them for sure!"

Of course, I had not been briefed on exactly what or where this 'dock' was, but I assumed I was heading in its direction and would soon be upon it following the perpetrators and their prey as I was. Running full speed towards the two running figures and the slumped councilman between them, I ran down the west side of the pavilion and under a lattice-topped tunnel and then out again into the late afternoon sunshine, down a steep flight of steps and then right into...

"The Dock."

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Nothing more than a balcony overlooking a parking garage below me, the Sirea kidnapers were holding the councilman between them as they made their way out across a one-lane bridge that spanned where I was standing to the other side of a gray block building's roof high over the open hover-cars below. It was an open maw of a space, but one I could easily traverse... that was, of course, if the bridge the Sirea were using had stayed in place.

Damn these people and their illusions, I thought, as the bridge crinkled way like Alvbrian spray paper in the still air, and the three figures stood on the other side, looking over at me and glaring at my misfortune.

"I thought you guys were against using illusion!" I shouted to no response, then a fleeting moment of clarity blurred past my mind.

"Nothing to it," the lady had said. "You've been here long enough; you could whip up one just as good. Just think it, and cast it from your mind."

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That voluptuous Sirea distraction had no idea how prophetic she had been, admitting what she had to me. Never thinking I could run as fast as I had or that I would muster the courage to try my own illusion, the lady had unwittingly prompted me to perpetrate one of the best and brazen illusions to the crowd swarming behind me.

Knowing that I would: (a) never again step foot on this world; (b) that no matter how much they paid me, I would never live down the fact that I had been tricked so easily away from the beet and berry market; and (c) that I still had a score to settle with this planet for bringing me here, I unzipped my fly and imagined, concentrated, 'illusioned' my member large and thick enough to span the open expanse before me. To my immediate surprise, the illusion worked (yes, there really was something in the air here!), and I received more than a few cheers—not to mention quite a few wild looks from the ladies of the crowd behind me—as I imagined, illusioned, cast my now mammoth member touching to the building across from me. I figured, if those Sirea could transverse on a bridge of their own making, then I could certainly

bounce over on my illusionary penis, which I did, never doubting for a second that what I was seeing was not actually real. Making to the other side, I zipped up, grabbed the two male Sirea by the scruff of their necks as they stood staring at me slack-jawed, a bemused smile crossing their faces as they realized they had just been bested by an out-worlder who had used the power they so hated to the best of his natural ability.

• • •

"Truly remarkable," Doctor Core was saying as we walked across the shiny tiled tarmac of the Mimba port. I counted the payment notes (converted only a half-hour before) and smiled at her as she continued to gush.

"No Ipsmerian would ever be so vain, at least not in public, but..."

The lady continued as she had for the past half hour while they arrested the Sirea men, and order was restored in the pavilion. I wasn't sure if she was insulting or complimenting me, as I hadn't been all along, but I could easily live with either. It is not every day a man gets to be so blatant and forthright with a part of himself usually kept under wraps. But as I thanked the lady one last time and turned to ascend the ship's gangplank, I realized that what had got me into this mess in the first place, the need to 'use' my little soldier on what had turned out to be an illusion, had also gotten me out of this mess, a few extra pay notes and another adventure in my pocket. ■

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**Ralph Greco, Jr.** is the devilishly clever nom de plume of Ralph Greco, a professional writer of short fiction, essays, blogs, SEO web copy, articles, interviews and reviews, one-act plays, songs, and the children's book series, *Echo City Capers*. Ralph's work has appeared in major market and small press magazines, online, in anthologies and single-author collection, and he's been published across seven countries. Ralph's music can be found at [www.ralphgrecomusic.com](http://www.ralphgrecomusic.com). Ralph also writes for 'adult' businesses worldwide and co-hosts the slightly naughty cultural podcast, "Licking Non-Vanilla" ([www.lickingnonvanilla.com](http://www.lickingnonvanilla.com)).

Ralph will be guest editing the special, erotic-themed, Summer 2022 issue of *Granfalloon*.

Illustration Credit (p. 92): Special thanks to illustrator **Joe Swartz** for his artwork!

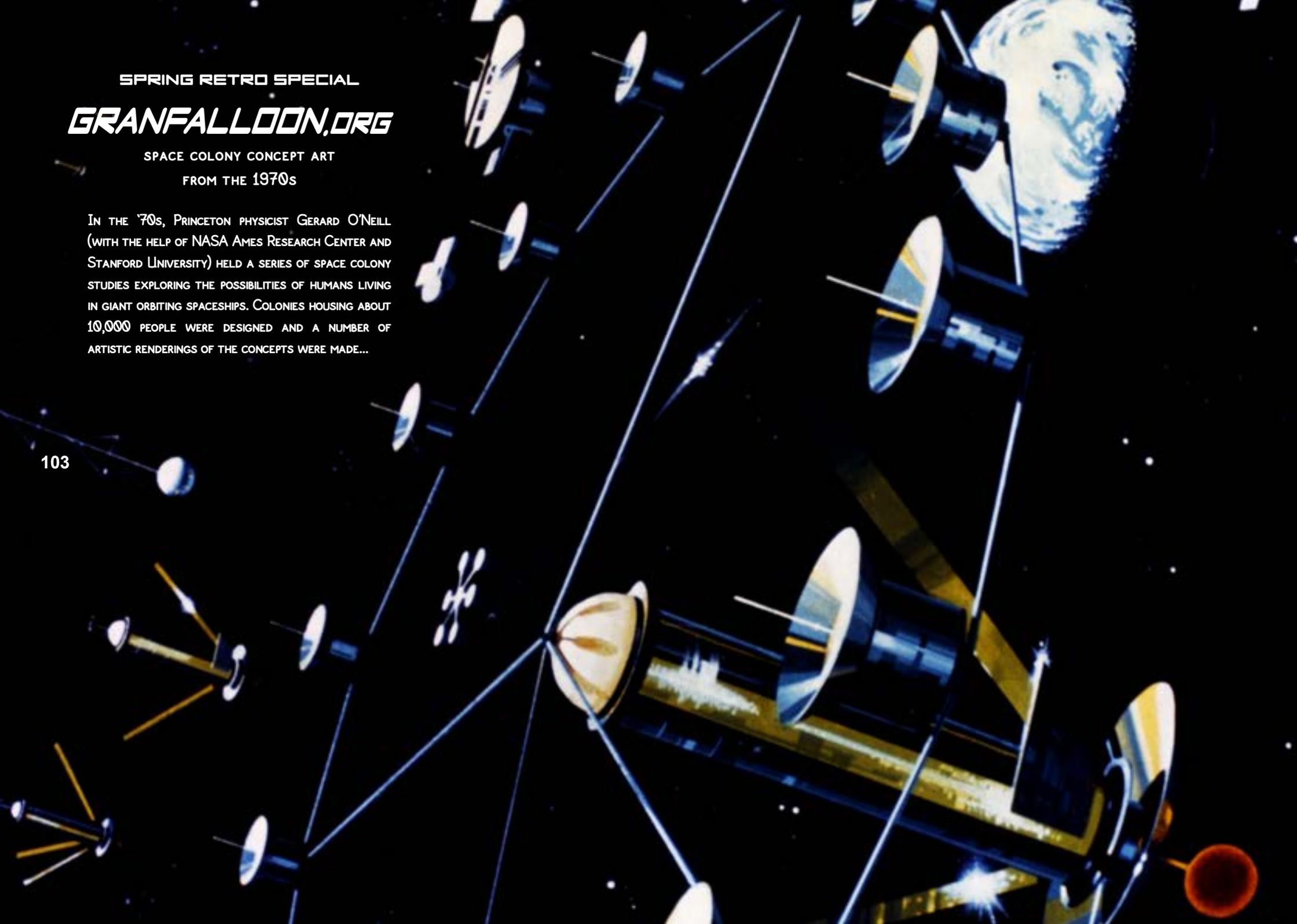
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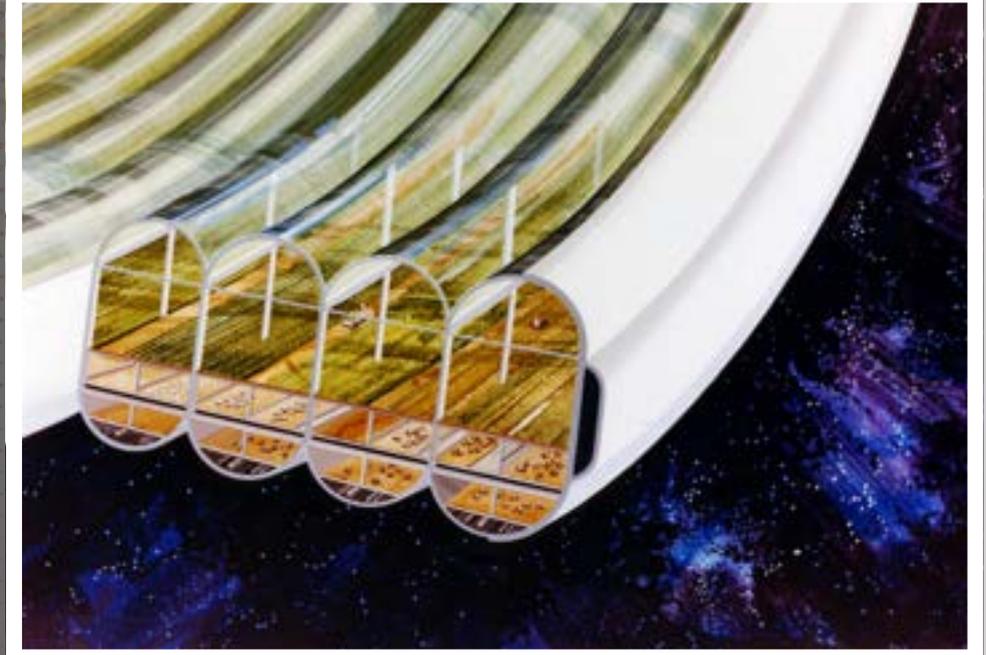
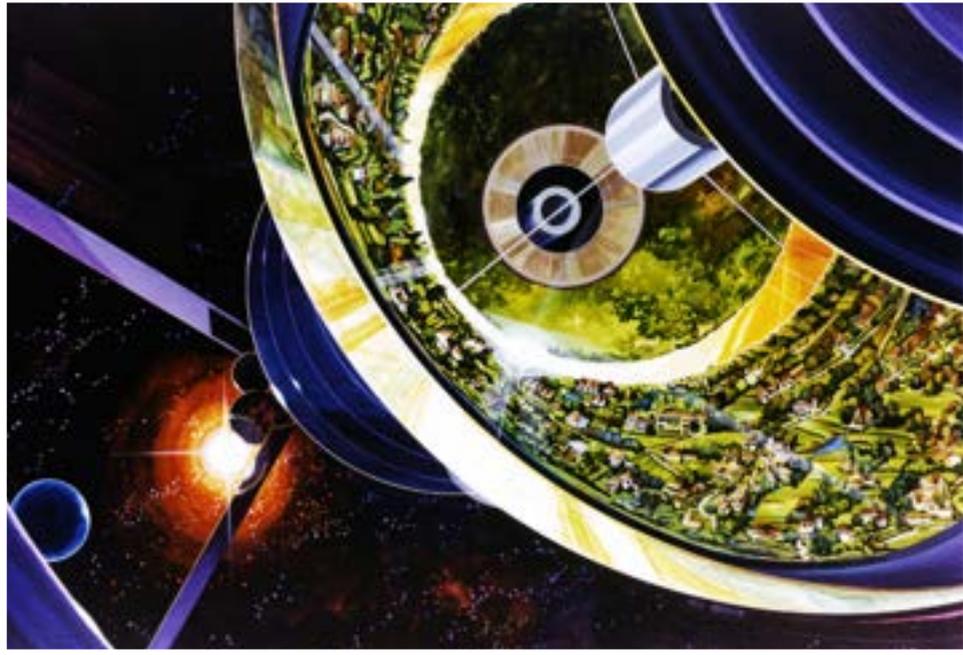
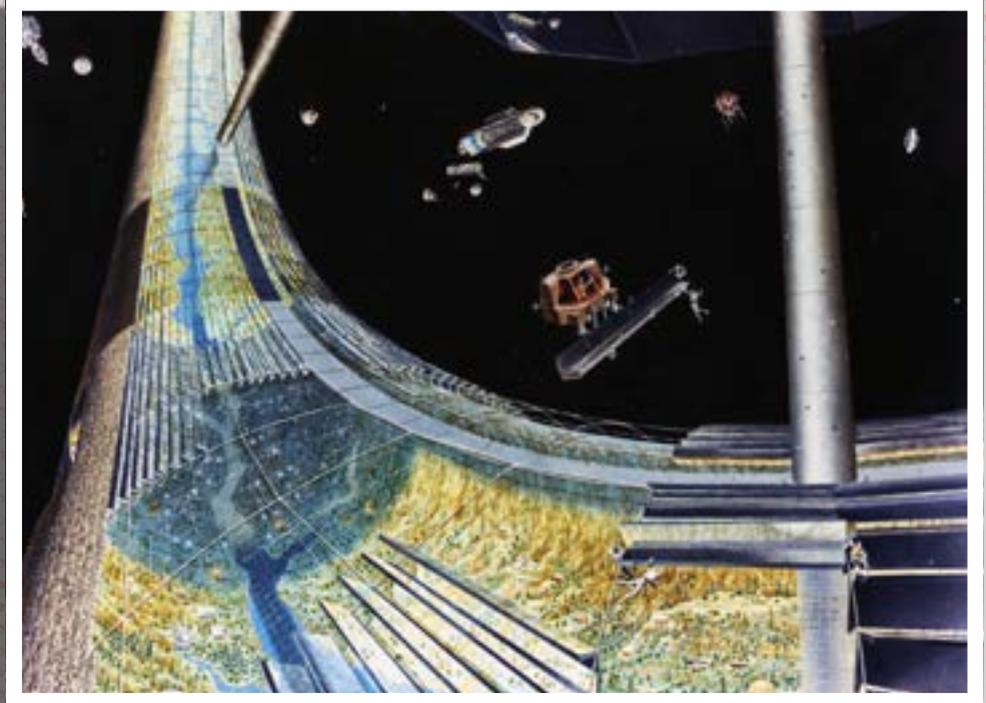
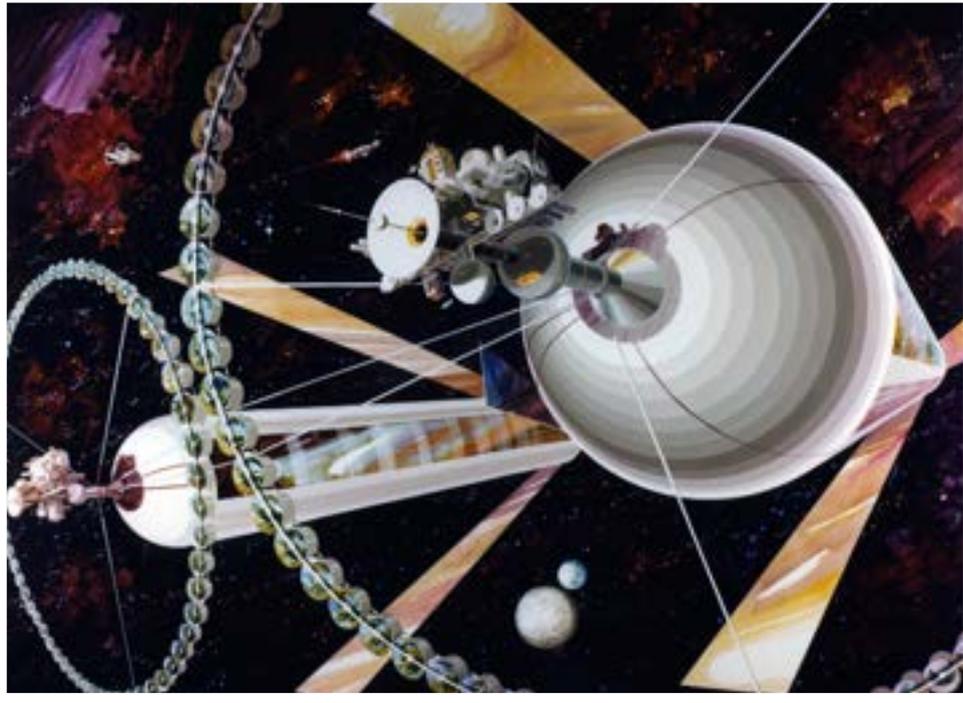


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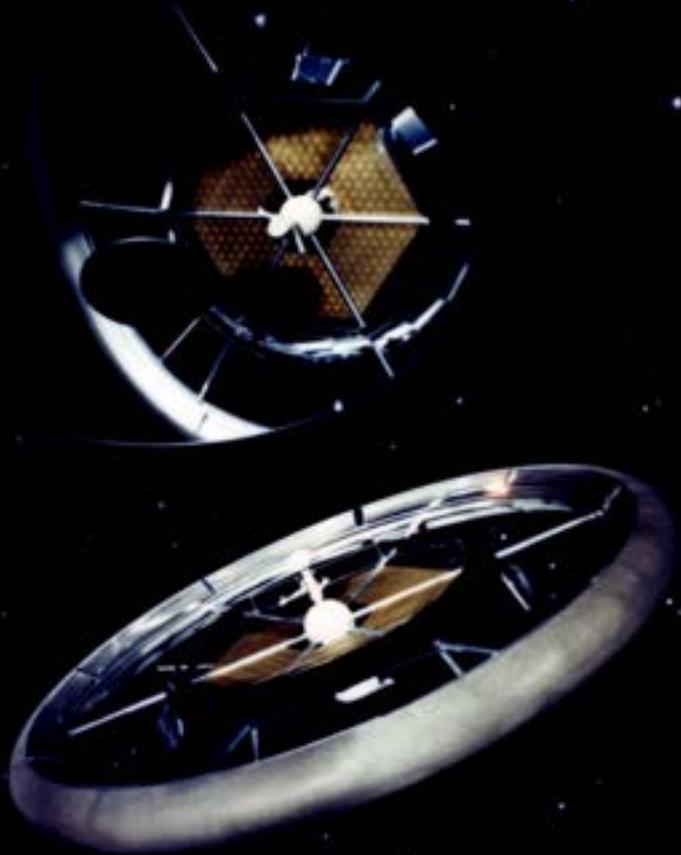


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