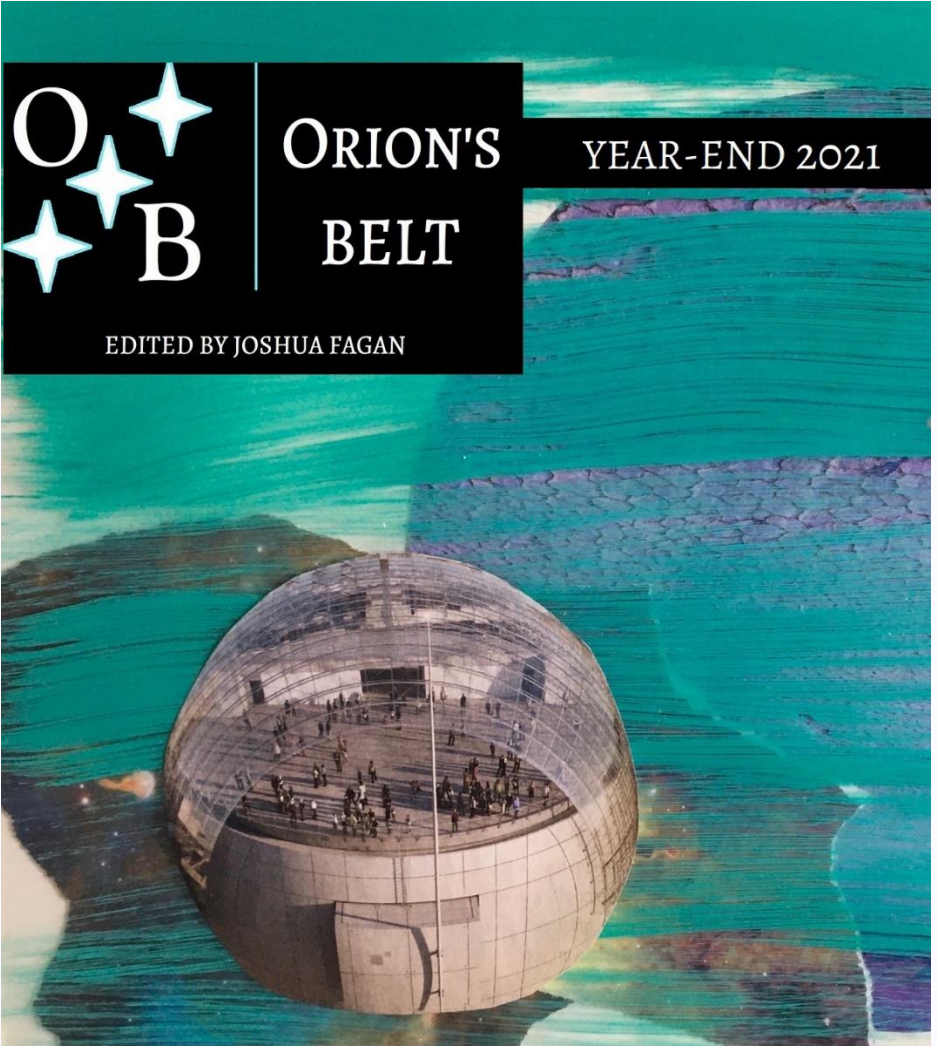


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ORION'S
BELT

YEAR-END 2021

EDITED BY JOSHUA FAGAN



|Featuring|

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Orion's Belt

Year 1 Anthology

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Welcome to Orion's Belt

Orion's Belt is a literary speculative fiction online magazine. We specialize in the strange and poignant and awe-inspiring, stories that have a cosmic scale and intimate personal stakes. Currently, we publish fiction only, one story per month. All stories must be twelve hundred words or less.

Speculative fiction for us encompasses a wide range of fiction that includes non-realist elements. While we focus on science-fiction and fantasy, we're open to slipstream, horror, magic realism, myth retellings, surrealism, superhero stories, and all other fantastical genres and subgenres.

The "literary" qualifier simply means we like stories focusing on internal and interpersonal conflicts. Don't give us people saving the world unless you can make us care about the people doing the saving. It also means we want stories that are sharply, intelligently written. We highly prize the craft of writing. This doesn't mean you have to be Faulkner or Shakespeare, and it certainly doesn't mean we want stories peppered with purple prose and thesaurus-words. It does mean that we care as much about form as we do about content. How a story is told is as important to us as what it is about.

Speculative fiction gives us the opportunity to imagine other worlds, but we can also use it to help us better understand our own little blue marble floating through the depths of space. We follow in the tradition of science-fiction pioneer Darko Suvin and his concept of "cognitive estrangement," in which the strangeness of different worlds provides readers with a lens through which to observe the strangeness in our own worlds. This is more than mere allegory. It's an awakening to a higher level of awareness. In our view, the best speculative fiction does more than offer escapism. It facilitates a better understanding of the self and the other.

Our founder and editor-in-chief is Joshua Fagan, who founded the magazine in 2021 while at Columbia University. Contact him at joshuafagan14@gmail.com or on Twitter using [@TheJoshuaAFagan](https://twitter.com/TheJoshuaAFagan).

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We hope the stories in this magazine delight and inspire and challenge you. If you're a writer, please send us stories that will delight and inspire and challenge us.

Witch's Brew

by Joshua Fagan

The magicians' truck vanished into the cold twilight, leaving Alia alone at the edge of the world. A solemn black tower ascended into the clouds. She wondered what its inhabitant must be like. What would make someone hide away from civilization?

This was her punishment. The daughter of her hamlet's two most prestigious magicians, she entered magic-school with high expectations, the burden of which she could not bear. She argued with her teachers and brewed forbidden potions. According to the dean, her behavior was more befitting a witch than a proper magician. Thus, he decreed, her punishment must fit her crime: she must steal and destroy the witch's brew.

The front door would not open, and there were no ajar windows on the ground floor. Pacing through the yellow-gray knee-high grass surrounding the tower, she failed to find a crack in the stone or a hidden staircase. Hiding in a nearby bush, she watched the stars emerge into the darkening sky. The glow of starlight illuminated the cloaks of the witch's three new apprentices. These were not the apprentices of vulgar folklore, with pointy hats and ancient robes. Their outfits were sleek and dark, hardly visible under cover of night. Alia lured the tallest one away from the others, hypnotizing her before delivering a decisive blow to her head. The apprentice lost consciousness, and Alia wasted no time stealing her robes.

Before following the apprentices inside, Alia cast a destabilizing spell on the tower's fiftieth floor. One stone tumbled downward, and the others trembled. She smirked before entering the tower to participate in the witch's séance.

The witch did not know any of the apprentices, and none of the apprentices knew each other, so they did not trouble Alia as they

gathered around a gold-lined lavender pillow. Atop the pillow was a winged goblet filled to the brim with a pale blue liquid. It had to be the brew. The dean had told Alia nothing about the brew's effects, only that it conferred dark power to whoever drank it.

As she stared intently at the goblet, the other apprentices freely conversed. The séance was orderly, but it was not dour. When they weren't chanting, they laughed and ate and played gothic music. Alia needed to capture the witch's attention, but she lacked the apprentices' easy charisma, so when the witch mentioned needing some newt's legs, Alia responded, "I think they're on the fiftieth floor."

The witch found nothing on the fiftieth floor except unstable stones. Before she could cast a spell, the floor collapsed. She hurtled toward the ground, shocked and helpless, only for Alia, strolling along the tower's perimeter as though suspecting nothing, to cast a spell, slowing her fall. The witch embraced her savior, saying, "I owe you everything."

"Witches should help each other out," is what Alia said.

"I didn't want the other apprentices to think I'm a murderer," is what she meant. A situation like this required more finesse.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing, miss."

"Call me Niobe," the witch said. "I'm sure you want something. Name it. I'll give it to you."

"All I want is to stay the night."

"Really?" Niobe's calm, surprisingly soft brown eyes traced Alia's face.

"I've always wanted to stay here," she said of the place she had not known existed twenty-four hours earlier.

As the crisp silver crescent moon hung in the center of the sky, Alia slithered out of bed and clambered toward the witch's brew. The two apprentices had left hours before, and the witch slept on the tower's top floor in a bed shaped like bat wings. Scrambling over wrappers and empty glasses, Alia wrapped her fingers around the goblet. The witch's brew glowed bright in the thick darkness. It couldn't be this easy, could it?

Was the witch, this supposed master of darkness and chaos, just going to allow her to destroy the brew? Did she not suspect Alia's ulterior motives? The parlor's sole candle abruptly disappeared. A figure lurked in the shadows, but when Alia turned, there was no one. "Is that you, Niobe?" she asked. There was no reply.

Alia tipped the goblet on its side. The thick, chalky liquid dribbled out, pooling on the pillow. What would happen when it was all gone? The magicians would let her graduate from school, but then what? She would still be a lonely outsider. Trembling, she returned the cup to the pillow. There was still a third of the brew remaining. After a moment's hesitation, she raised the cup to her lips and drank.

Her head swirled, and she leaned against the velvet curtains, waiting to see what powers had so concerned her teachers. Magic swept through her. As her blood thickened and her pupils dilated, she tapped a table with her thumb. It dissolved into atoms. She glided out of the tower, her stone-dark eyes burning with sinister ambition. Her teachers would pay for their cruel words.

Fifty paces from the tower, she slammed into an invisible barrier.

Regardless of what spells she cast, she could not bypass it. There was no trick to outsmart it, no scheme to outmaneuver it. As she searched in vain for a weak spot, she didn't notice a light click on behind her. Out of it emerged Niobe. "Thanks for setting me free."

"What do you mean?"

“The last person to drink the brew becomes the witch of the tower. Your power is infinite, but you’re imprisoned here.” Niobe easily stepped through the barrier.

“You tricked me.”

“You tricked yourself. Enjoy your new home.” Niobe waved farewell before vanishing into the night.

Returning to the tower, Alia found the goblet refilled with witch’s brew. It looked as tantalizing as ever. Approaching footsteps echoed through the stone corridor. The tall apprentice, still without her robes, wandered into the tower and asked what had happened. Alia grinned. How hard would it be to convince her to drink the brew?

The Truth About Woopy

by Liviu Surugiu

Nabi is six years old and not the sort to fear his own shadow.

“Dad, I don't always have a shadow.”

“That's normal. When darkness —”

“I don't think it's good to stay long without a shadow.”

“Which is why I always tell you to turn off the computer and go out in the sun.”

“But what about the nighttime? Dad, what is night?”

“You see, when the Earth spins—”

“I've read that night is the planet's shadow projected in the sky.”

I agreed with him. “Anything else?”

“Why doesn't the sun have a shadow?”

“Why should it? If you don't need a shadow, why should the sun?”

“What about sunspots?”

“Sunspots?”

That afternoon, my son kept after me like he was my shadow.

“Nabi, shadows are normal. Every object, every person has its own shadow.”

“Then how come when we were at the circus last week, a man made shadows that didn't belong to him with his hands? Shadows of mice and cats and dogs, shadows of butterflies, birds, and bats?”

I think having two kids would have been easier. They could have spent all day talking to each other. “Like I said, the shadow keeps true to the body's shape, but if the shape changes...”

“But the shape of his hand was still a hand, Dad, only the position changed.”

“Fine, the position, then.”

“So if I adopt a certain position, I could have the shadow of a dinosaur?”

“It's possible... I think.”

“If I have his shadow, can't I have him too?”

I laugh. “First detach the dinosaur shadow from your little body, then we'll talk.”

The next day Nabi calls me into his room.

“I should warn you, I don't have time for games today,” I begin, but before I can finish, I'm left gaping at my son.

Nabi stands on the mirror placed in the middle of the rug with a lamp tilted down towards his feet. He mimics walking, and I see the shadow reflected on the opposite wall. The shadow is independent.

“Aaarrh!” he roars, hunching over and taking the form of some antediluvian beast. It could very well be the shadow of a stegosaurus or a triceratops. I think triceratopses are his favourites.

“Ingenious.” I falter. “Where'd you get that idea?”

“From nowhere,” says Nabi nonchalantly. “But Dad, yesterday you promised me that if I showed you this, you'd answer a few more questions.”

“Of course.” I sigh and sit. “Go ahead.”

“I had to stand differently to get that shadow. Couldn't I have it acting normally?”

“Acting... you?” I wonder incredulously.

“Yeah, but...” Nabi bends over, picking up a tangle of wires. “One,” he exclaims, and another lamp lights up beside the first.

The shadow doubles.

“Two.” Another ray appears from the side. Almost a quarter of his masterpiece is obscured.

“Three!” Nabi flicks yet another switch and the last light, opposite the first two, finely carves the rest of the shadow.

Now it is truly the shadow of a triceratops.

“What do you think?” my son mutters, after what seems like hours of calculations.

“Where did you get all those lamps?”

There are sculptors of stone, of wood, of metal. Until now I haven't told anyone that my son sculpts shadows.

“Dad, come here.” Nabi kidnaps me as soon as I get home.

This time I enter the ‘laboratory’ with caution.

“Get up on the mirror.” I hear from the desk. “Don't worry, it's made of aluminum. More to the left, like that. Don't move!”

Then he turns off the light bulb.

“Close your eyes, Dad; I'm going to turn on more lights. The adjustment will take a few seconds.”

When I open them, only my shadow appears on the projector's screen.

“Well?” asks Nabi.

“Well?” I mimic, feeling that he's finally screwed up. “I don't see anything unusual. Can I move now?”

“Sure, Dad! Move just your right hand.”

I almost twist my neck in surprise. Still, I continue swinging my right hand—with no results on the screen.

“It's cut,” my son informs me. “I reconstructed this entire shadow from your head.”

“My head?”

“I mean, first I made sure its shadow would be the only one to appear there: convergence. Then I enlarged and moulded it, giving it the shape of the whole body: divergence.”

“Tom? What are you doing there?” I hear a shuffle, and almost immediately my wife's body appears on the threshold.

“Come here, Mom. Sit down!” Nabi takes her hand.

She looks wide-eyed at us. When she sees her shadow on the wall, she shouts. Nabi has turned off several projectors and quickly changed the angles of the others. His mother never looked that good, not even before Nabi was born.

“Wonderful,” she exclaims, tapping her slim waist. In reality, she weighs a hundred kilograms.

After dinner, the ordeal begins again.

“Dad, I detached the shadow. Now will you help me make bodies in its shape and likeness?”

I choke. “In its shape and... don't speak nonsense.”

“Dad, in its likeness!”

I grow angry. “And out of what, pray tell, are you going to make the bodies? Plasticine?” I'm going over the top, so I soften it a little. “How are you going to make a body from a shadow? Tell me, Nabi.”

What I fear isn't that he won't be able to tell me. What I fear is that he will.

He manages it the very next day.

Nabi begins the lecture. “The shadow is the force field that compensates for the light coming from the opposite side of an object.”

“I agree with you up to this point.” I sit. “Take your finger out of your nose.”

“But other shadows exist too. The shadow of infrared rays, which precedes the object being examined this way. The X-rays' shadow, which appears in the object. If we admit that there's such a thing as bioenergy, that means it too has a shadow.”

“What are you getting at?” I'm walking on eggshells.

“Mom has two bioshadows.”

“And why, pray tell?” I ask angrily.

“Because she's pregnant, Dad.”

It never occurs to me to disbelieve him. I immediately take her to a doctor we haven't seen in a long time.

I don't have the patience to wait for her.

This time I barge uninvited into Nabi's room. I think I take him by surprise, but the noises coming from there demand my attention, since they sound like a baby's cries.

“Nabi, what's going on here?” I look around. “Where's that noise coming from?”

“From there.” He points with tears in his eyes.

An embryo's shadow pulses on the wall.

“It's my brother's,” he whispers. “In a few minutes the doctor will cut him with scissors.”

I don't know how I manage to make a phone call so quickly. In a quarter-hour my wife gets out of the cab—stunned, frightened, but happy.

“Tom, my love.” She embraces me. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say she crushes me in her arms. “What possessed you?”

“Don't get too worked up.” I manage to escape. “Listen, I'm rather hungry. Why don't you make some devilled eggs?”

“With lots of mayonnaise?” she calls from the kitchen.

“Right.” And I barrel into Nabi's room.

“I wasn't trying to,” he tries to calm me. “But I was scared.”

“Okay. In any case, you needed a little brother.”

“A sister, actually.”

“How the hell do you know?”

“Tom, the eggs are ready.”

“Dad.” My son stops me. “Mom won't give birth to a normal baby.”

Either tired, resigned, defeated or a little of all three, I listen.

“I think it's my fault, with my experiments. The truth is that she's going to make me a little sister exactly how I most wanted.”

I do a double-take. It can't be, unless...

“She'll be a dinosaur, a female triceratops.” Nabi kisses me and bolts toward the kitchen.

The transformation must be permanently routed through the PC connected to the home network.

Every shadow has been monitored and positioned in this way to favour the events. Seen on the screen, the shadow-world of our home seems like the most authentic Jurassic landscape.

For a while I hoped Nabi would be wrong. I say hoped because there were already some things I could no longer doubt. My hopes

vanished abruptly, however, when the doctor told us after the first ultrasound that we would have a deformed daughter.

“It's too late for an abortion,” he added.

And in any case, I thought, better a dinosaur for Nabi than a child with malformations.

The truth is that if any woman on the planet had to bear a dinosaur, I'm glad it's my wife. She can handle it. Though still I hope this won't be the case.

In the morning, in darkness, we take Woopy out grazing.

Joanna West's Final Five Reviews on the Day of the Apocalypse

by Kelly Sandoval

1. Coya's Books and Games - 4 Stars

I've been a customer of Coya's for over 40 years, and it's always attracted a bit of an odd element. Heck, my husband and I turned a few heads, back in the day. I'm happy to listen to the woman who preaches about the healing power of essential oils in the self-help section, and I'm no stranger to the snickering, superior teens who perch in the café like a flock of ravens.

But there has to be a limit, doesn't there? Today, when I went in for my usual coffee, biscotti, and paper, the teen crowd was replaced by a collection of glowing wraith-like figures, whose high-pitched keening was certainly a step down from teenage laughter. The costumes were impressive (I swear it was as if I could see right through them) but the so-called 'music' made me feel light-headed and oddly lonely. I appreciate that Coya's supports the arts. But I say, bring back the bearded gentleman with the acoustic guitar.

That said, they've got the best drip coffee in town, and the biscotti is great too.

My first four-star visit. Hopefully, they'll have this resolved next time.

2. 4th Street Flowers - 2 Stars

I usually get my flowers from Fantastic Floral, but they were closed, so I decided to give 4th Street Flowers a try. Boy, did I learn my lesson.

The sign said Open, but no one greeted me as I entered. I wandered about a bit, while I waited for the staff to come out from the back. The flowers they have are beautiful, with some varieties I've

never seen before. Did you know they make glowing silver roses? And these little bell-shaped blossoms in all sorts of colors, that actually ring out when you touch them. The sound gave me the chills though, high and sharp and oddly familiar.

Eventually, I got tired of waiting and tried calling out. And did anyone answer? No. Really, if it's flowers you want, Fantastic Floral is the better bet. No glowing roses, but they know how to treat their customers.

I wish I could say I stormed out, but I couldn't leave without flowers. I've been visiting my husband's grave every week for nearly two decades, and I always bring a bouquet. I wasn't about to let poor service change that. Not after the day I'd had. (Whatever happened to happy families shopping after church on Sunday? I saw barely a soul downtown.) Finally, I took one of their premade bouquets and left cash and a very stern note on the counter.

Two stars, and that's only because of the unusual varieties they stock.

3. Unity Fountain - 1 Star

It's gone. I watched it go. Watched the great metal globe start spinning. Watched the stone children stand and stretch. Watched the swan, such an ugly, unfortunate carving, spread its stone wings.

It flew.

It flew, and the children tilted their heads, as if to admire its flight. Then they linked hands and started dancing. I think they were singing. I could see their stone lips moving.

And the globe kept spinning, shining brighter and brighter, still spraying water out in every direction.

My Max proposed to me at the Unity Fountain. Cliché, I know, but it's true. So many weekends, sitting on that same bench, remembering when he used to sit there beside me.

What would he say to all of this? Maybe he'd smile. He always did like a change of pace. It's all changing very quickly, now.

As I was leaving, the globe started floating upward and the children with it. One star.

4. Dawn View Cemetery - 3 Stars

Maybe it's silly to review a cemetery, but in the end, death's just another series of decisions you leave for the people who outlive you. I learned that when my husband died. He was never one to have strong opinions about anything, so it was up to me whether to bury or cremate him, and where to put the body.

I picked Dawn View because it was close, and I liked the name. It's a pretty place, all gentle green hills and old, gnarled oak trees. If it weren't for the gravestones, you might forget its purpose. But there's death enough to weigh on you, even on good days.

Today, though, it was full to bursting with ghosts. I've never been the superstitious sort, never figured Max was anywhere but gone. But you look out on a crowd of ghosts like that, everything from elderly sorts to little children, all watching the sky, and you tell me you don't believe in an afterlife.

I made straight for Max's grave, and there he was, same as the day I'd buried him. 18 years younger than I am now. Still so very handsome. It hurt, you know, seeing him like that. Seeing him at all.

Hurt more that he didn't seem to see me. Didn't notice me setting down my flowers, didn't turn at the sound of my voice. I just sat there and cried, while he stared toward the sun. Looking at what? I don't know.

Three stars. I didn't bury Max to have him rising again. You'd think a cemetery would be better at keeping its dead.

5. The Endless Abyss - 5 Stars

I'm surprised to find a listing for this already! I guess that's the benefit of living in the future. Or was the benefit, I suppose.

The sky is dark and empty and very cold. The ghosts rise up, silent, and the wraiths' keening goes on and on. It seems to come from everywhere. What little light remains comes from this phone and the roses on Max's grave. I watched him disappear upward, into the dark. I'm sure it's not long before it pulls me up, too.

Maybe it's beautiful, beyond the dark. Max's face held so much wonder.

In the spirit of optimism, I give the Endless Abyss five stars.

The Songs of the Siren

by Evergreen Lee

Sylvia gazed at the tranquil sea with despair.

How had such gentle waves killed her husband? And what was she supposed to do, now that he was gone? Her life had revolved around him. She had no family to go to. No friends. No job. She was all alone, and a long way from home.

A wordless melody carried across the waves, haunting and sweet. It called to her as if it knew her. Provided a musical counterpoint to her misery. Sylvia stared into the ocean, searching for the source, but she couldn't see far in the dusky twilight.

The voice grew louder, closer, and small splashes accompanied it.

Was someone swimming? Should she warn them it wasn't safe? Darren had been an expert swimmer and still had drowned.

"Who's there?" she asked.

No one answered, but the song continued.

Was it a real voice? The need to find out burned within her. Could any human sing such a lovely tune? Or was it a natural phenomenon, like the sound of waves in a seashell? A product of wind hitting the coast just right?

She waded in up to her knees, searching.

The melody became more playful. Teasing. Asking her to find it.

She stopped as the chilly waves lapped at her waist. Was this what had killed Darren? Searching for a song?

The melody didn't stop. Tinkling laughter bubbled inside her head, along with a feminine voice that matched the unearthly tones. "Why do you hesitate? You are so close to your heart's desire."

“Who are you?”

“Come and see,” the crystalline voice teased.

Sylvia tensed.

More laughter, and then a grinning face came into view.

The details and color were difficult to make out in the moonlight, but something about it didn’t seem quite right. The features too flat. The smile too feral. Inhuman, her inner warning bells chimed. Mermaid. Siren.

“Did you kill him?” Sylvia demanded.

“Who?”

“Darren. My husband.”

The creature stopped smiling and stared at Sylvia as if looking through her. Into her.

After several gut-wrenching moments, it answered with, “You shouldn’t grieve such a one as he.”

“He was my husband!” Sylvia choked back a sob.

“He had a black heart. It is my duty to protect my territory.”

“Protect it from what? He didn’t even fish.”

“Many have fished here. Few have died. I read his sins on his soul, just as I can see his marks on yours. Why grieve for one that hurt you so?”

Hearing a stranger—monster or not—speak the truth Sylvia had denied to herself, cut deeper than Darren’s cruel barbs ever had. Thousands of old wounds bled fresh upon the mermaid’s words. All the ways Darren had belittled her, controlled her. Hurt her. He hadn’t wanted to share her, so he had driven away her friends. Destroyed everything she cared about. Cheated on her, and then convinced her

it was her own fault he strayed. Forced her to satisfy him, but never cared if she got pleasure in return.

Sylvia staggered to her knees as a large wave hit. Saltwater splashed in her face and stung her eyes.

The creature had never stopped singing, but now the song changed. A soothing tone, an angelic lullaby.

The music whispered through Sylvia, promising her a better life. Love and joy. Sweetness and light.

“Is this how you lured him in?”

The siren laughed again, but this time it was without mirth. “He would never respond to songs like these. What use does he have for matters of the heart? Much simpler tunes were used to tempt him into the water.”

Sex, then. His lust never could be satisfied.

The song pulled at Sylvia again, urging her to give herself over to the ocean’s embrace.

She waded forward, despite her misgivings. At least if she died here, she might know one moment of peace. One moment of happiness. The song intensified, pulling at her.

She went under as the sand bar abruptly ended.

Gentle arms grabbed her shoulders and brought her head back above the water. A tail, slick and soft, wrapped around her legs and held them together.

Sylvia stared into the mermaid’s large eyes. The song had stopped. “Will you kill me too?” She couldn’t bring herself to care.

The creature grabbed Sylvia’s face, then kissed her. A soul-sucking, mind-bending kiss that didn’t end even as their heads submerged again.

A fierce rapture she'd never known suffused every cell of Sylvia's body.

Even as the siren stole the last of her breath, and her lungs started to burn, she didn't mind. It was worth it. She'd never experienced such deep pleasure. If sex had been like this, perhaps she would have understood Darren's obsession.

Her skin boiled with sensation. Her face felt as if it was melting apart. Despite that, the kiss continued, with both of them pressing so hard against one another that it felt as if they were one. Sylvia was determined to wring every last bit of ecstasy she could get out of this moment, before death took her.

The pain receded as her body went blissfully numb.

And then the kiss ended.

Sylvia's mouth and throat filled with saltwater.

But she didn't choke.

Her lungs no longer hurt.

In fact, it felt like she was—breathing? But not from—

She touched her neck and found flaps of skin cut into it. Gills?

Opening her eyes revealed an underwater landscape far brighter and clearer than what she'd seen before. Tapestries of color, stripes and streaks of fiery crimson and soothing magenta. Her legs joined to form a tail.

The siren smiled.

"How?" Sylvia tried to say, but the word came out garbled in the water.

"Many people disappear into the ocean depths. Not all of them drown."

Neutral Zone

by Joshua Fagan

Soaring through the stars was only worthwhile for Eliza if she had someone beside her. She wasn't sure she did anymore.

Cracked vases. A few broken plates. That's all the physical evidence there was. No record of the screaming and tears. She wished she could forget, but as she started to sweep up the broken glass, she glanced at a picture of them in happier times. Why couldn't they be like that again? They were young astronauts then, chosen for a ten-year mission into space, only starting to fall in love. Where was the passion they once had?

Hearing footsteps, Eliza stood alert. Lionel leaned against a balcony, his eyes red from crying. "Are you all right?" he said, not unkindly.

"Are you?" His face was pale, and his arms trembled. Though he'd never admit it, she knew their fights were worse for him. Instead of answering her, he glanced away—at the control room, at their starmap. Anywhere but the broken glass that reminded him of their shouting match.

"I don't know," he said, turning up the temperature in a vain attempt to combat the chills racing through his body.

"How about we go to a less dangerous destination this time?" she offered. A shy smile crossed his face. This is what they had fought about, what they always fought about. Lionel joined the mission for a danger-light scientific expedition. Eliza could never forgive him for that. The most valuable data could only be gathered on high-risk planets, she'd said. Their superiors were always instructing them to

travel to bizarre, unpredictable worlds. This did not, however, explain her eagerness to embark on such perilous adventures.

“There’s this tropical planet I’ve been wanting to visit for years,” he said. “Blue water, silver sand. There’s this uncatalogued variety of algae growing there, so it wouldn’t be a total vacation, but we could spend a few moments lounging in the sand.”

“Sounds nice. Let’s alternate trips. You pick this one, I’ll pick the next one.” Kissing her, Lionel raced to the controls and charted a course to the planet of his dreams. Eliza searched through the spaceship’s library for a book to read. It was going to be a boring week.

Though she brought *Anna Karenina* in all its 1000-page glory, she finished it in three days. There wasn’t much for her to do after collecting algae samples. Most of the work came in cutting open the samples and running esoteric scientific tests, and much of that was his responsibility. She spent long hours traveling around the barren landmasses, bored and lonely. Though she searched for natural phenomena, there was nothing of note on this planet except the algae. Sure, it was quaint and peaceful, but she wasn’t the kind of person who could sit for hours in the sand, watching foamy waves crash against the shore.

Three days before they were supposed to depart, she pleaded with Lionel to leave this planet. The smile dropped from his face. “Aren’t you having fun?” he asked, but as he studied her sullen eyes, he knew she wasn’t.

“This isn’t what I want. If I wanted to lounge around all day, I would have stayed on Earth.” When he drew back, she added, “Sorry. I know you’re happy here. If you don’t like the planet I choose, tell me. I want this—us—to work. But give it a chance. Please.”

On the planet she chose, geysers of sulfur erupted from lava-filled valleys. Unyielding gales scoured the marshy plains. But the mountains in the distance were majestic and strange. Atop the highest peak were the remnants of an ancient meteor the planet's atmosphere had turned radioactive-green. Grabbing a sail-size leaf from an S-shaped tree, she leaped into the valley. The winds caught the leaf and carried her to the peak.

A squid-like monster flung itself at her, but when she shot it with a taser, it froze before retreating into the stale, slimy embrace of its mountain cave. She reveled in her surging adrenaline while holding the meteorite aloft. "Did you see that, Lionel? It must have had sixty eyes. Imagine what they'd think of that back on Earth."

She looked for him, but he hadn't come with her. He hadn't moved at all. When she returned to the spaceship, meteorite in hand, he scowled. "You could have died," he said. "I don't want to lose you. Why do you keep doing this to yourself?"

"We have to. It's our mission."

"You always say that, but there are dozens of other teams floating around the galaxy. Why do we always have to be the ones risking our lives?" Before she could respond, he added, "It's because you love it. This is just a big adventure for you. But what if you die? What if we both die?"

Eliza denied this, but he didn't speak to her again until she said, "We can leave now."

After several quiet, solemn weeks, she tapped him on the shoulder, waking him. "What are you doing?" he asked, yawning.

"Just come with me." Eliza led him into what had been an unused bedroom. It was now divided into two different simulations. On one, there was a beach chair, the sun glittering on the waves, the song of seabirds. On the other, there was a rock-climbing wall, a countdown

timer, the rumbling of volcanoes. They stepped into a narrow corridor, gleaming white, between the two halves. “One side’s for me, the other’s for you. And this is the neutral zone, for both of us.”

“This is what you’ve been working on?”

“Every morning.” Staring into his somber eyes, she said, “I know it doesn’t solve everything. But we both can live out our fantasies, and then we can choose missions that are like this neutral zone. Ones that work for both of us.”

“Are you sure this can work?”

“I’m not sure. But we have to try.”

You Do Not Need to Open the Door

by Alex Penland

You do not need to open the door.

It calls to everyone. You're nothing special. They pop up frequently, these things. They're like pitcher plants: inviting, but once inside, you'll have a hard time getting home. You may not want to go home—after all, unlike a pitcher plant they won't devour you, simply transport you to another realm—but the choice won't be yours. You can't trust them. Once you're past the threshold, there's no telling what you'll find, and there's no telling what'll happen if you find another door.

It might take you home. It might take you somewhere else.

This one's blue. Someone has painted upon it a scene—they weren't talented, but the art's intricate. There's a mountain, complete with a palace perched atop its peak. It's covered in snow and narrative. A troll menaces from a cave—an adventurer hangs onto a cliff by a single ice pick—a wizard casts a flurrying, blizzarding spell. The palace is nondescript and white, with a nondescript princess waving from its highest window.

You cannot tell if it is day or night in the painting, as the moon and sun are both present. The sky is dotted with stars and brooming witches, both laden with cats. Below, in the valley, there are enticing villages, dotted with gardens full of fruit and hearths warm with fire. The paint is cheap, the style simple, and yet you swear you can smell the baking of bread from someone else's chimney. You can taste the crunch of a fresh apple, still warm from the sun.

You do not need to open the door.

The next door is also wooden. It has not been painted, or even treated properly. It appears to be made of cedar. It smells like cedar,

like the forgotten corners of a closet you haven't seen in years. On the frame, someone has notched markings: perhaps keeping count of something unknown, but given the varied heights it seems more likely that a child used this frame to record their growth over the years.

There's light coming out from underneath it. Perhaps the faint echo of music, though you can't be sure. The world beyond must be populated: there are shadows casting through the light, moving with the aimless sway of what could—perhaps—be a party.

You have been here a long time. It's not home, but it has been good to you. You do not need to open the door.

The third door is cold to the touch. So much time has passed since you felt anything other than heat that you press your hands against it. It's the color of silver. You almost missed it against the firelight, which reflects so perfectly in the metal's polish that the flames camouflaged it from view.

You don't know how the door could possibly be cold. The heat is sweltering. The light is burning. The other side must be cooler—colder—and you imagine lemonade, oceanfront, even snow.

You do not need to open the door.

You cannot see the fourth. You haven't seen anything in quite some time. Color is a memory, sung in associations from the darkness. There is yellow, the color of fruit that hangs in unseeable trees, of campfires which emit no light but still warm you, of a long-lost sun. There is blue, the color of what you hope is water, found rushing in invisible brooks. There is red, the color of the things which move unseen but not unheard. And black, the color you imagine the darkness to be, the color of the chill which dug into your bones years ago and lives there.

This door feels green.

What number is it, now? It feels like fresh wood, like living wood, wood still wet with sap. When you press your face against it you can feel the lightest breeze slipping between the cracks, a smell like summer and fresh-cut grass, like quenched thirst and the absence of hunger. If you look—if you peer, if you strain your eyes—you can see a sliver of light. It's faint. Perhaps it's only your imagination.

You do not need to open the door.

The sixth comes eventually. Of all of them, this is the first that's made you hesitate. You remember the flames and the darkness—in contrast, the loneliness of this world is nothing. Here there's water and food and light. Here you have no company, no other people, not even other animals, but you are safe.

This is your front door.

You have long since lost your keys, but you know it's unlocked. Decades have passed. Maybe centuries. It is remarkable how the paint's unchanged, how the mat's as you left it. You place your hands against its frame and imagine the home beyond. The place you left. The people you left. Memories you've locked away come back to you: the way the light comes through your windows, the smell of your kitchen, how it feels to lie in your bed.

Maybe everything you've lost is a decision away—you just have to reach out and grasp it. This door may be the one to take you home.

But it might take you somewhere else.

The Crown of Fire

by Reuben Dendinger

There was once a boy who, upon becoming a young man, was visited by an angel. He had only recently become a man, when sitting in the grass beneath a tree one afternoon smoking his pipe, he was consumed by a marvelous vision. All at once, he found himself enthroned in the flaming gold of ecstasy, every nerve blazing with untold bliss, and upon his head invisible hands placed a crown of fire. These sensations were extreme, and yet accompanied by a perfect mental clarity, an unprecedented stillness of the mind. And then before him appeared a shining red angel adorned in golden armor, who spoke with a great voice that boomed like a bell in the void.

“You have been Chosen,” said the angel. “Chosen to be a Champion of the Gods, a Destroyer of Serpents. This is the Destiny you must fulfill.”

When the angel finished speaking, it vanished. As the crown of fire was removed from the young man's head, his sense of golden ecstasy subsided.

For a whole day the young man sat beneath the tree, astonished by the prophetic vision. As he gradually regained his senses and began to process what he had seen, he was filled with an immense excitement. He had been Chosen, Chosen by the Gods. What could be better? His joy soon turned to pride as he contemplated the rarity of his vision. He replayed the moment in his imagination over and over, trying to recreate the sense of ecstasy, the feeling of the crown of fire on his head. For several more days he did nothing but dream about it, sitting there beneath the tree, basking in the prophecy.

Whenever anyone walked by, the young man hailed them and called them over to his spot beneath the tree. He would chat with them a little bit, gradually leading the conversation to the topic of his vision. Then he would describe it to them in dramatic language. Many people laughed and told him he was crazy. These people did not bother the young man, who understood they were merely jealous of him. Others became embarrassed as if he had told them something obscene. But a rare few were impressed by his story, some of them so much so that they would come back day after day to hear it told again and again, and they would bring him small gifts of bread and fruit.

Eventually, the young man had enough followers, bringing him enough food and other gifts, that he could have lived beneath the tree without ever having to leave or do any work other than tell his story. But he was so consumed by the memory of his vision that he only wanted to dream about it, talk about it, constantly wash himself in the glory of it. He ate less and less. He barely slept. By slow degrees, he wasted away beneath the tree, until eventually he expired.

His followers were superstitious and did not allow anyone to bury him or touch his body. After his vision, he never left that spot beneath the tree, and now in death he would remain there too. Time passed. The elements did their work on the young man's body. At long last, nothing but a skeleton remained, stripped of all flesh and tissue. By this time his followers had drifted away. There was no one to guard the body anymore. Occasionally curious people came by to look at the bones – they had heard rumors about the young man.

Later some would claim to have seen where the crown of fire had scorched a black ring around his skull.

Duet

by Joshua Fagan

But if you find the light of the sun

Or the warmth of a flickering ember

May the forgetting be undone

May you sing this song to remember

That was always my father's favorite verse, but few still know it. Since his passing, there are only two people in the Hollow who've memorized it: my sister and me. When I sing it, time ceases to pass in the Tree of Memory. Memory globes stop in midair instead of shattering against the base of the tree. Large skeletal limbs that would have fallen on homes and schools in the Hollow instead hang off the tree at distorted angles. Our beloved keeper of memories has become a nightmarish parody of itself, but it's still alive.

To restore the tree, two people must sing the third verse together. How am I supposed to convince anyone in the Hollow to sing it with me? The moment they hear the first few elegiac notes of the melody, they succumb to primal fear. They wouldn't believe me if I said the third verse was the key to salvation.

When Elina wakes, I ask her to sing it with me, but she turns away from me and responds, "You must be insane."

"It's the least you could do after the devastation you caused."

"Why should we preserve those memories? Can't the Hollow move on without them? If you break free from memory, the future stretches out before you, infinite and open. You can move on. I have, and the Hollow should too."

Grabbing the memory globe of our father's death, I press it into her palm. "If you'd moved on, you wouldn't have come back." I ask

her to play the memory again. When she hesitates, I add, “Let’s watch it together. Memories can preserve pain, but they can also help heal it.”

Finches sing their sweet tune in the grove. Poppies the color of the rising sun blow softly in the wind. White clouds drift through the sky as its color changes, pale gray becoming cerulean. Hawks leave their homes in the cliffside and ride the air currents, wings outstretched. A ring of clouds surrounds the sun like a halo. Only in the distance can I see the half-dead trunk of the Tree of Memory. Elina embraces me for the first time since we were children, and we activate the memory together.

It’s no less horrible than before, but we have one another. This time, we both cry. Removing her mask, she washes her face in the sunlit stream. “Do you know what Dad was holding?” she asks. “A poppy, just like one of these. It must have been around this time six years ago. I’d said I wanted one, so he went to get it as a birthday present for me.”

I give her a cloth to dry her face. “It wasn’t your fault,” I say.

“Camyron, I know that. But that doesn’t make it hurt less. I’m sorry for leaving you without saying anything, but I couldn’t stay. I would have drowned in grief.” After wiping her face, she faces the Tree of Memory. “You’re right when you say I haven’t been able to move on. I hoped I could change that if I destroyed the record.”

“Will you help me sing the third verse of our song and revive the tree? Do it for me and do it for Dad. He loved that tree.”

She responds by asking for two promises: the first, that she can keep the memory globe, and the second, that we won’t imprison her when this is over. When I say yes, she stammers. Yes is hard to hear for one accustomed to hearing no. “One can’t change the past,” I

say. “But the future has not been written. Come back home. Your bedroom’s still there.”

“Even if you’re willing to forgive me, I’ll always be an outcast in this town. But you’ll see me again. Running from the past is a doomed endeavor. That’s why I’m keeping this globe.” We share breakfast, lunch, and dinner in that sunny grove. It is not enough to compensate for the six years we spent apart, but it is nonetheless a hermetically sealed slice of paradise, and I would be tempted to continue talking to her for another few days if I didn’t notice birds flying in circles or streams flowing uphill. The balance of the Hollow is in jeopardy, so when the veil of night emerges from the embers of twilight, we sneak into the Hollow together.

We climb up a half-fallen branch and enter the tree through an opening near the fiftieth terrace. The inside is midnight black until we begin our song. Our voices harmonize. An anxious crowd of Hollow-dwellers, hearing us, races inside the tree and starts firing arrows, but they stop when the inside of the tree once more illuminates. As the memory globes glow, the broken terraces repair themselves. The branches reattach. A new Memory Thread forms. There can be no forgetting the shattered memory globes or fallen branches, but the tree lives. It instantly produces a memory of the event. I turn to show it to Elina, but she’s already gone.

Ten days come and go. The mayor showers me with accolades. I force myself to smile. My smile is less forced when I teach the Hollow residents about the third verse of the Song of Forgetting. My students wish me farewell as night falls, and I hike to Starcrest Hilltop. It’s the night of the full moon. Elina waits for me there. “I thought you might be here,” I say.

“Just like old times.” We revel in the golden moonlight and hum the entire song, remembering our father and dreaming of the future.

A Generation of Darkness

by Lynne Sargent

At the edge of the universe a star winks out from two directions at once, blackness closing in. Nonetheless, a kind of warmth is left behind, though not the kind you could measure in Celsius or Fahrenheit or even Kelvins. There is a silence too, like one made by two lovers who have touched for the first time, their hands reaching out slowly and then quickly withdrawing after the barest brush of fingertips. Now they sit, bursting with stifled excitement, each waiting for acknowledgement, for permission, for reassurance from the other that it is safe to let their joy out. Not that our lovers ever let anything out.

Mela is the heart of a galaxy, a motherland of darkness. She is an anchor, a tether, a magnet. Nothing can approach her without becoming her, without becoming a nothingness greater than any sun.

Fia is worlds and planets away and she has been wandering for a very long time. The universe is a lonely place. It doesn't matter how large or small a creature you are, nor does it matter how many or few of your kind there are. The problem is the vastness, the expanse, the silence. Fia is so used to seeing shadows that the first time she sees Mela she does not realize that shadow is all Mela is.

All life begins with at least one explosion. All love begins with surrender, with accepting sublimation into love's ever-expanding circle.

But what is it like to be born supernova? To go from being seemingly endless light to being only blackness, only consumption,

only known by the way you displace others. What is it like to be the absence that cannot be filled by anything?

The days pass slowly for these creatures. They are mouths that food comes to. They will take in anything, even dust. They are the spider at the center of all things, the galaxy their web.

But being the darkness makes you attenuated to the light.

Mela tries. She tries hard—so hard, too hard—to love the slow dance of the sky. But she lacks a partner, her very body demolishing the crowd. Not even the memory of the waltzing tune survives.

Still, she twirls in the face of the endless dark, head upturned, arms open. She spins until she is dizzy, and the dizziness is almost like a touch. She holds onto the illusion as long as she can, nausea like a blanket, like a caress, like an embrace.

Fia fails. She fails at finding slowness, she tries to be content with what she has, and yet, there is always more. Always more to be, to do, to see. Is she swept up in the universe's current or is the universe swept up in hers? Her unstoppable force has never met an immovable object.

Time is a beach she wanders. Bored with eternity she continues down its stretch, never finding the end of it. She continues to walk along it even if there is never any reward, any conclusion. Stillness is foreign, the greatest terror she can imagine.

Many things are said about love. It is said that lovers are meant to find each other, that the universe makes perfect matches, if only we will listen. It is said that we must let go of the things we love and

trust they will come back to us. It is said that they will come back to us.

Perhaps this is the best explanation we have for gravity.

The courtship takes millennia. Fia and Mela circle each other in a spiral dance that grows ever tighter and more urgent until they each become the center of the other's world, the thing around which all else rotates. They do not choose it, but once they are swept up in each other's orbit, they would.

The stars they once consumed without a thought try to slow them down. Despite its promotion of love, the universe cannot abide the point when darkness is faster than light. Cosmic dust tries to drag them apart, like children hanging on their mothers' skirts. Yet it is still true that love is the most powerful force, and so they find each other.

They say hello.

It is love at first touch. It is succumbing, energy merging, no seduction required. Not after all this time. They are still all mouth, all swallowing, but suddenly it is not to their detriment. It is not a point of shame. It is a feeling that cannot be escaped, and suddenly, they know what it is like to be the rest of the universe, what it is like to be consumed.

They come together like a thunderclap, and for a moment before they finally release, they are the brightest point in the whole universe. Without doubt, without hesitation, they abandon the worst parts of each of them: loneliness, doubt, shame, hunger.

In the darkness of space there is a spot that is blacker than the rest. A point of conception, of destruction. It is the legacy of galaxies

long dead, and yet, the love they created lives on. Fia inside Mela inside Fia, touch and nothingness and weight. It is brighter than any star that ever stood in their way or tugged at their heels.

Where love exists the universe takes note, knowing it is better for love to exist even if it goes unrecognized, unremarked upon by others. It is light within the darkness, it is making, it is a promise that all kinds of creatures can create.

Root to Sapling, Sapling to Stem

by Wendy Nickel

As the decennial review of our ship's governing charters approaches, Childrearing Law 2749 ("Child-2749") is up for debate. A vocal group of "pro-family" activists are determined to upend the systematic, individual-based process we've relied upon for generations in favor of what they claim is a more "natural" approach. This would allow, for the first time in a hundred years, genetic donors to raise their biological offspring in-home after it reaches viability in the ship's Womb Center. It may even allow potential mothers to undergo procedures to become pregnant and give birth, experiences which modern science has deemed unnecessarily risky.

As a woman of "childbearing age," as old Earthers would've called it, I decided to visit the one person onboard who'd know what it'd be like to have this law overturned.

I met Willa Shuman at her favorite coffee shop: a kitschy place on B-deck with caffeine and dairy licenses. If you saw this vibrant ninety-two-year-old at the gym, you'd never guess that she's the last remaining Fortitude citizen to be raised by parents—in her case, a couple named Trevor and Tina.

"What was it like?" I'd spent weeks reading about society before Child-2749 and was fascinated to speak with someone who'd not only seen it but lived it. A childhood outside the Deck-J nursery? With hundreds of kids running around, unregulated and uncontained?

She sat facing the window, watching as each person strolled past, though I got the distinct impression that she was not really seeing them; her mind was light-years away. "It was all I knew," she said finally. "We used to get together with the other parent-raised families

on H-deck, and the adults would talk work or politics or whatever, and that's how we learned how to be adults."

"By observation?" It sounded highly inefficient.

"Sure. Just being around them while we played."

"What kind of VR games did you have? Were they kinesthetic?" Nowadays, all ship-raised children require an hour a day of physical activity, but back then there were very few VR options.

"No," Willa said patiently. "Real games: hide-and-seek, tag, red rover."

Her admission struck me speechless. The dangers of these activities are well-documented: children becoming lost or even injured in the process of running and hiding and coming into forceful contact with one another. Not to mention the psychological trauma.

Willa must have read my mind, because she added, "Oh, I got hurt plenty. Then I'd climb onto Mom's lap, and her hug would make me feel better."

I'd read that parent-raised families of that era often encouraged oxytocin-releasing activities: hugging, cuddling, hand-holding. The hormone, released during pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, entrenched the bond between parents and children. Yet these close-contact encounters also led to germ-passing and heightened emotional trauma at family members' ultimate passing.

Obviously sensing my discomfort at such references, Willa gestured to the door. "Let's go for a walk."

Her step was quick and light, and it wasn't long before we reached the atrium, where the forest of giant aspen reach from Deck-D all the way up to Deck-A. It's one of my favorite places on the ship: a quiet, serene place, perfect for contemplation. When I imagine old Earth, it's a little like this.

“When Child-2749 was passed, I was heartbroken,” Willa said. “I’d wanted so badly to pass on more than just my genetic code. I worked here, in the atrium, at that time, and in a way, these trees became like children to me. Someone to care for. To guide.”

I tried to find something to say. “There’s so many of them.”

“And yet they’re one.”

“One? But there’s so many branches and leaves and trunks and—”

“Stems,” she said. “Each of those trunks grows from the same root system. It’s a single organism, entirely interconnected. They can be transplanted, if you dig up a sucker from the mother tree and make sure to bring with it enough of the root. You know what happens then?”

“What?”

“It starts the cycle all over again. Root to sapling, sapling to stem. As old stems die off, the new ones grow alongside them, eventually replacing them and passing their place in the world from one generation to the next. They pass on their genetic material, but there’s more to it than that. A single stem has the benefit of the whole root system, which makes it particularly hardy, and as the seasons change, their leaves change colors as one. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

I was beginning to suspect why she’d brought me here.

“But there’s plenty of other plants that thrive on their own,” I argued. “Our greenhouses churn out thousands each week for consumption. The process is efficient. No errors, no mishaps, no unpleasant surprises.”

When she spoke again, I realized I could not win her over. “These trees may not grow as efficiently or with the uniformity of our carrots or cabbage, but this?” She gestured to the chaotic flurry of leaves and overlapping of trunk-like stems. “This is part of what makes them aspens.” She pauses. “Would you like me to teach you about them?”

“I would.”

Willa Shuman passed away on Monday, leaving no one left onboard the Fortitude who knows for sure what it's like to hold a mother's hand or hear a father's words of encouragement or weep at a grandparent's funeral or play red rover (a game that, even after many long talks with Willa, I still find terrifying).

I'm not sure how I'll vote yet. When I hear the arguments made in favor of Child-2749, they make sense. They sound logical. Yet I can't shake the impression made by Willa and her trees. I wonder if that's what she meant when she'd said she wanted to pass on more than her genetic code.

Maybe it's these things that, despite her passing, still make me feel like we're connected.

Garden of the Gods

by Anna Madden

I am the desert, the call of the wind. I want to taste life, warm and finite and wet against my tongue.

Approaching footsteps stir a carpet of low-growing thyme. Sitting in the shade of a primeval crabapple tree, I twitch my tail, then brush aside the ledger which torments me. Once my joy, this long list of men's names I've killed in an eternal guardianship. I spread my tawny wings. A habit of anticipation.

I prefer kings, warriors, even the guileless pilgrims. This visitor is different. A man of no distinction, unmarked by allegiance or purpose, a homespun cloak fading him to obscurity. Is he prey or a fellow predator? I sniff, taking his scent—salty, but not born of fear. Yet, I don't take him for a hunter either. He carries no weapons, and his movements have been too brash, too visible.

I lick my lips, wondering what he tastes like.

He is a riddle, a long shadow to unveil. I must have his name for my ledger. Only then can I claim his meat for myself. Without it, who am I?

“Leondra,” he says, speaking my name with unearned familiarity. “I've found you.”

His words are an opening to put me on my guard, to corner me. I peel back my lips and show him my fangs. He stands his ground, his feet wide.

The next move is mine.

A breeze dances among the tall foxgloves, fairy-like impatiens, forget-me-nots, and the patches of delicate lady slippers growing amidst bones yellowed by age. I clench my claws, their sharp edges like fine daggers. The man flinches, and well he should, for I am a

monster to his kind, a guardian of old, but more, a reminder of a past best forgotten. My wings are mighty as an eagle, my body strong and lean, covered in honey-brown fur.

I stretch my forelegs, then rise.

“I am not alive,” I say, “but I grow. I am not wild, but must be tamed. I thrive in light, warmth, and gentle rain. What am I?”

The man takes in the summer’s offerings, then smiles, though an early frost lingers in his gaze. “A garden.”

I fan my wings for his admiration. His eyes watch with wariness, lacking awe or envy. I used to pity men, bound to this earth, unable to know the wind’s true voice or the gentle touch of the clouds. The heady thrill of freedom without bounds. Now I grow curious. Perhaps I’ve lost something without roots to hold me or death to make me afraid.

I pace back and forth. One wrong answer and he is mine. I pause beside the ledger set beneath the gnarled tree, placed among twigs and sun-dried skulls. Its fine leather is brittle, cracking. I fumble on the second riddle, my thoughts tangled and blurred. “I am life without end.”

“The answer is what I seek,” he says with weight to his words. “It is immortality.”

My fur hackles. He’s clever, I’ll admit, but I’ve one riddle left to ask. My stomach growls. I long to taste what I have not yet tasted, but my will is stronger than my hunger. I sit, wrapping my tail around my front legs.

“I am a question asked by poor and rich alike. Many look for me, but none agree what I am.” As I speak, I lean forward. Not with appetite, not completely, but an interest which I’d thought lost. For too long, I’ve breathed without living, watching leaves bud and wither, unable to join them.

He shifts his weight from one foot to another and mumbles to himself. “Happiness fits. But no, that isn’t a question. . .”

I salivate and stalk closer. The smarter ones make it passed two. Not three.

“The meaning of life,” he says, his words wet and swift. “Its answer has eluded us all, mortals and monsters and gods alike.”

I pause, and he waits for his fate with both feet planted on the earth. He dares to challenge a world he doesn’t understand. It’s admirable but foolhardy. I tap my claws. The man pales as though he sees his own death approaching on dark wings. My hunger nags, a feeble attempt to hide thorns of loneliness.

A similar craving reflects in the man’s eyes. It chills me. He wants what he can never have, but unlike the rest who’ve come and failed—he knows it.

We are more alike than not.

I turn, my view of bark and leaf and stem. The apple tree is older than me, and its fruits are rare and precious. I find a golden apple and shake it from its fragile branch. The fruit is leftover by the gods—their legacy. I know its sweetness, its lingering acidity. Sometimes I regret eating it. Will he?

The apple thuds. Circling tightly, I settle back down, closing my eyes against the sun’s glare. My ears follow his footsteps. He approaches, takes the fallen fruit, and bites into it.

“Why do you stay here, Leondra?”

I blink. He chews, then wipes juice off his lips.

It’s true, I can leave, but change is no simple challenge, especially to one with as many scars as mine. The garden of the gods surrounds me, and below, roots tangle beneath the dark earth. It is peaceful, though never mine. Still, what role can I claim but that which has

made me? This man who questions me has become an immortal—an equal—but he is naïve. Time will teach him the emptiness of never-ending days.

“It’s complicated,” I say, my chin low. “I don’t think you would understand.”

He shakes his head. “The answer seems simple enough. You’re afraid, aren’t you?”

I growl to hide my shame, but he ignores it, for what threat are my claws, my teeth? Like me, he cannot die.

“You know my name,” I say, “but I don’t know yours.”

He meets my open stare. “I know the value in keeping mine a secret.”

His eyes are as warm and bright as the sky up high. Like me, he seems to long for a change of seasons. Perhaps it’s a sign, like green shoots on ice-clad branches. I will learn his name, but in return, I will show him this world from a different vantage.

With resolve, I stretch my aquiline wings, then bow, offering my strong back. “Tell me,” I say, “do you know what clouds feel like?”

Reflections on Orion's Belt

by Joshua Fagan

Not long after graduating high school, I began to systematically commit myself to submitting speculative fiction pieces for publication. At first, I achieved little success, only gaining the interest of a few minor publications, but this initial experience left me with a great appreciation for the vibrant ecosystem of speculative-fiction magazines. Submitting books for publication is an arduous, tumultuous process involving editors, literary agents, and marketing experts. To say these people do not care about the books with which they work would be disingenuous; I've worked, albeit briefly, in professional publishing, and among employees, there is genuine passion and appreciation for literature. That conceded, the purpose of publishing, like any other business, is profit. Market trends matter as much as, if not more than, the quality of the writing. What the best speculative-fiction magazines represented to me was an escape from that.

These magazines provide a home for transgressive, bold, and experimental writing. I was drawn to this ethos of free-wheeling innovation, and I wanted to be a part of it. After spending years studying how these magazines operated, I decided to start my own with the support of a few close friends and associates. The result was Orion's Belt, named after three stars in the constellation of Orion. I intended for the name to convey both cosmic, mythological elegance and functional, practical commitment to craft. A belt is a simple but important piece of clothing, and the best writing is likewise steadfast and sturdy even as it's also lyrical and haunting. Despite the research I'd done beforehand, launching the magazine in late February 2021 was terrifying. A literary magazine depends on writers submitting great work. If that didn't happen, sleek web design and a flashy logo would not stop the magazine from quickly becoming irrelevant.

Instead, writers from six continents submitted work to Orion's Belt, and these pieces shone with an iridescent, crystalline glow. Turning down great pieces quickly became the hardest part of my job.

I don't mean to imply that Orion's Belt is somehow unique. While I am proud of what we've created, and I aspire to make Orion's Belt a respected and august publication, there are dozens of great publications currently publishing stories that are feasts for the senses or tender stories of loss and contemplation. These publications reveal the lie behind the cynical axiom that there is little great speculative writing in the mainstream today because modern writers are unimaginative, dogmatic hacks. Like all cynicism, this lie masquerades as wisdom. It pretends to critique while instead functioning as reductionist quietism. Yes, much mainstream speculative fiction is unimaginative, trite, or just poorly written, and this is cause for discomfort, but for a different reason than the cynics suppose.

If these unimaginative works represented the best speculative fiction could offer, that would merely be unfortunate. That innovative and poignant speculative fiction thrives outside the mainstream means the state of popular speculative fiction does not have to be so dire. For every mediocre, intellectually vacuous sci-fi movie shipped to streaming services, there are ten brilliant, lucid stories being published in online speculative-fiction magazines. The easy response is to target wealthy corporations spending money on big, established names to regurgitate what worked for them in the past, and this tendency is even worse in film and television than it is in book publishing, though the latter is far from perfect. Instead of pursuing short-term gain, these corporations could spend money trying to cultivate new talent and franchises. I do not wish to exonerate these corporations. Yet the disquieting truth remains that corporations do not make these decisions from a place of conniving immorality. Rather, they're amoral, pursuing short-term profit at all costs, and they know that given a choice between the familiar and the new, between the pretty and the sublime, between the reassuring and

the disquietingly poignant, the average person will typically prefer pleasant comfort.

There are no easy solutions to this dilemma, but we as individuals can freely choose how to position ourselves in relation to the dilemma. I want to provide a space for literary-minded speculative fiction, stories that care about people and their longings and relationships, not simply stories concerned with abstract ideas.

Though Orion's Belt is small compared to other ambitious magazines like *Strange Horizons* and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, a little light shining in the darkness should never be undervalued. In the past year, I have tried my hardest to provide as much light as possible.