

#24

JANUARY
2011

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HELLER

M-BRANE SF

The Magazine of Astounding Science Fiction

M-BRANE SF #24

JANUARY 2011

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EDITORIAL NOTES 1/11

Some Second Anniversary acknowledgements:

I know I am about to forget to mention a lot of important names here, but I need to recognize at least a few of the people who were so helpful and wonderful to me and M-Brane Press during these first two years. First, thanks to all the many, many fellow editors and publishers who offered me so much help and moral support, particularly **Kaolin Fire** (*GUD Magazine*), **Bart Leib** and **Kay Holt** (*Crossed Genres*), **Jason Sizemore** (*Apex*), **Caren Gussoff** and **Eden Robins** (*Brain Harvest*). I want to also mention again my awesome collaborators **Brandon Bell**, **Rick Novy**, **Jaym Gates**, and **Eric T. Reynolds** (Hadley Rille Books). A lot of great writer-friends helped make all this worth doing, such as **Dan Tannenbaum**, **Michael D. Griffiths**, **T.J. McIntyre**, **Derek J. Goodman**, **Jeff Kozzi**, and **Abby "Merc" Rustad**, and many, many more. The writers

M-BRANE SF #24

as a group are really owed *all* the credit, and they are too many to list here, but I'll throw out a few names that really stood out lately: **Patty Jansen, Cate Gardner, Gustavo Bondoni, Aaron Polson, Shawn Scarber, Edward W. Robertson, Ian Sales, Sunny Moraine, Joyce Chng, Jason Heller, Therese Arkenberg**, and, of course, the late **Jamie Eyberg**, whom so many of us knew for far too short a time. Though I have already heaped praise on them almost to the point of indecency elsewhere, let me single out again the incendiary talents of **Cesar Torres** and **Alex Jeffers**. Artist and writer **Mari Kurisato** merits the Red Star of Socialism (the M-Brane equivalent of the Congressional Medal of Honor) for her terrific artwork and her other work on General Awesomeness on Earth. And I'd be totally remiss if I forgot to mention as a group **all my badass Twitter and Facebook and Live Journal followers and friends**. Curmudgeons who still think that the social media are a stupid waste of time are dead wrong: I wouldn't know anyone and *M-Brane SF* would be nowhere without it. This is and always has been a grass-roots operation, y'all. So thanks perhaps most of all to the masses of you who actually bother to read my little posts and my longer outbursts throughout the vasty spaces of the intertubes. Love radiates from me to you.

An assessment at the two-year point...

This does not suck

January 20, 2011: Two years ago today was a day of great significance. A new President of the United States was inaugurated, my cat Maus turned twelve years old, and I released *M-Brane SF #1*, the first volume of a new monthly magazine of science fiction short stories. It was a project years in the works. I had begun and then set aside various plans to launch a science fiction zine going all the way back to 1994. I needed the proper convergence of motivation and technology to make it real, and the time finally seemed right by late 2007. But *M-Brane*—then tentatively called *Homeworld*—stalled out again for a while when I realized that I still did not have adequate

JANUARY 2011

computing power nor adequate command of how to use the internet to make a new zine's presence known. But a year later, I was ready to try it. I started the *M-Brane* blog, posted writer's guidelines and started reading the surprising number of submissions that appeared almost immediately.

Issue #1 opened with a quirky and funny tale called "Time Enough for a Reuben" by the late Glenn Lewis Gillette. It continued with fantastic stories by a couple of writers very well known to *M-Brane* readers now, Brandon Bell and Rick Novy. The first issue also included great entries by Barton Paul Levenson, Frank Roger, Joshua Scribner, Mel Cartagena and Jason Earls. I am happy that I am able to look back on that very first issue and say, "This does not suck."

Of quantity and quality

In the second year, from about issue #13 to the present, *M-Brane* changed in a number of ways. I simplified its design, making it less magazine-like in appearance in favor of a more book-like look. I also started publishing a lot less material per issue. These changes happened for a number of practical reasons, but also because of an evolution in my thinking on what *M-Brane SF* should be. During the heady early days, I wanted to have a cool, interesting, and unexpected sf zine with awesome writers and astounding stories, with a real proletarian, hand-made sensibility. But I also wanted to publish a huge quantity of material and make it as big a room as possible for all kinds of writers. While I still think this was achieved to some extent, it also resulted in some uneven issues with a fair amount of content that I liked for various reasons but which probably made the zine as a whole have more of an amateurish, fanziney character than what seemed good for the long-term future of it.

I still wanted the unexpected and brilliant stories, but I decided to severely limit the number of stories that could appear in an issue (six is generally the upper limit now,

M-BRANE SF #24

while some Year One issues had as many as thirteen). I decided that I could, by forcing myself to not exceed a certain amount of content, refine the quality of the zine's content and better define its character. As the number of submissions to the magazine has steadily increased, I have found that I generally have more and more interesting stuff from which to choose. Sometimes this makes story selection extremely difficult. Since I strive to completely clear the slush pile every month, this means that I must pass on stories that I really like all the time. But there are always more where those came from. I also decided that while six stories per month is probably the upper limit, I don't necessarily *have* to find six: when I was assembling issue #22, I only had four items that I considered to be proper *M-Brane* stories, and so that issue was our shortest to date. So while quantity has diminished a lot, quality has gone up, and it's more apparent what kind of fiction this zine deals in. When I assembled the first *Quarterly* (the print compilation of electronic issues 19, 20 and 21) and looked at its table of contents, I got a clearer sense of my own concept for *M-Brane* than I think I'd ever had before.

Expansion

Technologies like print-on-demand make it really easy to publish print books nowadays, and I decided to try that out for some dream projects. The ease of printing a book also invites a lot of really lousy work from well-meaning creators who don't know how to design anything, as one can see from the surfeit of really ugly books that are floating around the indie press world now. So, very carefully, I selected some special projects for book publication and put a lot of effort into making them handsome objects. The first was *Things We Are Not* (2009), an anthology of GLBT short stories and novelettes. A few months ago, *M-Brane SF* was described incorrectly in a Locus online review as being billed as a gay-oriented magazine, but if it were a gay-oriented magazine, then *Things We Are Not* gives one a good idea of what that would be like. I am very proud of it, especially as my first project as a book publisher. In 2010, I featured a couple of

JANUARY 2011

writers that I am very interested in by presenting collections of their work: Cesar Torres' *The 12 Burning Wheels* and Derek J. Goodman's *Machina*. These two lovely volumes are as different as two books could be in some regards: Cesar's is a collection of very short items while Derek's is a quartet of novelettes and novellas. But they are similar in that they both showcase in a very attractive way excellent writers from whom readers will be hearing a lot more in the near future. Then, late in 2010, we brought out a real stunner of an anthology, *2020 Visions*, edited by Rick Novy. A collection of stories set in the year 2020, this is a must-read antho. Next, in a couple of months, we will bring out another beloved pet project, the "Double." The date for this will be announced very soon.

Collaboration

2010 was a year of exciting collaborative projects. With the brilliant and lovely Jaym Gates, I co-edited the sexy little zine *Little Death of Crossed Genres*. This was intended to have been a quarterly periodical of erotic speculative fiction from Crossed Genres, but, alas, I think it ended up being a one-night stand. But even if there is never an issue #2 of it, I am quite pleased with the nice work we did on it. The biggest collaborative project of the year was, of course, the awesome and monumental *The Aether Age*. Co-edited by Brandon Bell and me and published in November 2010 by Hadley Rille Books, this was the realization of a terrific shared vision. Not only did two editors and two publishers collaborate on getting it done, but dozens of writers collaborated from afar to create a whole new fictional world that we have opened up for limitless future invention. The Aether Age has only just begun. But as exciting as publication of *The Aether Age* was, I am just as pleased about the new addition to the family, Brandon Bell's *Fantastique Unfettered*. Issue #1 of *M-Brane SF's* new fantasy sibling was released just a few weeks ago as a very beautiful print publication. A quarterly "Periodical of Liberated Literature," FU is based on the same Creative Commons philosophy as Aether Age, and I think it's going to be a great big deal in the next year.—CF

The Arab's Prayer

Alex JEFFERS

7

Sparrow and g.d:shrike

Jude-Marie GREEN

19

When We Were Mutants

Edward W. ROBERTSON

32

**Everything You Can Think of
is True**

Mike SAUVE

52

Other Gray Things

Jason HELLER

65

The Arab's Prayer

by Alex Jeffers

W *hrrr-click.* The door near the top of the white plastic minaret opened and the little plastic mannequin teetered onto the balcony. Its painted beard was black, its turban green, its lips unmoved. “*God is great,*” sang the speaker behind the door, “*God is great!*”

“Time for you to get up,” said Yaffe, jostling Mus’ad. “Prayer is better than sleep.”

Mus’ad groaned indistinctly. Yawning, he tried to sit up, but his boyfriend’s arm had him pinned down.

“*I attest,*” sang the device on the shelf across the room: “*there is no God but God!*”

They struggled for a moment before Yaffe gave in, kissed the back of Mus’ad’s neck, and removed his arm. Momentarily saddened by the loss of that weight, Mus’ad blinked gummy eyes and rolled away from Yaffe’s sticky warmth to the edge of their bed.

“*I attest: Muhammad is the messenger of God!*”

“God honor him and give him peace,” Mus’ad murmured, lowering his feet to the floor and sitting upright. The only light in the bedroom came from the glowing dome of the miniature mosque on its shelf. The window was so dark he could barely distinguish the tessellations of the mashrabiya through the glass. “How is it,” he asked, turning back to Yaffe, a dark shadow on shadowy sheets, “you may be a secular Jew but I not a secular Muslim?”

“It’s not *my* alarm clock.”

“*Come to prayer!*”

“It was a gift from my mother!” She’d been amused by it, he assumed—*she* was a secular Muslim. Assembled in Gaza from Brazilian bioplastics, Turkish and Indonesian electronics, running Egyptian software and catching its time cues from an Israeli satellite, it commented on the

M-BRANE SF #24

world in ways its producers had failed to consider.

“Come to salvation!”

“I honor your mother as my own!”

Mus’ad shook his head. “I know you do. I know she doesn’t care two figs. Habit, I guess. Will you kiss me before I brush my teeth?”

“Prayer is better than sleep!” sang the plastic muezzin as Yaffe sat up. They embraced again, nuzzled closed lips to closed lips, and Mus’ad stood. “Go back to sleep if you can, habibi.”

“God is great! God is great!” The clock’s voice was sampled from a famous Turkish muezzin so its accent was off. *“There is no God but God!”*

Yaffe dropped back to the pillow. “Perhaps.” Mus’ad imagined a thoughtful frown.

In the bathroom, he blinked, dazzled by the lamp over the mirror. He brushed his teeth, shaved, showered. After the shower, before drying himself, he ran a trickle of cool water from the tub faucet and crouched to perform the prescribed ablutions.

Dried but damp again for the morning was already hot and humid, still nude, he returned to the bedroom. Yaffe snored. Pulling the white dishdasha off its hook, Mus’ad smiled. He would have liked to kiss his man but that would mean doing the ablutions over. The clock’s glow had dimmed. He checked to make sure it wouldn’t wake Yaffe with the second call—*he* would do that.

Nakedness covered, he went to fetch his rug, rolled and propped by the flat’s front door. It was Pakistani, not an antique, not precious except by being all he had of his father’s, a childhood gift. Going through the door, he touched his fingertips to the mezuzah on the frame and kissed them.

On the roof of their building, he spread the rug out below the tallest white-brick malqaf. When they moved in, he had worked out the position of the holy city: from this point the qibla axis projected between two smaller windcatchers, their verticals framing a mihrab in the air. It had seemed to him not quite right to say his prayers in rooms shared with a kafir nor fair to expect the unbeliever

JANUARY 2011

to observe them. He was not especially welcome at the most convenient mosque.

Before he began, he stretched and looked out from his height. Five years before, when he first said the fajr prayers on this roof, dawn had been hard to make out, quarrelling with the city's lights. But now, except for aircraft-warning beacons on their spires, the towers of Tel Aviv stood mostly dark, street lamps only blinked on when they sensed a pedestrian, and stars glimmered over the Mediterranean even as the sun's limb rose above the inland horizon. From a minaret's loudspeakers in Yafo, Mus'ad heard a faint voice proclaim the iqama, the second call. He sank to his knees.

Yaffe still slept, still snored, sprawled across half the bed. Mus'ad admired him for a moment, the lushness of his flesh pixellated by thin sunlight through mashrabiya, then went to the kitchen to make coffee. Both of them liked it Ottoman style, a finicky business. When the brass ibrik was balanced on the element, heating toward the first boil, he rooted through the basket by the door for his earpiece. He found Yaffe's first—they were distinguished by Yaffe's having a blue button. Another rummage found the 'piece with a green button. Tapping it into his right ear, he returned to the ibrik, not yet bubbling. The boot-up chime sounded deep in his ear. He waited for the second chord to indicate a connection established.

"Good morning, Mus'ad," the jinni in the cloud said in Hebrew.

They danced the call-and-response of ID verification, jinni and Mus'ad, while he watched the coffee seethe—the foam reached the ibrik's lip and he lifted it off the heat before the jinni was satisfied.

"Messages?" Mus'ad asked. The coffee needed to stew a moment. He turned away from the stove.

"Eleven professional, one personal."

The windows in the flat's main room faced north. No mashrabiya broke up the view. He looked down into the street. Indicators flashing, a van stood at the curb outside the bakery across the way. They might stop for breakfast.

“Personal.”

It was Yaffe’s mother in West Jerusalem. “My dear, my dear,” she sang in her lovely, not quite idiomatic Arabic, “the Knesset votes today. I shall endeavor *not* to say a prayer.”

Mus’ad smiled, wondering whether Yehudit had left the same message in English with her son’s jinni, or Hebrew. He took two cups from the tray that displayed the painted coffee service he and Yaffe had brought back from their first holiday abroad, Spain—Sfarad. Al-Andalus.

He replaced the ibrik on the element for the second boil. His own mother, fond as she was of Yaffe, would never think to echo Yehudit’s hope. Nadiyya was a staunchly modern woman who had divorced Mus’ad’s mad father without sentiment. In ‘18, faced with the choice, she had not hesitated to resign Israeli citizenship—crossed the border only infrequently for coffee and shopping with the Jewish woman she called *sister* or to visit their sons on the coast, a foreigner in the nation of her birth. None of her former husband’s actions had surprised, only saddened and angered her. She had no use for marriage.

The coffee smelled good, dark and rich with cardamom, and Mus’ad preferred not to think of his father. He poured it out and carried the two little cups and Yaffe’s earpiece to the bedroom.

Yaffe was awake, surly, sitting cross-legged on the mattress. The backlight of his slate gilded his face. Smelling the cardamom, he looked up. “I have to go to Cyprus.”

“Oh.” Mus’ad offered a cup. “Today?”

“Have to be on the dock in three hours. Should be back tomorrow night.”

Mus’ad sat beside him. “That’s not so bad.”

“Unless something goes wrong.”

Mus’ad didn’t entirely understand Yaffe’s job. He seldom had to travel but it was always sudden, while Mus’ad’s business trips were meticulously plotted out months in advance. “Three hours—time for a fuck?”

“Come with me, habib.” Slings the slate aside, Yaffe took his boyfriend’s free hand. “We’ll get married.”

JANUARY 2011

Mus'ad met Yaffe's fierce grin with a smile. "Your mother called."

"I know—me too." Yaffe frowned, squeezed Mus'ad's fingers, sipped from his cup. "Drink your coffee, then we'll fuck. The act won't pass, you know. The rabbinate's been calling in favors all month."

"I have to work today. The Arab parties are far from certain, either, even the leftists. If it doesn't pass, I'll catch the night 'foil to Famagusta. I expect it takes a day or two for formalities—we'll spend the weekend."

"That, my love," said Yaffe sweetly, "sounds like a plan."

Mus'ad and his co-workers Yael and Yoel left the office for lunch. "You know," he was saying, "all my favorite Jews have *yod*-names—the two of you, Yaffe, his mom."

Fumbling for her ID, Yael laughed.

"You know," said Yoel, "I feel Vered would find that statement hurtful."

The building's retrofitted low-carbon-debt climate control wasn't overly efficient outside the server cores—the lobby especially, designed in the bad old days, was routinely warmer or chillier than ideal. Low-e glass had only succeeded in making the atmosphere murky. It meant, though, that the transition to outdoor summer heat wasn't quite so shocking. Mus'ad submitted to the retina scan, waved his ID past the sensor, held the ante-lobby door for his friends. "I adore your wife," he told Yoel, donning his glasses, "but I don't know her well enough to rank her as a favorite."

In turn, Yoel opened the outer door. Mus'ad strode through a moment of brilliant blindness before the glasses compensated.

Yael caught his swinging hand in an anxiously friendly way. "You don't come out with us enough, that's why you don't know Vered or Amir."

"Dinner tonight," said Yoel, hearty, from his other flank. "You and Yaffe. We'll add a *vav* and an *alef* to your favorites list."

"Thanks, but another time. Yaffe's on his way to

Cyprus. I'm thinking of joining him."

"That's why you were working so hard!" Yael was a romantic.

They waited at the corner to cross. K-cars and electric runabouts and vans purred past. "What's in Cyprus?" asked Yoel. "Besides Yaffe."

The light changed. In Rabin Square across the street, there appeared to be a demonstration, noisy, parts of it joyful or expectant. "Marriage," Mus'ad muttered, removing his hand from Yael's and stepping into the crosswalk. Maybe they hadn't heard.

Yoel had. "It's that important?"

"It is to *them*."

He didn't mean the crowd in ordinary, everyday clothes listening to an orator on the City Hall steps, though their presence demonstrated its importance, their banners and signs and noisemakers. He meant the unholy alliance of the righteous—the clots and pustules of dog-collared Christian clerics, Arab and European, of robed Muslim imams and their bearded or veiled followers, of angry Torah scholars in crow plumage. He'd never seen so many Haredim at once outside of Jerusalem. He hadn't seen them so angry since the internationalization of the Old City and the holy places, the division of the new between two nations. A distant cousin of Mus'ad's, a little girl, had died in the Jerusalem riots in '17.

He looked away from the demonstrators, those on the side of the angels and those who said they spoke for God—looked up. Looked away from the scaffolding that had served as City Hall's façade for four years.

"Our very first holiday together," he told his friends, "abroad, that is, Yaffe and I went to Spain." They were cutting across the square, well away from demonstrators and counter-demonstrators. "In Granada, I asked him to marry me. Because, you know, we *could*. There. Civilly. Legally." Not unconsciously, he thumbed the ring on his right hand, rotating it around the finger. "I'd bought rings! When we came home, we could register with the Interior Ministry like any couple who married abroad."

Yael took his hand again. "He turned you down."

JANUARY 2011

“He was feeling idealistic. Some politician, I don’t remember who, had floated another attempt to instate civil marriage. Yaffe said it was an immoral abridgment of everybody’s rights for marriage to be under the thumb of the religious courts. If he was a woman or I was, we still couldn’t marry in our own country.”

Yoel, who had married within the status quo, laughed. “I doubt the rabbinical courts would permit dear Yaffe to marry a Jewish woman even if he weren’t gay. I doubt he’d put up with the rigamarole. I had my rebellious moments—” He laughed again. “But honestly, Mus’ad, why is it important? Vered and I only did it to please our parents. You and Yaffe, Yael and Amir—as common-law spouses you have all the same rights and privileges as me and Vered.”

Mus’ad knew Yoel well enough not to be offended—Yoel was a conventional, don’t-rock-the-boat young man—only vaguely hurt that Yoel didn’t know him.

Yael was less patient. “If I could marry Amir without first convincing a pack of doddering nineteenth-century rabbis I’m a proper Jew, I would.”

“Exactly. It’s the principle.” Mus’ad took a breath. “Also, I hate the term *partners*. I want Yaffe to be my husband.”

Their path did not take them near the rebuilt memorial to the martyr Rabin. It did pass through the shadow of the newer monument that honored the seventy-nine civil servants killed in the City Hall bombing twenty-one years later. Yael squeezed Mus’ad’s hand, making him cringe, and murmured too low for Yoel to hear, “It’s nothing to do with you.”

He should never have told her. *I was in Spain*, he thought. *In al-Andalus with my beloved*. Taken into custody at Ben Gurion, right off the plane, taken from Yaffe, interrogated, drugged, the least contents of his mind opened to their view, pawed over. It wouldn’t have been appreciably easier for Yaffe to protest if they’d married in Spain. There were no charges, he was released—had known he would be released as well as he’d known they would arrest him. He had had no dealings with his

mother's former husband since the divorce, nearly ten years.

He walked faster. He didn't think about it. Everything was better now.

"So you wore him down?" Yoel asked.

"Sorry?"

"Yaffe. Willing to settle for an EU marriage certificate now."

"Knesset wore him down. How many times has an act been floated? How many times have the rabbis and imams and bishops got it shot down? He asked me. Here, if today's vote is successful. Cyprus if not."

"Congratulations! Felicitations!"

"Indeed." Yael was grinning, the '16 memorial forgotten. "Here would be better, in all ways. I should like to be on hand."

"We should—oh." Stopping short, Yoel shook his head, then hurried after. "No, I forgot. I suppose not."

"Yoel, my friend, if you buy a bottle of Champagne, I promise to drink a glass with glad and grateful heart."

He supposed he was tipsy. Not drunk—he had been drunk once. Yoel had insisted on calling Yaffe, speeding across the blue Mediterranean, and standing him a split from the hydrofoil's bar. He, Mus'ad, drank a second glass without noticing—he broke the messenger of God's commandment perhaps twice a year—and then a client's call interrupted the dickering over division of the bill. He waved his friends off, back to the office, ordered coffee, and unrolled his slate: the client was calling from Kuala Lumpur at, for her, a thoroughly inconvenient hour.

The rally and counter-demonstration on Rabin Square had not broken up in the interval. The same speaker or a different one addressed the crowds. The separate religious parties still refused to mix, oil and oil seething atop troubled waters, united only in their anger. Passions might be more elevated, but not in a way that suggested a clear result from Givat Ram in West Jerusalem. He could ask the jinni but he was reacting poorly to the heat and bright sun. And Champagne. He took off his glasses to wipe

sweat from his eyes.

“Are you ashamed?” The words were Arabic, the voice unfamiliar. “I know you, ibn Hassan. Your father would be ashamed.”

Ashamed? The man who had been his father? That was one explanation. Partial, invalid explanation.

“I have no father.” Mus’ad put his glasses back on. “I do not know you, uncle. Let me pass.”

The man was not so much older than himself—not old enough to be truly his uncle. In the tired fashion of a decade before, he wore a black-and-white keffiyeh loose around his neck, three days’ worth of black stubble on his face. “It was to prevent such abominations—”

“That man, Hassan, was the abomination,” said Mus’ad, weary. “Let me pass, uncle. I have work to do and an appointment to keep this evening.”

“Filth,” the stranger said, flecks of spittle pinging the lenses of Mus’ad’s glasses as he crowded closer. “Faggot filth unworthy son of a blessed martyr.”

It was not anger, not yet, simply sorrow. “Indeed. I am quite certain the martyr reclines in paradise even now, surrounded by houris whose touch revolts him.” Mus’ad stepped back and raised his left hand, spoke deliberately, formally, in Hebrew. “I do not know you, adoni. I do not wish to converse with you. It would be regrettable if I were forced to request assistance of these public servants.” With his chin, Mus’ad indicated the armed young woman in IDF uniform on the point of taking an interest, her male partner intent on the restive Haredim.

As much a relic of an ugly past as any stubborn Haredi, the man stepped back. Another man than Mus’ad might find him handsome—the martyr Hassan, perhaps. He spat at Mus’ad’s feet. “You will not escape the judgment of God.”

“Oh, surely not,” Mus’ad murmured under his breath as the man strode away. “Nor will you, my friend.” He nodded politely to the IDF woman and walked on, ignoring a change in pitch in the noise of the crowd.

“My dear,” said Yehudit through his earpiece, “foolish

Haredim are rioting outside the Knesset and you may marry my son.”

“Oh?” Mus’ad closed his eyes and flexed his fingers before pushing his slate away, across the desk. “I’ve been busy, not keeping track.” The Kuala Lumpur client’s problem was nearly solved. “I’m a little surprised. Have you told Yaffe?”

“He’s not accepting calls. Not from me, anyway. I left a message. Are you well, Mus’ad? You sound ... weary.”

“Work.” Mus’ad shook his head. “Going to join Yaffe in Cyprus tonight, have to finish things up.” He breathed in, breathed out. “That is excellent news. Thank you for letting me know.”

“Every Jewish mother wishes her son happily wed. This Jewish mother has waited years to call you her son.”

As often as it was repeated, the claim never failed to make Mus’ad flinch with gratitude. “Yehudit—”

“You should call your mother. Or I will, if you’re too busy.”

“It will be some years more, I think, before Palestine or Gaza acknowledge such marriages. Yehudit, earlier I was reminded....”

“Yes?”

A lawyer, Yehudit had been his advocate when he went to court to renounce nasab, laqab, nisba, the whole panoply of patronymics and family identifiers that so bewildered non-Arabs, in favor of a simple Israeli-style surname. “When I changed my name—I don’t think I’ve ever thanked you enough. It was a difficult time.”

She hissed air through her teeth—he’d seen her do it, many times. “That man. Hardly a man, a sad, broken boy never permitted to grow up or be happy. He and his family lost any claim to share a name with you, Mus’ad, long before he killed himself.”

And all the others, but she was too kind to mention them. “Thank you.” Mus’ad’s voice came thin.

“You paid my bill. Thanks are superfluous. Get back to work, my dear. Give your future husband my love tonight and tell him to call his mother.”

JANUARY 2011

Time was short. He needed to be at the dock by 1630. Even with the world at peace, security screening was never swift. Particularly not for an Arab. Another day the Knesset might abolish the requirement that IDs and passports proclaim one's religious affiliation—that one declare an affiliation. Another day.

He had packed for a holiday weekend. Doubtless he'd forgotten something but he and Yaffe had ready funds between them for incidentals, even at EU prices. He glanced around the flat's main room again. He had watered the plants, shut off devices that drained power even when inactive, given the thermostat permission to allow the flat to get warmer than they generally preferred. The rolled prayer rug by the door caught his eye.

"You were nobody's father, nobody's husband. You died unloved."

He shoved aside the low table before the sofa. Its feet screeched across the tiles. When he spread out the rug, he made sure the mihrab woven into its pattern did not line up on the axis to Mecca. It wasn't handsome, the rug, its colors garish, its workmanship not fine—it was small, the table would hide most of it. They should buy a bigger carpet for their home, he and Yaffe. In winter, the tiled floor became uncomfortably chill. He'd heard that artisans in Gaza were weaving interesting carpets—not as cheap as those from Pakistan, not as precious as even new Turkish or Afghan rugs, but interesting. Modern. He lifted the table onto the rug. The pieces of the Spanish coffee service trembled, ringing against each other. He looked around again, went to the bedroom.

On the nightstand by the bed he shared with Yaffe, the photo frame blinked from a snapshot of them in the Alhambra's Court of the Lions, where Mus'ad had asked Yaffe to marry him, to one of them at the Western Wall. The frame's carbon debt was minimal but he reached behind the nightstand to pull its plug from the socket. He twisted the ring on his finger. Now he was just wasting time he didn't really have.

Before unplugging the plastic mosque his mother had given him, he opened its control panel. The buttons were

M-BRANE SF #24

easy enough to figure out. He shut off the voice of the muezzin, saved the action into permanent memory, closed the panel. Deprived of its purpose, the thing was tacky, but a gift from his mother. He pulled the plug.

A Muslim was permitted to marry an unbelieving woman so long as their children were raised within the ummat al-mu'minin, the community of belief. The restrictions on a Jew, he believed, were more stringent. An Israeli had the whole world to choose from.

On his way out, Mus'ad brushed his fingers across the mezuzah on the doorpost, brushed them across his lips. There was sentiment and there was sentiment. Tapping the 'piece in his ear, he asked the jinni to let Yaffe know he was on his way.

Alex Jeffers enjoys reading and writing about all the cities in the world he may never visit and a few he knows well. His novel Safe as Houses is set in San Francisco and Providence, novella Do You Remember Tulum? in Boston and the Maya sites of Tulum and Palenque, all among the latter; The New People, short novel forthcoming as half of the first M-Brane SF Double, on a distant planet of the future whose cityscapes and landscapes nevertheless recall (at least to him) Tel Aviv, Istanbul, Venice, the islands of the Aegean, and coastal northern California. He dedicates "The Arab's Prayer" to gay Israeli singer Yehonathan: an idiosyncratic response to the anthem "Waiting for you (Tel Aviv)."

www.sentenceandparagraph.com

Sparrow and g.d:shrike

by Jude-Marie Green

My grandmother said this to me, her last words from her deathbed: “We do not merely survive, my little Sparrow. We live on in style.”

My brother Joseph, overhearing, said, “And the South will rise again, old woman. You’re hopeless!”

I understood that he spoke from grief, but still he spoke in anger. I backed away from him only just in time.

The lightning stroke selected him, lit him up from crown to toe. The meaty odor of bacon blasted us along with the heat of his immolation. My skin pimpled and crawled from the ozone and my eyes saw negative images for a moment, after-effect of the brilliant heat blast. God’s Thumbprint on my right forearm tingled and for a moment I feared g.d:shrike’s wrath. When at last I could see again, my brother wasn’t even a pile of ashes on the unscorched carpet. Grandma was dead.

Her body made the slightest hill under her handmade quilt. I reached down and closed her eyes, crying as quietly as I could manage. *I love you, Grandma.* I swear I saw her breath my name one last time but that was probably just my light blindness and tears.

She’d saved some old silver coins, tarnished black from disuse but she’d told me what to do. I placed the dimes on her eyelids, payment for the ferryman. Grandma was religious, all right, but she still held to plenty of the old traditions. Like the one that said you had to take care of your three grandchildren when your own child died.

Grandma had raised us since our parents passed on from a shootout at the local bank. Just living in a small town didn’t make us safe from violence or crime. Once, we’d thought God’s Thumbprint would keep us from harm, since it kept track of everyone, made everyone -

M-BRANE SF #24

even little children - accountable. But being accounted for your crimes was not the same as being punished for your crimes, Grandma said. After a while, the government said the RFIDs weren't enough. G.d:shrike was designed and loosed, swift punishment for criminals, they said.

She suffered through Matt's petty criminal behavior when he was a teenager. Much as it pained her, she never had a bad word to say about him, just allowed that he was going through a phase and getting over the loss of our parents the only way he knew how.

Joseph she adored in a doting grandmotherly way, baking him special treats and patting his hair as often as he'd sit still at the kitchen table. He hated that, or so he said, but I knew he loved her with all the emotion he'd bestowed on our parents, transferred to her by some pagan magic. "The old woman loves us," he'd said to me once, confidentially. No wonder her illness took him so hard. No wonder he called down the wrath of g.d:shrike. Sometimes suicide, an awful sin, is easier than going on alone.

Grandma called me 'Sparrow,' though my name is Sarah, because she said I was small and smart as a tiny bird. Sparrows are small and brown and unappealing to me. But I was smart, smallest and youngest of three orphan children. Smart enough to survive the apocalypse this long, anyway.

My oldest brother, Matt, had died in the first wave of the apocalypse. In those first days, billions of men and billions of women (don't think women can't get angry!) died. Were killed. By g.d:shrike. I think even g.d:shrike's designers were surprised it could strike out so often. But they'd built it well, a phase unlimited laser weapons system (so Seth said, and he worked on it, so he'd know) with a personal connection to every person who had a god's thumbprint chip, and that pretty much meant every person on Earth. Perhaps some tiny wild enclaves of people, in forests or deserts, survived without the punitive touch of g.d:shrike, but the rest of us now understood: a single rude or angry word, gesture, action, and g.d:shrike would send a bolt of high energy lightning.

JANUARY 2011

Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord, but somewhere along the line someone decided to help God along.

Angry men. Angry women. Angry children (and oh that raised a fuss, but by then g.d:shrike had killed its designers and everyone who knew how to halt it, so it became unstoppable.) Criminals. Minor thieves.

And that was only the first wave.

We survived under the hand of g.d:shrike by being nice. G.d:shrike can't read thoughts, but it can hear lies. It can't stop a person from striking out, but it strikes back with terrible speed. I think, though no one is left to write papers confirming my guesses, that the god's thumbprint chips broadcast telemetry data. Surely g.d:shrike's computer is enormous, a distributed machine, to manage all that incoming data; not that so much comes in any more. Since g.d:shrike doesn't leave bodies, doesn't even leave piles of ashes, there's no sure way to tell how many have died. But the absence of living people, the lack of public utilities or almost any public services, the utter silence from those who passed themselves off as our leaders, tells a story.

The few of us remaining these short months after the first wave feel the weight of g.d:shrike's regard, and we shiver.

The day of the apocalypse came and my oldest brother Matt was burned away while driving a stolen car. The car crashed into a van in a grocery parking lot, killing a woman and her baby. The woman had been screaming because her husband (known in our small community to drink too much and be free using his fists against his wife) had just been assumed into Heaven. The baby was screaming because her mother was screaming. Over the screams they didn't hear the squeal of Matt's stolen car, driverless, before it plowed into them.

It's possible that g.d:shrike can be merciful. But so far, it has not been.

I was alone. I picked up an ornately framed photograph, put it down again. I almost tripped on the hooked rug and blindly reached for the door. I shut it behind me.

M-BRANE SF #24

I needed help burying Grandma. I needed to arrange some kind of wake, some kind of remembrance. I'd put up a note on the bulletin board at the library, just like all the other notes except Grandma's body was still here to grieve over. I'd put up the note, then I'd go see Seth.

In two hours' leisurely walk I would be at the town's library, still full of books and old newspapers and the meeting point for the town's remaining people.

I walked out the front door. I didn't lock it or even close it. No one these days would even think of violating a home, no matter the status of the front door.

I didn't even glance at Grandma's car in the driveway. Six months ago we would all have climbed into her nice Dodge sedan; not one of the fancy new models with automatic everything and more to boot but a nice stodgy comfortable car with cloth seats and air conditioning and a good radio. We'd have been in town in twenty minutes, dispersing to the four winds: Grandma to the grocery store where she could visit with her lady friends; my brothers to the pool hall or the corner bar, where they could brag with their buddies or leer at women brave enough to enter those places; me to the library.

No one drives any longer. The minor annoyances of sharing the road with others whose style of driving isn't to your taste can now be a death sentence. Some folks have brought out their horses and mules as transportation, but what happens if the creature gets ornery? One angry word, one violent swat on the creature's rump, and g.d:shrike will do away with you. Not the creature. Creatures are beneath g.d:shrike's notice. Only us humans are required to act nice. Or else.

Our nearest neighbor, Old Man Herbert, who never said a mean word to anyone or raised a fist or even lied, for all I knew, sat on his front porch glider and watched me walk by. I wouldn't ask him for help. Old Man Herbert had followed me with his eyes since I'd come to live with Grandma. Every time he looked at me I wanted to take a shower. But he never did anything. As long as his lust stayed in his heart, he was safe from g.d:shrike.

Grief overtook me on the road into town. Tears fell

JANUARY 2011

out of my eyes, fat and greasy to start with and I ignored them; then silvery drips that mingled with the silvery snot running from my nose and I couldn't see any more through the prism of my grief. I fell to my knees by the culvert, finally collapsing onto the dusty grass. I cried until my lungs were sore and I began to hiccough. My eyes gummed up and were hot and swollen but I could see again without the world swirling. I climbed shakily to my feet.

After the library, I'd go to Seth's. I'd stay there until the project was done. If I died, I guess it didn't matter much.

Revenge. I looked at that word in my head and my telemetry didn't stir. Revenge is just a word.

I wanted to stop g.d:shrike. Destroy it. Blow it up into millions of messy tangled bits of metal.

Now my telemetry stirred. My blood boiled and the fine hairs on the back of my neck stood up as if I were under someone's regard. Something's regard. G.d:shrike stood ready to take me into Heaven at my merest angry utterance. I had alerted it with my rage.

Fine. That surveillance would fade once my telemetry calmed. No one is struck down for nightmares, so I'd been told. I consciously controlled my harsh breathing and tried to remember that Buddhist yoga breathing thing I'd learned at school. I slowed my stride to a short amble. Road dust kicked up behind every footfall and clung to my bare calves. The brambles in the culvert bloomed with white flowers, ready to produce some fine blackberries later in the summer. The trees cast swaying shadows over the road and the scent of pine tar and cedar made the heat bearable. Cardinals flew and sang. I saw a red squirrel climbing, then two then three. One had a stumpy tail curled partway over its back.

Clouds floated in the hard blue sky. No airplanes. Technologically we were back in the 1900s; socially we lived in a place we never dreamed possible. Everyone nice, no violence, no crime, no pollution. Hell.

I brought my thoughts and emotions under control, slowly, and coated my insides with ice. Now that I knew

M-BRANE SF #24

what I wanted, I could plan how to do it.

I had seen how g.d:shrike killed. Supposedly it had no undefended weaknesses, but every system has an Achilles' heel. I vowed that my job from now until g.d:shrike brought me to Heaven would be to find that gap in its system.

I climbed the steps up into the library and immediately appreciated the coolness of its dark after the hot summer sun outside. A younger man, the junior librarian, met me at the door with a glass of water.

"How-do, Sparrow," he said. His official job was greeter, but unofficially he was threat assessment. Would the new person cause trouble, bring down g.d:shrike's wrath? He knew me. I wasn't a threat.

"Hey, Johnny," I replied. I sipped the water politely instead of chugging the entire contents despite my thirst. The sips soothed my throat well enough; chugging might have horrified the man into some kind of rudeness. New rules of social interaction: no shock, no awe.

"Mighty warm outside," he said, mildly.

"Yessir, a perfect summer day," I replied. A mistake and he stiffened. A definite statement of opinion could lead to argument, if some old-timer wanted to contest my definition of a perfect summer day. I took a deep breath and bowed my head in apology. Johnny relaxed, after a quick glance at the bench of farmers in denim overalls who were whittling chunks of cedar wood and watching us from the corners of their eyes. I counted one less farmer than had graced that bench last week.

"I just need to use the printer, please, Johnny," I said. Hopefully I hadn't blown away my welcome.

"You know the way," he said. He held out his hand for the glass, which I surrendered with murmured thanks. The cool inside had turned bitterly cold; or perhaps that was just the ice in my blood.

I had to pass the bulletin boards on the way to the computer desks. Rumor says that g.d:shrike can't read. Too bad. Perhaps if it could read all the notices and photographs pinned and posted to the library walls it would feel some shame, show some pity, stop. Just stop.

JANUARY 2011

I sat at a computer to type in a notice about Grandma's death. The words wouldn't come. I sat with my fingers poised over the keyboard, frozen. My mind slipped away.

Grandma had supported g.d:shrike. She saw it as a guardian, a salvation. Even the loss of family didn't sway her opinion; she just pursed her lips and said, "He's in a better place where he'll find peace."

Now she was in a better place too. I hoped Grandma, my parents, my brothers, would all find each other and be peaceful in Heaven.

A reek of used alcohol assaulted my nose. Seth, one of the overalled farmers, had crept up behind me and was reading over my shoulder. All I'd written so far was Grandma's name. My moment's panic gave way to curiosity: why would he care what I was writing?

He had been a corn whiskey drunk for as long as Grandma could remember, though she never said a mean word about him. "Poor man," she'd said just a few weeks ago. "Losing his wife that way, at the end of his life and all."

His wife, Alma, must have known what would happen when she finally lost her temper at Seth, when he came home that night drunk and singing and happy as a pig in mud. She lost her temper and screeched cruel words at him and she was whisked away to Heaven by g.d:shrike.

Grandma sent Joseph and me around to Seth's house with some sealed salad and macaroni. The old man barely acknowledged us, and he kept looking over our shoulders out to his old-fashioned red barn. He escorted us into his dim sitting room, lace curtains and worn velvet overstuffed chairs and prized books only just acquiring a layer of dust from his neglect. After putting the food in his icebox, we sat a while, keeping company. Joseph extended Grandma's condolences.

"Your Grandma is a good woman," Seth said. "Alma and her got along. I'm sorry she's bed-ridden." That was the last he spoke to us that day.

On our way out, I saw Seth's diploma hanging on the wall, under portrait photos of his family and his wife. He'd

M-BRANE SF #24

gotten his degree in some science or another. He'd wanted to build spaceships, so the rumors had it, but the farm called him home and Alma settled him down. I quelled the pity in my heart and held the man's shaking hand before we left.

After Alma's death Seth sobered up and stayed that way for days. He'd begun some kind of project in his barn, super secret and shared with only certain friends. Rumor had it he was building a spaceship. But the whiskey got its hooks in him again before he completed the project and he went back to the alcohol, the kind of drinker who stays perfectly silent when he's sober and perfectly sweet when drunk. He'd taken up sitting with the other good old boys on the bench at the library. For the company, I assumed.

He whispered something that I didn't catch.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I did not hear you." That was a safe reply.

"Mirrors," he said again, enunciating as clearly as he could through his loose dentures. "Mirrors and lightning rods."

I shook my head. "That's been tried."

He smiled at me. So sweet and tired. "Your Grandma's a good woman," he said. "Tell her goodbye for me."

I frowned.

Seth pulled a bit of mirror from his pocket. It was oval and looked like a woman's hand mirror without the usual frame and handle.

"For you," he said. "I made it in my barn. My barn," he repeated.

He back away from the row of computer tables and stretched up as tall as his old scrunched back would let him. Johnny walked towards him, but stopped a prudent distance away. The other old-timers never even stood up from their bench. We all knew what was going to happen next. Suicide was becoming common.

"God damn you!" he said, not in a big voice but with huge emotion. "God damn you, Alma, for leaving me alone!"

He'd barely finished his second statement when

JANUARY 2011

g.d:shrike flared down at him and assumed him into Heaven.

The mirror jumped in my hand and I gasped a little. The other people in the library glared at me and I bowed my head again. My fingers hurt. Burned. The glass was heavier. The fibers woven into its backing held the charge of the reflected lightning bolt.

Why would Seth design a mirrored capacitor? I could only imagine that he designed it specifically to hold charge from g.d:shrike bolts.

Before g.d:shrike's second wave had erased most of my remaining friends, we'd discussed — in roundabout, gentle terms — ways to be rid of g.d:shrike. Someone had suggested using a heat weapon on g.d:shrike, giving it some of its own back. Of course we were blue-skying. How could we begin to make a heat weapon?

But perhaps Seth had come up with something. What had he said to me? In the barn.

I finished the sign about Grandma, printed it out. The printer's soft whirr melded with other muted sounds in the library, but I noticed no voices. No whispering. No breaking of the rules and no unwary conversation. Just whirrs and hums and flutter of paper and book leaves.

I pinned my sign to the bulletin board. Folks would probably come over the next day, to help with Grandma's body and to sit with me a spell. Before that, I wanted to check out Seth's barn. Maybe there was something to see.

I nodded to Johnny, to the old-timers on the bench, who nodded back at me. Seth's farm wasn't too far away, easy walking.

Mirrors and lightning rods.

Apparently Seth's mirrors could hold charges. Were the lightning rods meant to channel the energy as it rained down? But then, what to do with all that stored energy?

What did Seth have in mind?

Seth's barn doors were both open on their rails. I knew in my heart I was entering his property for good reasons, that I wasn't trespassing, in fact I was invited, so g.d:shrike could find no reason to remove me. I entered the dirt-floored barn and there it was, not hidden from

anyone's sight.

At first I wasn't sure what it was. The half-dome like a huge inverted salad bowl stood almost as high as the barn's second level. Like a salad bowl, this half-dome was glass, thousands — maybe millions — of glass ovals like I had in my pocket, all laced together. A hexagonal set of the glass ovals opened like a door in the dome's side.

I stepped into it.

In the center I saw a plate of green glass, perhaps originally a desk anti-static mat. Under the plate I saw some rubber bath mats. This stood on the packed dirt of the barn floor.

Glass and rubber. This was a place to stand. Stand and not be electrocuted.

Next to the mat was a pole that ended about waist-high to me. On the pole was a round press-button. The pole itself was unremarkable PVC pipe, probably buried a good couple feet down, probably filled with wiring of some kind. Unfortunately I could not see the wires. I could only guess.

I was beginning to get an idea but I refused to consider these ideas. I clamped down hard on my excitement. G.d:shrike wouldn't mind curiosity, though. I stepped out of the bowl and examined its perimeter. The dome edge was countersunk just a little into the dirt. Every few feet around the edge a metal knob stuck up. I touched a knob; it looked like copper and felt gritty. Salt. Salt for better grounding, if I remembered correctly.

So Seth had built a room to attract and hold lightning. I guess he figured g.d:shrike's bolts were the same as lightning. But how to attract a strike? The only way would be to stand inside and... sin.

A cold sweat sprang up all over my body, especially on my scalp. The mirrors would keep me safe, I guessed. The lightning rods would pull away the extra energy. And store it somewhere, I didn't need to guess, since I'd walked all the way to the other side of the half-dome. Racks of batteries - big old truck batteries - hundreds of batteries - stood arranged in a half-circle. Cables snaked up from the dirt and into the batteries.

JANUARY 2011

Okay, so this was one half of an equation. With this dome and the lightning rods and the batteries, Seth could keep safe from a strike and store the energy.

But this wasn't good enough. I didn't want to deflect g.d:shrike's bolts, I wanted to destroy g.d:shrike.

Of course all that energy would be a weapon in its turn. Had Seth designed a way to use g.d:shrike's energy against it? That would mean a directed weapon somewhere nearby.

I searched. I assumed I'd find something pointing up or cables leading away to another discovery or, I don't know, a rifle. A cannon. Something. But all I found was a sheet of paper taped to a battery.

The paper didn't contain instructions or even words. Just a line drawing. And that's when I understood.

A small male stick figure stood below, a slanting halo drawn around his balloon head. Far above, a satellite hovered: g.d:shrike. At four points between the man and the satellite, big black x's marked repeater stations.

Repeater stations allowed satellites to broadcast information no matter if they were on the other side of the planet. Repeater stations. Of course. G.d:shrike couldn't be overhead everywhere at once.

The drawing showed the stick figure pressing a button on a stick. Showed electricity streaming from the lightning rods into the repeater stations and from the repeaters stations up to g.d:shrike.

Backflow the energy and burn out the system. Not a simple solution, not something I could have worked out, but Seth had been trained for the space program. He knew materials. He knew systems. He knew how to destroy it.

I couldn't wait. I couldn't let fear start up. I couldn't give g.d:shrike an excuse to notice me. I rushed back to the half-dome and climbed in again. It took just a moment to secure the door behind me. I went to the glass mat and stood up straight.

I took a deep breath. That did not help my trembling. Was I afraid to die? Well yes, of course I was. But I was more afraid to keep on living.

"Damn you!" I screamed. I shook my fists upwards. I

M-BRANE SF #24

even hit myself, in my left shoulder, not enough to bruise, I hoped, but enough to sting. I screamed again. “God damn you, it’s our lives you’re stealing!”

The lightning rained down. It was beautiful.

Though the bolts from g.d:shrike always looked white, when they hit the mirror dome they split into all the colors of the spectrum, brilliant rainbows cascading down the sides of the dome. The hair on my skin floated a little, whether from static build-up or from my reaction to the display of power I was not sure. I was, deep-down, god struck with awe.

The hesitation between the first and second strikes proved Seth’s hypothesis to me. Somewhere, somehow, feedback was being sent to g.d:shrike, feedback not related to my telemetry chip. If my hunch was right, then when I pushed the button I’d send all that stored energy flowing through the feedback system and burn out g.d:shrike.

I stopped just short of pushing the button. Why hadn’t Seth done this? Why had he left it to commit suicide in front of his remaining friends? What if this didn’t work at all?

I did not want to die. At this point however I had no option. I had to finish this experiment upon myself.

I breathed. My hands were sweat-slick.

I pushed the button.

As far as I could tell, nothing happened.

Nothing.

No sparks flew. No smoke wisped. No voice from Heaven summoned me to the Pearly Gates.

I pushed the button again but got exactly the same result. Power certainly flowed from the mirror capacitors and out the lightning rods towards whatever sent the bolts, I had surely backflowed the system, but was it enough?

I breathed again. A deep breath. Then I screeched, “Fuck you, g.d:shrike!”

And for the first time, there was no lightning bolt. Nothing.

“God damn you, you fucking piece of machinery!”

Again nothing.

“Damn you to hell, you murdering bastard!”

JANUARY 2011

A third time, no result.

Could g.d:shrike be waiting for me to leave the dome's protection? Was it that sly? I only had one way to finish this experiment. I did not realize a person could actually shake this much. I had trouble moving my feet in the right direction, off the glass plate and to the hatch.

But then I said the words of zen that a Native American chief had once spoken.

"Today is a good day to die."

I flung open the hatch.

I stepped outside the bowl.

Nothing.

g.d:shrike should have blown me to Kingdom Come. And I was either still alive or experiencing a very detailed death dream. I slapped myself. No, I felt the slap, but g.d:shrike did not strike me down for violence.

One last test remained.

I closed my eyes.

"In my family's name," I said. "Damn you. Whoever built you. Damn them too."

I remained unscathed.

I wanted nothing more right then than to find a place to lay down and sleep. Yet this day was not done for me. I needed to get home, get behind familiar doors, and get safe.

g.d:shrike had assured that what remained of humanity was pre-selected as survivors. Most of us would be bone-deep nice and polite. But some would be the kind that survived by being cunning and sly and quick. It might take that sort a while to figure out that g.d:shrike no longer threatened them. I wanted to be prepared before then. Old Man Herbert still lived down the lane.

Jude-Marie Green lives and writes in Southern California. She read an article in Analog about RFID technology that got her thinking about unintended consequences. She has had recent stories in Electric Spec Online, RetroSpec print anthology, and Dark Tales of Terror print anthology. She attended Clarion West in 2010.

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When We Were Mutants

by Edward W. Robertson

The moment before Miles found what he would later blame for the death of the woman he meant to marry, he was staring at a *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition* and wondering how mankind had ever built the rubble that used to house them when they were surrounded at all times by smooth and unmarred skin and such haunting, fleshy symmetry. It wasn't a miracle—unlike Glenn and his flock of fools, Miles was smart enough to know that not understanding something didn't make it beyond understanding—but it was a mystery. He turned a brittle yellow page. A redhead knelt on a shore of white sand with her hands behind her head and her chest thrust out like wind-bulged sails and he found to his surprise his penis hadn't budged. It was, somehow, too astounding to be arousing, a vision of Eden like Glenn yawed on about, a promise of the perfect people that still lived, he believed, deep away in the night stars. He imagined them returning, seeing what had become of what they'd used to be, and he stared at the redhead and he hated her.

The voice was at first so scratched and faint Miles tensed neck to toe, thinking the building was croaking and bowing in preparation for a fall; he was eight floors up and if the tower went now his only hope would be to fling himself out a window and pray he'd catch a freak bounce and break all his limbs instead of his back. But he felt no rumbles, heard none of the weird ticks and metal pops that meant everything was about to collapse into violent dusty hell. He heard only what he soon became convinced was a voice, and not one, he thought, that could be produced by the most warped of human throats.

He stood, knees popping, and settled his pack of

JANUARY 2011

books, metal odds, and pornography over one shoulder. The stairwell was silent except a cold updraft and he paused on the floor below, shutting his eyes and pressing his ears against the walls, then mustered his nerves and slid through the tangle of hallways and rotted paper and carved-out machines until he heard the tinny, scratchy voice talking to itself within a dark and cluttered room. He knelt outside the doorless doorway, breathing through his mouth so his nose wouldn't whistle. From somewhere near the back of the room, a faint green glow silhouetted the indistinct lumps of three chairs.

"...preparing to eat pizza," the scratched-up voice said, the first words Miles could clearly hear. The voice went on: "'Careful, it's very hot,' his friend said. The young man took a bite and was burned so badly he spit it out immediately. 'I told you it was hot!' his friend said. The young man frowned. 'How will I know what's hot if all the foods I eat are cool?'"

"Did you get that?" a live man said from inside the dark room. Miles' cheek spasmed. In a flood of terror and elation, he understood the lumps weren't chairs, but seated men facing the small green panel, their own heads dark and still as burnt-out lampposts, and it was a *radio* and his people could have it if he got back to them alive. He backed away, as silent as a falling leaf, then dashed down the stairwell into the tangle of eroded skyscrapers toward the river and their home on the other side.

He went to Lua first, because she always knew. She said nothing as he slipped off her veil and kissed her, his mouth brushing a small, lip-pink third nostril tucked into the fold of her nose; three days earlier it had just been a hard bulge, and he'd hoped, hopelessly, it was just a bad pimple. Her eyes skipped between his and he had the sense she was daring him. He told her about the radio and what it was and he saw she understood.

"Tell Kan like you're reporting back from a mission he sent you on," she said. Miles felt a sharp sadness as she dropped the veil back over her face. She touched his wrist with her rough, pebbly fingers. "He's an idiot. That'll put a

smile on his face.”

“And keep him thinking I’m one, too.”

“Idiots like company. That’s why they’re idiots.”

“It sounded like nonsense,” he said, remembering the thin and stretched-out voice, the words of a can hammered flat. He reached for her hip. “How have you been?”

“Fine.”

“Good. Do anything while I was gone?”

She tipped her head; behind the veil, he could see only the suggestion of her features. “I read a few books. They used to worry about very strange things.”

“Um,” Miles said. “I love you.”

“You too.”

He found Kan in the courtyard shooting arrows into a pile of old melons. Juice and sticky seeds warmed in the dirt, fogging the yard with a sweet but musty bloom. Kan drew back his right arm—scarred up and down from fights with the Reagans and the Chaspers and from slicing off the small, nailless fingers that always tried to grow around his elbow and wrist—and sailed an arrow into a slumped melon. It burst wetly.

“Smart move putting me out a third day,” Miles said, lowering his eyes as he faced the older man. He grinned at the ground, then made himself serious. “Have you heard of radios?” Kan shrugged his red-streaked shoulders. “Omnis? Cells? Telephones? They were ways people could talk to each other from far away. From miles. Across the world. Radios were like that, too.” He met Kan’s eyes for a moment. “I found one. Working.”

“Where is it?”

“Near 28th and Lex. Three men were guarding it. Spears. Think one had a sword.”

“You heard it speak?”

“It sounded like it was reading something. I didn’t stay long.”

“Show me.” Kan threw his bow over his shoulder with the decisiveness he wore like a shirt. Back when she’d been able to breed reliably, he’d seen Lua one night a month. “I’ll get the others.”

Miles thought Kan was stupid, but the red-streaked

JANUARY 2011

old bastard brought back four of his killers and Miles felt young and soft like fresh bread. Peter, his left hand clawed like a bear's; tongueless Mikal, silent, the watcher; Jeans, tall like a pike; Flinn, a third arm below his left that swung a sword as strongly as his right. They jogged west for the bridge, late afternoon sun splashing the cracked concrete and the grass in the streets.

Miles had felt another bone there on Lua's hip, he realized. Too caught up with the radio to recognize it. Shocked she'd let him touch her at all. When they'd captured her from the Chaspers she'd been thin as a branch with skin like the girls from the magazines Miles looted and traded to the older men. In the four years before she started her drift, she'd had three children, one of which Miles was convinced without evidence was his. After her first she could have chosen anybody but she'd chosen him, committing to him with a totality he still found hard to believe nearly five years later. He was a scavenger and a fixer, a nobody, some guy, but she'd known, somehow, the way she knew everything. She came to him the night after her firstborn had been taken to the old birds at the nursery and led him through tangles of rusted fence and beard-thick weeds to a slip on the East River. She'd spread a blanket on the tide-washed dock and named the silhouettes of the dark buildings as she stripped down to a body that was flawless except the sixth toe on her left foot. He'd been too shaky and awed to get hard, but the next night she brought liquor and that had done it. After, she said he looked silly with no eyebrows, but she liked silly. The drift, when she finally admitted that it wasn't just a phase, had hit her hard, and when he was sleeping in strange buildings on the island, pack heavy with razor blades and cloth-wrapped bottles and silver forks, Miles prayed, sometimes, to Jesus and Columbus and the seven Hopestars that it *was* just a phase, that the next day he'd come home to find her knots and nodes had brushed off in their bedsheets to reveal brown skin beneath, the extra teeth had sunk back to the bed of her gums, that he'd grip the springy flesh of her thighs and feel none of the spurs that had taken her desire to walk and she'd be the

M-BRANE SF #24

yakky, holiday-loving Lua who had spread him a blanket on the docks when her life could have led her anywhere. The Son and the Sailor and the Stars stayed as silent as an empty window.

They saw two others when they reached the island, lone men with long spears who loped away on sight, shadows bobbing on the grass-furred streets. For the first time in his life, Miles led; almost none of the corners still had signs and all the men but Jeans were in their early 30s or more and hadn't had to roam far from Greenpoint Terrace since the struggle with the Chaspers and anyway they probably couldn't read. He angled them up Broadway until the street collapsed into a deep crater, steel tracks gleaming dimly in the last light some forty feet down, then swung east for a block before continuing north through light rubble and around a small park, the iron fence long forced down by a thick crush of bright roses.

When they entered the office stairwell, sun blocked to the west by walls of buildings, Miles realized, with a sharp plunge, that he had been gone over five hours and he might be about to lead Kan and his warriors into a dark and empty room where they would turn on him with a collective silence as total as tongueless Mikal's and not look at him again during or after their return to the Terrace. Sweat slimed his armpits, gathered in his crotch. He trained his ears over the shuffle of their feet on the dusty steps. On the landing to the seventh floor, he heard the tinny voice, faint through the walls.

"That's it," he whispered to Kan. "When I was here, they had their backs to the door."

Kan passed him a short spear. "Don't get hurt."

Miles turned the oak shaft in his hands, expecting to feel the breath of all who'd used it before, but all he felt was hard dry wood. Kan was saying something to the others: marching order. The last name was Miles'. He took his place, willing himself not to stumble.

It was Flinn who exposed them, the stump of his fourth arm banging the corner of a dust-coated desk and sweeping a glass of tiny metal twists onto the floor. The glass exploded; the three figures, seated where they'd been

JANUARY 2011

when Miles left them earlier that day, leapt to their feet, hands flashing for weapons. Jean slung a spear and the first of them fell without a word. Metal winked in the shadows of the room and a spear answered back, burying itself a foot through Flinn's side. He dropped, arms thrashing, and Miles felt something hot and wet splash his face. He ducked and wiped his eyes and found himself alone next to Flinn who was crying. Silhouettes jabbed at each other inside the soft glow of the chamber and Miles knew they wouldn't know how easily they could destroy the radio's delicate entrails and he scrambled through the door and stopped short to plunge his spear into the back of a retreating stranger. The man tensed like a bow, slapping a hand to his spine. Mikal leaned forward and a bright point emerged from the stranger's throat. The others' spears found him as he went down, points whispering with the shuck of iron in flesh. The man screamed once, badly, a gunked-up cry-turned-gasp. The third man, Miles saw, had died before he'd even run inside the room. Kan knelt over the still body of the one Jeans had speared and calmly slit his throat.

They panted in the darkness. Miles smelled sweat and shit and a warm metallic musk he associated with gutted deer. Kan slapped him on the shoulder and his knees nearly gave out.

"Right in his back," Kan grinned, his red-streaked face counter-lined with trails of sweat. "Who taught you to fight? Remind me not to cross him."

Miles swallowed, staring at the body. "I didn't think he was paying attention."

Kan and his men laughed except Mikal, who had no tongue and hooted instead, and Flinn, who had bled to sleep in the other room. They lapsed into silence as if by agreement and in the stillness they stared at the paneled box and its scratched-out voice.

"...virus has been sampled by remote probe," the radio was saying with what Miles thought, bafflingly, was profound sadness, "as despite the continued efforts across the League we remain unable to distill a permanent cure. Remain patient. Remain true. Remember your heritage and

know that we, too, have not forgotten. Some day, however far from now, we will again be united as brothers.”

“How is it speaking?” Kan leaned in, tan face creasing. “Peter, go check on Flinn.”

“Be careful,” Miles said as Kan reached for the radio’s face. The older man gave him a blank look Miles barely registered. “It’s as old as this building. We got to be careful.”

Kan jerked his chin at the round mesh screen on one side of the box. “Who is that?”

“I don’t know. We can ask him later.”

Suspicion flickered in Kan’s mismatched eyes. “Find a way to carry it without breaking it. We can’t leave it here.”

The sun was fully down by the time Miles had gathered an unruined metal box, convinced the others to shed their shirts to line it for the radio, and settled the device and its various wires and clickable pieces where they wouldn’t rattle. On the desk where the men had listened to it, they had also gathered a pile of thin white squares, two inches to a side and oddly heavy, as if filled with lead. He couldn’t place them, but something about them tugged Miles’ mind like iron shavings set next to weilded iron. He poured the squares into a spare sock and settled it in with the radio.

“It could be someone from the other side of the world,” Miles said into the quiet of the night. He glanced up at the stars, terribly bright, trembling against the black roof of the sky. “Maybe they have things we don’t.”

“If they’re on the other side of the world, how would we get what they’ve got?” Peter said, eyes on a dim figure far down the avenue.

“I don’t know. They used to be able to travel much, much faster than a horse, or than birds. Maybe they still have those things, too.”

“No,” Kan said. “If they did, we’d already know about it. You can’t hide something like that.”

“Unless they don’t want to share,” Jeans muttered.

“We can ask them.” Miles clutched his spear. “They wouldn’t be speaking if they didn’t want to talk, would

JANUARY 2011

they?”

Kan shrugged. The others said nothing at all. In the same fundamental way he knew that if he touched water, it would be wet, Miles was certain that when he worked out a way to send his voice through the air to whoever was waiting, the man on the other end would laugh, greet him, tell him the secrets none of his people had known since the Big Drift and the loss of the world. Something deeper niggled his mind, a memory that slipped from his grasp like a trout whenever he stooped to scoop it up. The night tasted different, like fresh rain and fresh blood. The city didn't have to be a skeleton. It was in their hands.

“God made us in his image,” Glenn said from his place on the altar in the sunny morning courtyard of the Terrace. Glenn Wellsaid's face had no nose and one ear and his left cheek looked like congealed yogurt but his voice rang like hammered steel and he had answers no one else had. “For an age beyond counting, men used that reflection to build the body of the world. A body without sickness, of beauty and light, a body so perfect that, soon, it could know no aging, no weakness, no death. It would be, and we would be, the body of God.”

Miles' heart was breaking. He had shown them how to use the radio when they had returned like victorious warlords to the Terrace, deploying all his intuition and the passing references he remembered from cracked novels and flaking magazines to manipulate the device's tricky knobs and dials into speaking to them. In the end, this had proved fruitless; they heard nothing but a dumb hiss from any setting but the one they had found it in, though Miles discovered readily enough how to make it louder or softer, and had, after some twiddling, refined the voice so that when it spoke it was as if the man were standing beside them rather than mumbling through a length of rusted pipe—and once he had done this Kan took it to Glenn and the men on the upper floors and it was as if Miles were a child again. He had not seen it since until they had marched it down to the courtyard, all the people assembled, heads tipped to the veiled box planted on the

altar just below Glenn's viney shoulders.

"God scowled from his seat in the sun and he warned us to turn back. When the seven ships penetrated his heavens, and man was poised to usurp him, he blew the Culling Sickness across the lands and the seas; he reached down to Earth with his twelve hands, twisting their perfect bodies into us, the wretched, the malformed and forgotten. And he reached out to the stars and he broke their minds, too, so they would not finish what they had begun." Glenn raked his milky eyes across the crowd, pausing at intervals on Milla with no legs, on John whose skin glistened like a frog's. He lingered on Miles and Miles' ribs prickled. "Some of you doubt. You call them the Hopestars. You call them salvation.

"I call them madness."

He swept the veil from the radio, reaching for its volume knob. A new voice, different from the ones Miles had heard before, rolled across the courtyard in a warped but just-comprehensible language his brain had to fight to make sense of.

"...Tauri, 302.815.027, period n42, repeat at six-hour intervals. Expected turnaround eight years, 256 days." There was a brief, staticky pause. Men and women blinked at each other, to catch up with syllables that sounded English-but-not-English. "Updated RPGS conditional report follows. Update 812, 02.01.2719 Solar, Alpha local." The crowd winced as the announcement shifted to an incomprehensible blur of beeps and tones. Glenn let this electronic babble go on for half a minute until it was difficult for Miles to think anything at all, then switched off the radio.

"There is no salvation in the stars. There is hope only in God-in-the-Sun and what our twisted hands are able to build for ourselves on the bones of this Earth. Salamen."

Many of the older men and women echoed his last word. The younger people stood silent, faces stony, troubled. Beside him, Lua squeezed Miles' hand and he glanced down and wiped his eyes.

"It *is* from the stars," he said when they'd returned to their apartment on the fourth floor. "I thought it was

JANUARY 2011

some guy across the sea and I let them take it away from me and it was *them*.”

“You don’t think they’re crazy,” Lua said. “The people up there.”

“You do?”

“I’m asking what you think.” Beneath her veil, she was impossible to read. Her hands were folded on the table, fingers so crusted with gray, fibrous knots he could only catch slivers of brown skin in the cracks. Somehow, it looked worse than when he’d come back with the radio eight days ago.

“Glenn’s just saying they’re crazy to get their kids to stop talking about the Hopestars. Those were instructions. I don’t know what they mean, but that doesn’t make them any crazier than we are just because bugs can’t understand us when we’re talking.”

“We’re not bugs.”

Miles had the shocking conviction Lua was stopping herself from striking him. “It was just an example.”

“We’re different. Variants. We don’t even know what they look like now.” When she spoke again, the violence was gone. “Well, so what? So what if it is the stars. What does that mean?”

“If they can talk to us, maybe we can talk to them. These things were built to go two ways.”

“You think they might know something we don’t.”

“I’m fucking sure of that much.” Miles reached for her hand. She neither drew back nor folded her fingers into his. He exhaled out his single oversized nostril. “All I need is to listen for a while. Then I’ll know what to do.”

“I’ll talk to Suwanne. She’ll understand.”

He grinned and leaned forward and kissed her through the veil and found himself strangely aroused. She stood and he gazed up at her, but she turned and the smell of the flowers she rubbed on her wrists and her neck drifted in the air after she had gone. Once she returned, maybe—speaking with the big guns always put her in a lively mood, returning her, however temporarily, to the way she’d been before her drift.

He’d asked her once, before he understood how

women hated weakness, why she had chosen him among all the others who had cleaner faces or commanded men like him or who owned swords—the men who inevitably ended up with true breeders like Suwanne, and like Lua had been at the time, in other words—and she had folded her smile into something serious.

“That question’s your answer.”

He bunched up his hairless brows. “What the hell does that mean?”

“You’re like a rat. Snuffling your whiskers around in places you shouldn’t be because you’ve got to know what’s happening and why.”

“You think I’m like a rat?”

Lua laughed, then, and his face burned harder. She reached up and touched his flushed cheek. “That means you’ll find the things no one else will, even when you’re scared. Because you’ll keep snuffling down the tunnel no matter how dark it gets.” She kissed him once, smiling. “Unless you get eaten by a dog first.”

She had put into words what he’d never been able and he was in love. He had asked her to marry him then and there, though she wouldn’t be eligible until she’d made it through another two kids or four years, and she had said yes and for the first time he lived thinking of neither what he’d done wrong in the past or what he wanted from the future. On her nights with others, he went to the island and plumbed the old subways, scrabbling down into the black ways with a torch and a rope to pry chunks of metal loose until his pack dragged so hard on his shoulders he could barely climb back out. On her nights with him, they tussled for hours, careless of the humidity, then lay bare beside each other and as the sweat cooled he asked her about the Chaspers and where she wanted her life to go and she asked him what he’d seen in the places no one else went. When he found the first knot—a small, gray, bark-tough node just below her left buttock—he figured it was a phase, a passing blot like they all went through as their bodies constantly drifted, and the real miracle was Lua had never had any of them before.

A second on her right elbow, a third between the first

JANUARY 2011

two toes of her left foot, then a fourth and a sixth and he lost track. She had to know by then, but he wasn't certain until she started leaving her blouse on during sex, and then it was too late to say anything at all. After six months, when the scales had blotched her skin and she'd grown a new ear and three new toes, with no sign of new pregnancy when before she'd been fertile as a riverbank, Kan submitted she had started to drift. Kan stopped seeing her and soon all the others did too except a young man named Bin who said he was in love and he and Lua had fought angrily and Bin ran off that night and then Miles and Lua were left, finally, alone. She spoke little and touched him less and he spent his days in the city thinking about it but nothing he could think of would change anything. It had been eighteen months since Kan had made his announcement, then nearly a year since its confirmation had left Miles eligible to marry her.

He reached up to rub his neck where the thin steel chain should have been by now and he thought about the future and what he should have done different. Lua returned a few minutes later, drawing in on herself when he rose to hug her.

"Well?" he said.

She pulled away and sat on the far edge of the bed, hands in her lap. "Suwanne said no one's supposed to touch it."

"Did you tell her we can use it to talk to them?"

"Of course."

"And?"

Lua's veil puffed with an uncharacteristic sigh. "She said Glenn had spoken into it, but it just kept saying the same crazy things like it hadn't heard him at all. She says it's a demon-box. They're trying to drown us in their madness so we'll go crazy, too."

"That's...crazy," Miles said lamely. Something itched his mind, a passage from one of the brown-paged books. He blinked hard. "What else did she say?"

Lua shrugged. "I don't know. More of the same."

"I thought she listened to you."

"She used to."

M-BRANE SF #24

“Well, what are they going to do with it? Parade it out whenever Glenn wants to yell at us for not praying efficiently enough? Say that, in a moment of singular clarity, the box revealed a kernel of ancient wisdom, and that now the old men get to sleep with the breeders six nights a week instead of two? Or maybe they’ll just smash it and eat it so they can take its power.”

Lua was staring at him, a noon-bright gaze he could feel behind the shadow of the veil. He took a deep breath to stop himself from dashing their nightpot against the wall.

“Would you know what to do with it if you had it?” she said.

“Not right away.”

“What does that mean?”

“I think I could figure it out.”

“You could.” At first he thought she was doubting; when he repeated her tone in his head, he thought she was in one of her moods, unreadable as the empty covers of a rotted novel; later, when it was too late to do anything but regret, he understood she’d been deciding. When he fell asleep that night—him naked, Lua thick in her wraps and veil beside him—he dreamed of the city wriggling with so much smooth and perfect flesh it spilled out the windows of the towers like a flood of brown and white, pouring through the streets limbs swinging breasts bouncing, bodies filling up the bay, a living flood that had no end.

Killing Kan or Glenn, Miles knew, wouldn’t be half as easy as the silent thrusts of his victorious imagination tried to convince him it would be. Once, he’d seen a man with a spear sticking out both sides of his chest stumble, pick up a rock bigger than his fist, then rise and bludgeon his stunned attacker until the second man’s head caved like slapped mud; on the other side, he’d seen skirmishers pause with their killing blow hanging, stunned by what they were about to do, as helpless to finish the fight as the unconscious body in front of them. Miles had helped kill one stranger while that stranger’s back was turned. He didn’t have whatever had carried Kan and Mikal and the

JANUARY 2011

others to their place in life. If it turned to murder when he stole the radio—more and more, he could see no other way than absconding with it to somewhere they couldn't find him—he did not see a scenario in which he didn't end up dead.

Useless Lua. She sat in their room until there were no more hours in the day and when Miles returned at night (when he was able to return from the island at all) he found her sitting in perfect darkness, too lost in herself to light a candle, gone. They might have spoken ten minutes in the week since she'd seen Suwanne. He, too, had tried diplomacy, going to Glenn with an actual hat in his hand, asking demurely to have a few hours with it, or to assist Glenn in understanding it, anything to help, and the old man had sent him away with no more than a no; later, when Miles spied on him, climbing the fire escape so rusty it left gritty smears down both palms, he watched through the window as Glenn shouted at the box, leaning so far forward his noseless face nearly brushed the buttons, and once, to a sharp pain in Miles' chest, striking it. Glenn sat straight up, blinking around, and Miles ducked below the window and shook for five minutes in the wind and starry night until he was ready to risk the creak of the stairs and return to the ground.

Unable to learn from the radio firsthand, he returned to the island. The headless stone statues of big cats guarding the old library hadn't stopped it from being burnt years before Miles' birth, but he knew other places, old market-shops, the ruins of the university down by the small park and the other a ways north of the big park, the eerily preserved private collections in the dusted-out shells of apartments that stretched across entire floors. The city had been looted for centuries but always seemed to birth up more. To his hands, it spat out relics like cherry pits.

He could make zero sense of the zaggy illustrations and perverse abbreviations in the handful of books he dug up from the basements and the sealed rooms. In his frustration, he turned to a crackly stack of *Scientific American* to clear his mind, only to find these made as little sense as the radio diagrams—the third-to-last issue

described the plan of someone called the Frontier League to introduce something called the Rapidly Protean Genetic Sequence, the details of which Miles understood, with a vague but thrilling leap of logic, were meant to enact the Big Drift, but that was nonsense, as mad-sounding as Glenn made the Hopestars out to be. Miles returned to the radio manuals with a cold and focused anger, and by the end of the first day, he felt he could operate one. By the end of the third, he believed he might be the most learned source on radios between the two seas. By the end of the week, he knew he had to steal it.

He came home. Lua was sitting in their dim room. From deeper in the apartment, he thought he smelled the moist waft of rotting food. He sat down beside her, leaned his back against her legs.

“Sometimes when I’m in those old buildings I can almost see the faces of the people who used to live there,” he said. He didn’t know if she was listening. It was late afternoon; he meant to make his try that night and already his stomach felt tight and empty and squeezed like between two palms. “I talk to them sometimes. Tell them not to worry.”

She was silent so long he thought she was asleep sitting up. “Why would spirits worry that a live man was stealing their things? They’re not like us.”

He closed his eyes. “Do you remember when we hiked upriver for three days without telling anyone and we thought we heard a bear and climbed up that tree?”

“It was a fat old dog.”

“It ate all our food before we could get down.”

“We had to eat those gross roots. They were so mad when we got back. I think Kan actually meant to kill you.”

“Not after you talked to him.” He leaned back, remembering. “I love you.”

“I know.”

He waited until she was asleep and everyone was asleep and he lined his pack with the softest rabbit furs and rubbed ash on his arms and face until he was shadow-black. He picked up a knife and he held it and then he sheathed it and put that on his waist, too. He listened to

JANUARY 2011

Lua breathe for a long time, thinking no matter how much her face and skin had changed, the sound of her breath in the darkness stayed the same. He gagged and drank some water and inhaled shallowly until he thought he could move. He had spent all morning writing a note which he hated, but it was the best he could do and he folded it and set it on the small bedside table he had never properly smoothed. He lifted her veil. Moonlight splashed her cheeks, her extra nostril, the knots that crusted her eyebrows and around her mouth. Miles felt sick for a moment, then angry, then nothing, and he lowered himself and kissed her once. She stirred. He dropped back the veil.

The outer wall was so crumbled and craggy he all but didn't need the fire escape when it started some fifteen feet above the ground. The first landing squeaked under his weight, rust flaking between his fingers. He tested it again, bouncing gently, feeling something tug from the wall, and then he got scared and crouched against the wall until he felt ready to climb. Wind slipped through his collar and the loose mending in his left armpit. He hunched up the stairs, pausing in front of each window for voices above the wind, but each was dark and quiet. The air at the twelfth floor outside Glenn's window burned impossibly cold. Miles edged one eye above the sill and strained into the darkness. From another room, he saw the radio's pinpoint green wink.

Glenn's panes were somehow still intact. Miles prayed to Columbus and jammed his fingers under the wood where it had rotted. He tensed his arms. The window stuck, then slid up with a horrible, squealing jerk which Miles was sure could be heard all the way from the island. He waited, then pushed up again, slowly as he could, until it wouldn't move any more.

Glenn's apartment stank like urine and mushy pumpkins. Miles swung his leg over the sill. He scooted toward the radio, its glow and the moon's lighting the curling papers and twine-wrapped twigs and mold-frosted fruit speckling the floor. Beneath the wind, the apartment was as silent as the ones back in the empty city.

He set his pack on the floor and eased the radio into

the furs, covering it and packing it and pulling the drawstring tight. Beside where the radio had been sat the stack of small but heavy white squares (batteries, Miles had guessed during his reading), and these he settled into a pouch around his waist. His heart felt like a fishing line about to tear free from the pole. He shouldered the pack, snugged the pouch against his hip, and climbed back onto the skeletal iron stairs.

He was halfway down when the fires lit far down below his feet.

One torch spilled into the grassy street, then two and then two more. Through the gritty slats of the stairs, Miles saw eight men in the firelight, their faces turned up like daffodils. They muttered things he couldn't hear in the wind, then one pointed straight at him and the others clumped tight and babbled. He could just make out the grin on Kan's red-striped face. Kan's mouth moved and Jeans' pike-tall body steered away from the small crowd.

"Come on down, Miles," Kan called, hands cupped to his mouth. "Deliver yourself and be judged."

A gust smeared Miles' face and his eyes went watery. He grabbed the rails and hauled himself back up the steps, iron jogging beneath him. Impossible; he'd been stealthy as a rat, everything he'd learned scavenging the island, outside his room no more than fifteen minutes all told. Had Lua? She'd been asleep, he knew what she sounded like asleep, she slept like a stump. He paused at the next landing, thinking to leap through a window, and felt the armrail vibrating under his touch.

Two stories up, dark figures pounded down the groaning stairs. Sandy rust peppered Miles' face. He clenched his bladder. The window in front of him was boarded over. He wanted to sit down and hug himself until they stabbed him or pitched him over the rail. Mindlessly, he ran back down. Sixty feet below him, two men hoisted spears. The wind would save him for two or three more floors, he guessed. Then they'd start throwing.

Boots thudded above him. He reached a landing and slipped and scraped his palms across the metal and when he banged into the rail the whole thing jolted. Bile burned

JANUARY 2011

his throat. He got up and one of the men drew back his arm. The spearpoint glinted. From just below and to his left, a shadow swept out from an open window and hurtled toward the cluster of men. The nightpot slammed into the street and burst with a crazy mash of hard clay and spattering shit. Two flashes followed, bright silver knives that sent the men ducking.

“Go!” Lua screamed from the window to his left, her gray-speckled face bare to the moon. “Run and don’t stop!”

“Lua!”

“Go!”

He went. Half-falling, he hurtled down the stairs, hunching his shoulders to keep the pack tight to his body. A step snapped and chunks of brown iron rained into the street. A man with a spear bobbed under a Lua-thrown chair, then straightened and slung his weapon. It slashed past Miles’ side, chinking into the wall behind him. He halted on the last set of stairs, some twenty feet above their heads: any lower and they’d be able to stab him if they jumped. Kan leapt and rattled his spearpoint against the bottom landing and the rails jounced above him. Miles spat a mouthful of vomit and drew his knife.

“Jump, Miles!” Lua called.

He glanced up and could make no sense of the woman-sized object tumbling down from four floors up. He thought: She didn’t have time to read the note, and then Lua’s warped body slammed into Kan and he crunched beneath her and the others fell back, swearing. Someone screamed. Miles vaulted the rail. A spear sailed over his head. He hit the ground hard and rolled onto his shoulders and the radio dug into his back, blunted by the layers of furs. Lua smiled up at him, a bloody flash, knowing, like always, and he ran away because he understood, dodging spears and churning through grass-blanketed alleys, breath searing, until the only footfalls were his own. He wouldn’t cry until that morning, when the sun touched the bony old buildings and he saw how much there used to be.

He lived in the city because that’s what he knew. He

M-BRANE SF #24

holed up in the top floor of a brick five-story with good stairs and he trapped pigeons and dug carrots from the park. He listened to the radio every minute he was home, keeping the volume just above a whisper, its green face a tiny square moon, and he wrote down what it said even when it made no sense, which started out always but became less muddy each week. Sometimes he tried talking back, speaking hesitantly into the time-fuzzed handset, but the voices on the other side never gave any sign they heard.

It was months before he understood. By the time he was ready to speak back, he'd burned through three battery cells and had filled the margins of twenty-seven time-browned books with his half-sized, scrawly notes. He was lean and tan from foraging and when he swaddled the radio into his pack and dropped into the streets the autumn sun colored everything with melted butter. Most of the big buildings had decayed too dangerously to scale, but he had climbed and climbed until he found one with a roof he could reach, and there an antenna. He didn't know if it would work, if he needed to be pointed in a specific direction or if any of them were big enough to make him heard, but he would try others, and when the spring came and he could travel, he would find the towers in other cities and the lonely hilltops and he would talk and talk until the batteries or his voice gave out.

The wind ruffled his hair. He crouched on the roof, shivering, carefully laying out his tools on the dry and sunny surface hundreds of feet above the ground.

"...resent what we did to you," the radio was saying. It was a message Miles had heard in one form or another a dozen times now, all spoken by the same sad and quiet man, a frail voice stretched through a distance so bafflingly long that (Miles still wasn't certain he believed this) it would take years before he heard Miles' reply. At first, he had hated them: what happened to Lua, that was their fault. Without them, she would have been one of the girls in the magazines, would never have known what it was to wake each day a little different, realizing, at last, that one day she would find she no longer knew herself at all.

JANUARY 2011

“Changing you was the only way we knew to save you. To keep you ahead of the plague that had taken so many others, that was fixed to take you all. It was a choice we never should have had to make. We haven’t forgotten you. We’ll find a way to fix you. We love you.”

Miles knelt and prayed to something too deep to name. The rivers winked on each side of the concrete island, the bay gleaming to its foot. He felt whole and terribly calm. He cleared his throat. He clicked on the handset, then paused for a long time, remembering how Lua’s chin had fit into the crook between his shoulder and neck while twenty feet below them a fat old dog ate their lunch.

“Hello,” he said once he was ready. “I forgive you.”

Ed's recent fiction can be found in The Aether Age: Helios anthology and at Big Pulp. He covers movies new and old at <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/1348> and usually lives somewhere on the West Coast.

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Everything You Can Think of is True

By Mike Sauve

“The whole magic universe is dying.”
William S. Burroughs—*The Cat Inside*

Somebody once said, “A screaming came across the sky,” and it didn’t seem to mean anything except it sounded cool. But then a screaming *did* come across the sky and you started to wonder if maybe that guy knew something all along, starting such a giant book with that one line of terrible prophecy.

When other spirits try to lock on you can sometimes seize up. I had to close my eyes. I felt like someone wanted to process information through me, because I was a technical writer and I could express the messages. This projection said I’d get it all down as my memories came either chronologically or not, regardless of tense or presence of fact. It would be the essential document of the shadows that fell across the world. I wasn’t a medium but I knew how to meditate. I could hear the third-person voices. I’d always heard the third-person voices and they’d made me shiver right before sleep.

March 1

Shortages of fuel, water and supplies led to the panic. The anti-gouging laws lasted only as long as the rule of law, which wasn’t long at all. Criminals stormed the retailers and grabbed what they could when the social order showed its first cracks. The first grisly images began appearing on the news: a little girl trampled, an elderly man in a wheelchair mugged in broad daylight, a woman gang-raped while horrified spectators looked on helplessly. My

JANUARY 2011

parents own an isolated piece of farm property with a deep well. I hope they are on it.

I worry most about families, their loved ones who are missing and the communication problem. I can't get to a phone and mine died at the start. My Internet works only through the cable; something is disturbing the free Wi-Fi you could once depend on in the city. The social networks are full of gross distortions now. Apparently they were all for some sinister purpose. Images of corpses are sometimes uploaded as Profile Pictures....those images are haunting every time but the future.

I worry what will happen once the spotlight turns off. If we get past this crisis we'll have to accept a new standard of normalcy, and then the second wave will bring us down even lower.

My mood was lightened briefly by an email from my boss saying my services wouldn't be necessary for the foreseeable future. She assumed I would otherwise have been in the mood to commute several hours through the riotous streets to teach an already meaningless Microsoft Excel lab. I'd never likely see my boss again so I queried her on an End Times E-course I might put together. I ended my email by saying, "For the time is at hand." It seemed funny to me but my services were flatly declined.

March 6

The CIA's MK Ultra mind-control program had recently revealed Lady Gaga as their mind-controlled slave in a surreal press conference on MTV. Media had focused primarily on the war in Israel since the formation of the state of Babylon three years earlier. The Gaga announcement happened a solid week before any other weirdness so the press had a difficult time digesting it, immediately labeling it a publicity stunt. Then members of secret societies started to make pronouncements that they were and always had been the true controllers of the earth. Their video press release showed massive supplies of diesel fuel and dried food, so I was convinced. But it wasn't anyone well known so the media gatekeepers denied these doom-criers also.

M-BRANE SF #24

Rumours surfaced that on top of the rioting, the shortages, and the earthquakes there was a World Health Epidemic of mania and contagious rape instinct, a total release of the suppressed genitality of the blocked-up masses. Internet commentators suspected Lady Gaga's organization at first. The rape disease was later identified as a strain of the aggression virus that started in the prisons. The jails were a fertile breeding ground for the great anger. It can be traced back to prisons all over the world. I think that's important to note.

A man, calling himself Himmler, emerged who looked an awful lot like Heinrich Himmler, but he was discredited by the press because he did not look exactly like Himmler. Nonetheless he became a leader among the various Aryan militant groups throughout the United States and mobilized them as one unit. This was never on the news at first. The Islamic terrorist groups were the preferred scapegoat and received considerably more airtime, but terrorism was merely a pleasant diversion by then. No one was gathering in stadiums or flying on airplanes anymore.

March 8

Down the street there was a car crash, and then it happened again just as it had happened before. The very same cars and people arguing. The second set of people did not appear conscious that it was a repetition. "Come see this," I told my wife. She shook her head and I could see the goose-pimples on her arm. It was the first time she would admit that a rational-material worldview could no longer apply.

City workers mysteriously appeared to fix a broken water main. City service had been suspended as far as we knew. We had still been able to get a slow drip of water out of our faucets and flush the toilet but once they finished we were bone-dry. I had watched them deliberately cut off our water.

It was dangerous to leave the apartment for water so we decided there wasn't enough for the dogs to drink. We had to let them go because we didn't want to watch them die that way. But they didn't run away. They stood outside

JANUARY 2011

the door of our apartment building looking scared. It was my responsibility to let them go because my wife couldn't do it. We lived on the second floor and when I got back upstairs we could see them barking at the front door of our building in a panic. There wasn't going to be any food or water for them outside either. They were too domesticated. They would get scared and turn vicious. We couldn't do that to them so I went downstairs and let them back in. But we gave them less and less water and they whined all the time.

Marijuana and alcohol consumption were untenable causes of dehydration, so I couldn't even dull my senses. The cable lasted longer than anything so we were always up to date on the horrific daily developments. Before the unraveling I'd have never believed I could enjoy cable news without weed and alcohol.

March 10

I thought the earthquakes might stop but they didn't. A large aftershock hit close enough to us and broke all the windows; by some dumb-luck we had a large piece of fiberglass we were able to block the main one up with. For the first few days we'd only watched the earthquakes on the coasts. When the CN Tower fell we stood by the window and watched. A bright green mist in the air couldn't be identified. Once it came in through our smaller windows we started going crazy.

I considered my brain and how much blood it would require to continue operations. No longer did I feel autonomous but that my physiological functioning was in the hands of some mysterious syndicate. They didn't owe me the steady flow of serotonin I was accustomed to. No one neurotransmitter can stay in fashion forever.

March 12

I came to love every sip of water. We had filled several four-litre jugs from the drip and rationed as much as we could in the beginning, but that barely lasted a week. We finally ventured out to buy jugs on the black market that had sprung up on George Street where the crackhouses

M-BRANE SF #24

were. The crackheads must have known something; they'd started hoarding water early and now they were on top of the economic spectrum. I'd bought drugs on the street before so I thought I could bargain with these guys, but I only got 20 litres for \$600. Half a litre a day each for the arbitrary period of 20 days. I suggested going back for more before the violence increased.

"I can't," she said.

"I'll try."

"You can't go alone."

She was right. We'd barely made it back with this haul after the incident with the old man. I was trying to stay in control of my emotions because I felt these could be our final days. I tried to love my wife, but the love-feeling did not come natural as it once did. Facing all this horror our emotions should have stirred. We'd always loved each other almost like a brother and a sister. But a new coldness had spread between us, caused not by these new stresses but by the new condition.

March 13

The commercials were still on TV for insurance companies that said, "When you love someone you'll do anything for them." It seemed to me that commercial time should have been commandeered by some emergency management agency. Better yet would have been a highlight reel of human achievement, to give us even the goodbye treatment of a long-running sitcom. At the very least they could have used the time for a few good jokes, like Bukowski saying in bone-dry desperation, "We have wasted history like a bunch of drunks shooting dice back in the men's crapper of the local bar."

The hungry and homeless masses continued fighting over supplies. Tens of thousands tried to leave the city each day. "Unacceptable" the acting Mayor called it, but it was really something to see, a pretty vicious-looking exodus. Particularly nasty things happened to some Swedish hockey players.

Their attackers were the first confirmed cases of the *accelerated* aggression-rape virus. Until then the rapes were

JANUARY 2011

officially attributed to the breakdown in law and order, but these attackers were convulsing, and certainly raping with a new level of malevolence. The images of the castrated and desecrated Swedes were the end of hope for even the most optimistic Internet commentators.

No one had been beamed up to heaven by God either. Many evangelical Christians were discouraged that they had not ascended. The true believers were undiscouraged, believing as always that they would meet God in death. Both groups were convinced that tribulation was well under way.

March 15

The Himmler videos on YouTube became my primary fascination. A creepy bald female medium named Desteni had predicted the return of Himmler in a YouTube clip from 2001. She predicted many things however, so rational-skeptics argued she was bound to get something vaguely right. They didn't want to admit it was the reincarnation of Himmler anyway. It was too familiar. The mystical blood cult of the so-called "Aryan race" originated with the fortuneteller Madam Blavatsky. She was nothing but a cheap con and they killed six million.

March 17

The American cable landscape quickly incorporated all sorts of wild figures. Alex Jones' (a fringe radio host and conspiracy theorist *par excellence*) wild predictions had been proven accurate and this became a legitimate news story. Alex Jones replaced Larry King when Larry King was killed in one of the earthquakes. He began his broadcast, "The moment is at hand.."

"It is spreading through sexual intercourse, most often forced, and it was started by these MK Ultra sex slaves, like Lady Gaga has already been exposed as on PrisonPlanet.com. We have been telling you this was coming for years and now it is here. It has been independently confirmed by *The New York Times* and countless publications.

M-BRANE SF #24

“The President has been exposed as the fraud we always knew he was. There is a Reptilian race with the ability to shape-shift among us, and a half-breed, human-Reptilian species. Many of your beloved news anchors have already been exposed. [*Images of Greta Van Susteren, Eliot Spitzer, Jon Stewart, Glenn Beck, and John McCain appear in background*] Human DNA has been mixed into these creatures, programmed if you will. This involves programs like MK Ultra, CIA Black OPS, and basically every dark force we have described on PrisonPlanet.com. For this collaboration with lizard people you have sold your souls forever! I only hope it's not too late.

“We told you what they were doing. Now you say protect us from these all-powerful operators. Well...we are mobilizing on the *new* CNN social networking site as we speak. There is a group on Facebook but I urge you not to trust it. This is vitally important so I'll repeat that: You can no longer trust Facebook, or any of the major social networks. They have been taken over. Any Alex Jones content you see on Facebook I can assure you is coming from the global elite and is intended to misdirect and fragment our constituency.”

He continued like this. In the other camp were the less television-friendly quantum philosophers who believed that Jones, David Icke and the other conspiracy nuts had somehow manifest their own desired reality. Certainly what they had proposed couldn't have been true until it became true. All of their claims had been thoroughly discredited. But then they came true.

A man showed up at CNN's Atlanta studio and said to Alex Jones' production assistant, “Hello I'm Brion Gysin.” He looked identical to the artist and provocateur Brion Gysin, who was said to have shared a third mind with William Burroughs (Burroughs writings were enjoying a renaissance in these times). Gysin was inventor of the cut-up method, inventor of the dreammachine, and a general dandy who died in the 1980s. Nobody that important, but someone who had said some strange, upsetting things in his life.

JANUARY 2011

They asked how he'd returned and what the score really was, but he yawned and said he didn't want to talk about it. He just wanted to repeat some lines he'd used before.

"Ask me what we're here for," he said.

"Why are we here?" asked Alex Jones.

"We're here to go."

"What could we have done differently?"

"Rubbed out the word.' As Burroughs informed us, 'Word begets image and image is violence.'"

"What do you mean?"

"The narrative was running into the ground and it could have been halted. They dropped an atom bomb for Christ sake. But you couldn't make people stop thinking, or talking, or expressing dangerous ideas, or thinking about death. You couldn't stop Timothy McVeigh, and that should have told you something. You couldn't stop Lee Harvey Oswald either. These were not anomalous men; they were part of a calculated system of chaos. This system grew exponentially in power as information sped up. These kooks with their misspelled blogs became as relevant as the *Wall Street Journal*. We should have known where we were headed after we saw the look in Oswald's eyes; we should have put a computer on the job, not left it up to lazy, stupid man."

That was Brion Gysin. The only other recorded interview he gave during his brief resurrection was a long hostile diatribe against Gore Vidal. Then he seemed to disappear altogether.

It was followed by a 20-minute segment on Himmler, now increasingly prominent in the new mainstream media due to his massive military gains. He suddenly had fortified compounds throughout the American south. The segment consisted of material taken largely from his YouTube page.

Jones ended his broadcast with a clip of an evangelical preacher named Jeffrey Gant whose End Times message had become increasingly popular since the start of the war. "I read to you from the book of John: 'Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now there are many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.'"

M-BRANE SF #24

This was the very first *Alex Jones Show*. It was kind of cool to sit back and watch it all go down at first. As a student of the cable landscape, it was interesting to see it stretched beyond capacity, and then simply continue in its new paradigm. This was a welcome diversion from our current issues: lack of water and untreated injuries...which themselves were just a preview of what was to come

March 18

We had to let the dogs go. We weren't laughing much after that. You couldn't flush the toilet and it was starting to stink, and they were pissing and shitting up the place. This wasn't the issue; the issue was the water, but if we'd have known how close it was to the end we'd have kept the poor guys. We really loved those dogs. They looked scared again, but this time we hid our heads under our pillows for a long time and when we finally looked out the window they were gone.

It had been so ugly when we got what water we did. I'd nearly been robbed on the way home. I was cut with a pocketknife by some determined old man who'd tried to steal our small cart. Now that wound was infected. He'd probably lanced his hepatitis-oozing boils with that knife. He was almost 80 so I threw him to the ground easily. I gave him a hard kick to the gut and didn't regret it one bit. How we made it home without getting robbed by a more dangerous entity I'll never know. We wouldn't be so lucky a second time.

There were no longer any organizations to provide help. A disproportionate number of civic officials were dead. Chaos seemed to be spreading chemically and with purpose. Across the world the earthquakes had been precise, leaving hardly a government building or hospital intact. The news networks were the only sector operating near full capacity. This could not have been coincidence.

JANUARY 2011

March 21

Now the moon is almost invisible in the mist. The fortunetellers have totally taken over the A and E Network. There is a sudden awareness that every point of view is significant. The realm of imagination is now as real as a pretentious formula. Folklore is relegated to reality. Art is no longer content to occupy any kind of frame.

Everyone is either holing up or else fighting like animals on the street; there are no good Samaritans despite their existence in literature; there are no carnivals. No performances of *Othello*, just fear. No 21st birthday parties, just rape attacks and group rape attacks.

The God consciousness is spreading among a segment of the population; more and more people perceive themselves to be God, or part of a consciousness system that is God. This isn't so far from the good old Christian message. But this is just one side of a two-pronged occult attack. The other side is the cult of self-interest which emerged in the 1990s: "I'm the director of my life. I'm special," is the essential motto, but they were the same as anyone else, just men facing a great flow of vengeance.

March 22

We understand things in terms of mechanism, but not theory of mind. My dream will be as important as observable mechanics...and my dreams have become increasingly operatic in scope lately, beacons of hope. I'm beginning to think this is a matter of false belief. Our brains are not binary machines. They are radios.

March 23

What will happen to our pages of white whales and green lights gleaming on docks; our prose, tender and ambiguous; Midwestern virgins in the shower, spied on by a slimy but otherwise loving stepdad after his ravenous crystal meth hit; the night air on a highway; the tearful laughing euphoria of a life-shortening whiskey hangover in the rock and roll morning? Where will it go? Tell me there's a God in heaven.

M-BRANE SF #24

March 25

Am I a harlot writing a strange beast? What can these symbols mean? It really was the most important book in the world. It did reveal the future of humanity, the future of our earth, devastation to mankind, a white horse, a pale rider, a conqueror...because people read it, and believed it, and the schizophrenics knew.

I hope this is clear. My wife keeps nagging that I've got the schizoid-virus that's spread since last Sunday. Personally, I feel fine. My thoughts are clear and each one rings out like a bell to me. I feel my thoughts are crystallizing in this time for a reason. It's possible my wife has the rage disease. We've been having sex often despite the coldness I mentioned. Some can sublimate the rage disease into sex with an accommodating partner.

I'll get on with what happened. The crazier people were killing their own children and using their body parts in brutal sex-rituals. Those without the virus had the fear so bad they were shooting first and asking questions later. Something had to happen. It was John Stossel who bore witness then; most of the big-name anchors had taken themselves out of the game. We heard the voice of the fourth creature on CNN, "Come and see," and we beheld the graphic of a pale horse, and on it was a graphic of death. I recognized the beasts. I felt a sorrow because I'd wanted to go to heaven.

Two were ordinary men. One was less ordinary in that he had iron teeth. The other, a charismatic European General, was the political figurehead. He had won the Nobel Peace Prize two years earlier for his role in the inconsequential Israel-Babylon peace talks. He was the persecutor but that was not obvious. He was only a man of sin, which cable audiences were accustomed to. It was the time of the absolute end and these beasts seemed like fitting characters.

The third and fourth beasts were actual beasts. One had ten horns. Men who gazed upon them were said to change. It didn't matter if you saw them in reality or on television. The fatally-wounded were made well for a moment, and everyone on earth marveled at the new beasts. They

JANUARY 2011

worshipped them knowing they were unbeatable and would solve the shortages. It was an inevitable, necessary transmutation, and a curse on us all.

March 26

I had ears but I did not listen. I was doomed to be captured and the people came when it was that people started breaking into apartments and houses. They axed down the door. We'd been watching the beasts on television and not thinking much about the aggression diseases.

They raped my wife many times and then started putting the knife into her. They pissed on me and told me I liked it. They stayed for two days doing this kind of shit. This evil had always been with us, all this time.

I wanted badly to mock them but it only made them more violent, but I still found it hard to resist. They were two burly old bums with jail tattoos.

They had a fourteen-year-old boy in handcuffs. He was treated better, but also abused sexually. They cut him slowly, with a sick fascination, while we watched. They were building up to the big moment when they fucked him together and beat him to death. They had a lot of methamphetamine and Viagra so they had erections all the time and all they wanted to do was fuck and cut us up.

They cut off my wife's hands because they thought that would make them feel something after many hours had gone by but they were disgusted with the result and killed her because she couldn't stop screaming. I told my wife I would pray for her soul but she couldn't hear me. I hoped someone would pray for my soul. They looked at me like a pathetic dog and one said, "Ah get out of here you faggot." But the other didn't want to let me go so easy; he told me if I could make him come I could go. He just sat back on the chair. He'd ejaculated dozens of times in the last couple days and it took almost two hours; the other guy kept cutting at me the whole time but I finally got the job done and out the door.

Expelled into the streets, activated into the gridline structure, my entire pre-programmed life spread out;

M-BRANE SF #24

shivering with the bloody asshole blues I'm brought into a collective of beast-worshippers right off the bat. They saw me and knew the score. "Have you heard the message of the great benevolent beasts? They have come from below where they've been waiting. They are here to restore hope." I thought of my wife for the last time. The machine was recalibrated in such a way that the followers of the beasts could see in a new way. I could no longer see in the old way.

Anyone who refused was alienated, essentially left to die. This world will have meant nothing in the end. A man can outlive his own heart, but not his own brain; this was the dream now fully interpreted. I went with them because I'd heard the beast camps were well organized with plenty of food and water for those who'd sign the ledger and receive the mark. I felt untold terror to see life beyond life. I could see their features, and the agony and the pain and the frustration that would lie ahead. The beasts were creating great illusions and we were absorbing them like deep healing breaths.

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Other Gray Things

by Jason Heller

Speth sat with her spine curled, clutching her guitar, cradling it in her lap as if it were an infant rather than an instrument. A blade of feedback slit the haze that swirled in the air in front of her amp. Her face beamed through the smoke like the moon.

She sighed into the microphone.

She sang.

Her lyrics came out in vague, overlapping phrases, half composed and half improvised. The longing and lingering melody tethered her drift of images. She sang of faces: her mother's, her father's, a professor's, a lover's. And, of course, Lydja's.

The audience swayed. There were no more than two dozen people in the smoky room, but they stood as rapt as seagrass in a warm, nourishing current. When Speth compressed her voice and made it arc an octave upward, the faces around her flowered. For half an hour she fingered the frets on her acoustic as if stitching together some fractal quilt, chords spiraling around a modal core before resolving, suddenly spent, in a calm pool of hush and shadow. She stopped.

"That one," she whispered, "is called 'Lydja'."

The crowd clapped.

The Hum resumed.

Callused fingertips squeaked on glass. Speth knocked back a shot and squinted at the rows of bottles in front of her. Her legs dangled from the barstool.

It wasn't noise, she recited to herself as the whiskey scorched a trail down her insides. Noise, after all, is a process as much as it is a sound, a clash of forces that underscores order even while drowning order out. And noise has a lifespan. It builds exponentially from the stillness of silence and bears the calculus of its own

entropy in its chaos.

It wasn't noise. It was the Hum. It was as harmonic as it was hideous.

And it was forever.

"Got a minute?" yelled the man propped up on his elbows next to Speth at the bar, interrupting her thoughts, "I have to tell you, I've always had this thing for redheads." His own toxic-red hair was swept back in a greasy, elegant heap, and his eyes twitched with mischief. Speth had been trying to forget he was there. "Not to mention musicians," he finished with a ridiculous wink.

"Sorry, Arj. That red of yours came out of a bottle, and I'd only barely call you a musician. Not my type." She thrust her jaw sideways and blew a splay of rust-colored bangs out of her eyes. Being alone right after playing a show was a luxury Speth rarely enjoyed, even at a club as dead as the Parabola. But she could never bring herself to pack up her equipment and leave for home immediately after a gig. She needed a crowd around her in order to feel truly alone, that stink and thickness of small talk filling up the blackness around her.

And then there was this asshole. Her bandmate. Her so-called friend.

"Look, Arj, thanks for the shot. But I'm not in the mood to chat."

Arj leaned close and tucked in his chin. "Then listen. Let's get out of here. I happen to have it on authority"—his eyes scuttled down the long bar toward the open door, where a flashing light could barely be seen in the distance outside—"that the dazzling Parabola won't be fun for very much longer tonight."

Speth got it. She grabbed Arj's hand and jerked him toward the back of the room, cleaving a path through the crowd with her shoulder. The two reached the back door of the club, and Speth yanked it open. It whooshed. Then it wailed.

The door's alarm rose to meet another, louder cry. Sirens. Lights flashed over the low roof of the Parabola and pulsed in red blurs across the walls of the alley. From inside the club came a thud, then a scream. Speth and Arj

JANUARY 2011

stood in the doorway for a second, sucking in breath. Then they stepped into the alley and ran.

Behind them sirens and alarms stabbed the night sky and twined like tentacles around the Hum.

“Shit! My guitar. My fucking guitar.” Speth fought to catch her breath. They were a dozen blocks west of the Parabola, halfway to the asphyxiating sprawl of the Chrome Boroughs, before they slowed to a trot. “It’s back at the bar. God, my lungs hurt.”

Arj gasped and smirked at the same time. “You’d think with all the singing you do, your lungs’d be big as airships.”

Speth’s eyes flashed, but she didn’t have the breath to spend on a comeback.

“And speaking of singing...” Arj’s voice dropped. “When were you going to tell me you’d gone fucking Aurinth on us?”

“Look, don’t even start. Just keep your goddamn artistic integrity to yourself.” Speth hung her head and leaned against a brick wall smeared with the scrambled, algebraic graffiti of some mad Spherist. “If you hadn’t come into the Parabola just to make fun of me, you wouldn’t have even found out. And now I suggest you pretend you didn’t.”

“Oh, really? You think the rest of the band should just be kept in the dark about this? Other Gray Things, Speth, we’re *Other Gray Things*. Orghs. Not Aurinths. Or did you conveniently forget all that in exchange for a nice, fat commission and a pat on the head?”

Her punch whipped Arj’s head around. The sound ricocheted down the alley. “Don’t,” she said through her teeth. “Don’t you ever presume to tell me what Other Gray Things means. I started this band. And last time I checked, I still led it.”

Arj stuck his bottom lip out and glared down at fresh blood. “Well, you can lead it straight to fucking hell, then. I didn’t come down tonight to tease you. We got word from Nearly Liquid Mass. They have a whisperer inside the force. That wasn’t some random raid back at the bar. The

M-BRANE SF #24

Sworn are finished with random sweeps and citations. They want to end this. They want *us*.

“Or rather, dear leader,” he grinned, “despite the fact that you’ve apparently started whistling their Hum-loving tune, they want you.”

That night Speth lay awake with fear eating at the pit of her gut. She remembered—as she often did when she couldn’t sleep, and the darkness on her ceiling gave way to strange and shifting shapes—the night her mother died. Speth had been eight, and earlier that the evening she’d watched her mother on television, circling the world, while her father sat on the couch next to her and cried.

She could still hear it: He made soggy sounds, blubbery hiccups. Meanwhile her mother rode a clean, whirring machine and flashed bright teeth and reckless freckles into a camera and told billions of people back home about the great gift she was about to give them. Not godhood. Not knowledge. Not power nor purpose nor even pride.

It was silence. She was going to give them silence.

A newscaster displaced her mother from the screen. The Hum, he reminded viewers, had descended one day four decades before, like a curtain draped in an instant over the entire world. It wasn’t noise. It was a sound, for certain, only one that no gauged outside the human brain could detect. It festered behind the eardrum, impossible and inescapable, and blossomed like a paroxysm of chaos in the auditory cortex. No physician or alchemist could fathom it. But the Hum itself—subtle, ceaseless, just short of maddening—wasn’t itself intolerable.

It was the music.

When the Hum mixed with music, it was torture. The Hum comprised a specific yet spectral pitch, an unreal rate of vibration that scraped against all existing forms of music. No system of tones or instrumentation was immune. They all blended with the Hum in the human brain to form a clot of almost apocalyptic discord.

Speth first heard the curdled chemistry between music and the Hum the night of her mother’s historic broadcast from etherspace. Her last broadcast: As her craft spun

JANUARY 2011

suddenly out of control and forever into the void, Speth was at her friend Lydja's house, sickly Lydja, staying the night there while her helpless father sobbed. Speth hadn't yet been told the news about her mother's accident. She was in Lydja's basement with a flashlight, digging through a chest of junk Lydja's father had hidden away, looking for a toy or treasure.

And then Speth found something. A big metal straw, tapered at one end and with little holes and valves along the side. She didn't know its exact name, but she knew what it was: a musical instrument.

"Put that down," Lydja hissed in her weird voice. She'd been born weird, Speth's mother had told her; that's why she looked and walked funny. "That thing is *bad*. You're going to get us into trouble."

Speth stared at her friend in the dark and nodded. Then she held the instrument to her pursed lips, as certain yet nervous as if she were giving her first kiss.

She took a giant breath and blew.

A space opened in Speth's brain. Pain, white and so cold it burned, poured into it. The darkness of the room gave way to a searing light that Speth realized was behind her eyes, not in front of them. She dropped the instrument as if it were a snake.

Footsteps pounded on the stairs, and Lydja's parents ran into the room and flicked on the light.

Lydja's face, far from pretty to begin with, had already started to melt like candle. It bubbled. Strings of jelly-like flesh dripped from her scalp and chin. Her head seemed to be caving in. She tried to scream. Only red and pink came out.

As Speth's mother, thousands of miles overhead, was hurled in a malfunctioning craft into the inescapable reaches of the ether, Lydja drew her last gurgling breath. The Hum had swallowed them both.

"Speth. Speth, wake up." It was Arj. "Look, I hate to light a fire under your holiness first thing in the morning, but you need to get up right away. The kitchen. They're

waiting for you.”

“For fuck,” she muttered. She sat up, blew a stray spike of hair off her nose, and pulled on a shirt that had been wadded into a ball next to the ratty mattress that passed for her bed. “Get the hell out of here while I dress. Tell them I’ll be down in a minute.”

Half an hour later five cold faces watched as Speth climbed down the rickety stairs of her loft bedroom and into the grubby kitchen. Arj sat cross-legged on the floor next to the main table, his attention on a bass he was restringing. It had been weeks since all seven members of Other Gray Things had gathered outside of band practice, even though they all lived and rehearsed in the same converted warehouse. And even practice had been sporadic.

She’d been through the same thing many times before, of course, but that didn’t make it any less painful. Slowly and with no small amount of dogma and drama, Other Gray Things was breaking up.

“Look, I know what this is about,” Speth said, her bare feet dislodging scraps of salvaged carpet as she walked to the refrigerator. “Things have been weird lately. Practice has been shitty. Gigs have been drying up. And now it looks like the Sworn—”Sworn to Protect,” what a joke—are about to start cracking down on us. Hard.”

She poured a glass of juice and padded back to the table. “We need to seriously figure out what we’re going to do if we want to keep Other Gray Things together. Lay low for a while until the pressure lets up? Maybe even get out of Billow City altogether?”

Speth ignored the sharp intake of breath and plowed ahead before any protest could be made. “I mean it. We could always pack up and start over on the other side of the continent, Silt or Cynon or somewhere. There are all kinds of other Orgh bands we could hook up with out there: Gorgeous Poison Fungi, Iron Bells, Clusters of Five.”

Arj looked up from his bass and let his gaze rest on Speth. “No, actually, the band’s just fine.” His voice was as taut and steely as the strings under his fingers. “That is, it

JANUARY 2011

will be fine. As soon as you get the hell out of it.”

Speth dropped her glass. The room erupted. It took a few seconds of shouting before she could make her voice heard above the din. “This is really how it’s going to happen? Thrown out of the band *I* put together? Half your assholes were fresh out of the academy, singing Aurinth arias and tuning your guitars like automatons to the Hum before I started Other Gray Things.

“I’ll admit it hasn’t been easy the past few years. No one, not even the damned decadent academics, wants to hear us play anymore. ‘It’s getting too dangerous,’ they’ve been whining. Hell, you know what the Regents told me the other day? They wouldn’t organize another Orgh concert because the Spherists have been sending them formal protests. The Spherists! These cultists think the Hum is a single facet of some cosmic, geometrical divinity, and now the intelligentsia is bowing down to their crazy bullshit.”

Speth was frantic now, her voice shaking. “The world is going nuts. Someone’s got to remind people how things really are. Someone has to make some *noise*, clash with the Hum, go against the grain. It hurts, we all know that, but it needs to be done. The Aurinths have kept us deaf and senseless with their placid crap for decades. Now is not the time to destabilize this Orgh cell. You can’t do this.”

Speth’s small body deflated along with the force of her oratory. They’d all heard it before. Such speeches were why most of them had been moved to become Orghs and join Other Gray Things in the first place. But never in Speth’s mouth had it sounded so hollow.

“Why don’t you tell all that to the crowd at the Parabola last night?” Arj sneered, standing up and letting his bass fall to the floor with a crash. “I told everyone. We’d all suspected as much, anyway. We’ve seen some of your charts, heard you singing in your room when you didn’t think anyone else was home. Real pretty, that Aurinth shit. You’re a hypocrite, Speth. A traitor.”

“Arj, you don’t understand. There was a reason behind that.”

“Don’t even try. You know the rules. Hell, you *made* the

M-BRANE SF #24

rules. There's one thing we absolutely cannot do, and that's harmonize with the Hum. It wasn't an accident or some private lapse. This was a public performance, for money, in an Aurinth venue. And it was done without telling us. While the rest of us sat here with our guitars and amps and drums and horns, stripping our skulls of sanity in this endless, thankless protest, you were making nice with the enemy. Perverting your talent. Betraying your band, Speth. And me."

Arj turned away from her. "Get out. Grab your shit and leave. I don't care what you've done for us in the past. I don't even care who your hero fucking mother was. If you can't maintain the trust and loyalty of this band—of this goddamn illegal organization, in case you forgot—none of it matters anymore."

His eyes burned with shame and rage. "You taught me that, Speth. Remember? *You* taught me that."

The doorbell sounded the same as it ever did, a translucent ping that rang and hung precisely within the middle of the Hum. The old aroma of milk mixed with ambergris was still there. Speth could smell them even from the front step. Behind the house Billow City chugged its shitty mist into the sky, squatting in the exhaust of the alchemical power plants and the belching patchwork of factories that formed the Chrome Boroughs. That's where I live, Speth thought, in that crotch-like swamp of airborne bilge and metallic smog. Or at least—she allowed herself a bitter grin—that's where I used to live.

As the bell's last echo bled into the breeze, the door creaked open. A tall woman, her bony face like the surface of a frozen river, stood in the opening. Her long silver hair dangled in dry, tight braids on either side of her face. She fidgeted.

"I see." She paused. "Speth, I..."

Speth couldn't bear to hear another word. She stepped up to older woman, stood on her toes, and kissed her on the mouth with a desperate pressure. Then she brushed past her and down the hallway toward the dining room. "Coffee, Kellen," she called out over her shoulder.

“Preferably with some kind of alcohol in it.”

Hot water with herb milk. Speth had always wondered how Kellen could stomach it. Then again, she was almost three decades older than Speth, and had been born smack in the middle of the Great Dampening—back when the economic collapse had forced people to cut back on luxuries. Kellen saw firsthand how Billow City—hell, the whole world—had gone to shit for two generations following the onset of the Hum.

“Are you still working on your book?” Speth asked, taking a seat across from Kellen at the table.

“Trying,” Kellen said, stirring the fragrant milk into her plain water. “The academic world isn’t exactly in a hurry to release yet another socio-aesthetic treatise about the Hum. And commercial publishers won’t touch it. No one wants to pay good money, they tell me, to be reminded of the thing they spend every waking moment trying to unhear. And you know Spherist sympathy is running high just about everywhere right now.”

Speth nodded and sipped at her coffee. After the initial wave of madness and disorder had passed, governments did their best to institute new laws and cultural initiatives to curb the Hum’s traumatic effects on the human nervous system: insanity, partial paralysis, and, in rare cases, gruesome and often fatal birth defects that twisted fetuses into fatty, faceless question marks of pink meat.

And then the uprisings came. The Spherist cult seemed to spontaneously generate, and it soon lobbied for a planet-wide embrace of the Hum. Its leaders preached that the Hum was a divine phenomenon, a test from Heaven sent to weed out the wicked – the “spiritually atonal”—and unite the survivors into a single symphonic consciousness. Then, of course, there were the conspiracy mongers and outright insurgencies, but those had been too loose and scattered to make any impact. At least not politically; after going underground, remnants of those rebellions began to trickle to the surface of Billow City and beyond in the form of the arts. Poetry, graffiti, sculpture, street theater. And, most radically, music.

M-BRANE SF #24

“Have you thought about publishing it yourself?” Speth suggested, immediately realizing how lame that sounded.

Kellen wrinkled her nose. “Speth, please. You know your guerrilla tactics aren’t fit for an academic. I know you outlaw musicians still think that taking matters into your own hands and clashing with the Aurinthia—with the Hum itself—is somehow noble. But you can’t expect me to print up my own tract and peddle it on the streets like some urchin radical.”

“Urchin radical? Is that how you look at me, Kellen? You know, the Hum isn’t just an *inconvenience*. It’s an assault. A perpetual rape. Bowing down to it or even letting it pass unnoticed is immoral. It’s inhuman.”

Speth had made similar speeches many times, but it had never sounded so hollow in her own ears before. She had loved that initial, blinding rush of Orgh music. It bolted erratically in and out of the Hum, hovering just at the fringes of sickening, flirting playfully yet purposefully with abrasion and chaos. She gravitated to it and quickly became a passionate voice in Billow City’s movement. Unless we fight against the Hum, she would ask potential Orgh converts, how can keep from succumbing to the Hum, from tailoring every of detail of life to fit its invasive, oppressive din? People didn’t need to forget about the Hum, as the Arinths taught, or to become complacent and complicit with it. They needed to be reminded of the Hum, harshly, every waking moment of every day. By force, if necessary.

“Speth, even I have a hard time believing you still cling so dogmatically to that line of polemic. You react against the Aurinths so stridently, what are you but their product? What agenda, political or otherwise, do you Orghs truly have? Are you accomplishing anything other than estranging yourselves from those you claim to serve most—the people, those whom can’t help but cover their ears and call for the Sworn when you and your kind come caterwauling?”

Speth squirmed in her seat. True, the Orghs existed and operated in the legal twilight between post-Hum cultural reform and Billow City’s traditional civil freedoms, a gray

JANUARY 2011

area that those Sworn to Protect had been slow to shed light on. But the Sworn's self-styled War on Discord had picked up momentum following the government's failed etherspace missions to eradicate the Hum, and the Orghs' pirate broadcasts and guerilla performances had been increasingly quelled—and with increasing brutality.

And from her distant, academic perch, Kellen had been a witness to it all. But why did she always have to sound so damned sensible about everything? Sitting with stately poise in a crisp linen dress across from Speth, the older woman seemed like a ghost of the world's suppressed calmness and dignity.

Speth laughed at her own sentimentality. After all, Kellen was the Aurinth professor who had been so easily yet violently seduced by her brash, young protégé.

"May I assume, at least, that you haven't made any secret calls to the Sworn since I showed up?" Speth mumbled around a mouthful of coffee-soaked cookie. "You're not just keeping me distracted with refreshments and small talk until the riot squad shows up to raid the place, are you?"

"Speth, please. You know I don't wish you ill."

"You sure sounded like you did the last time I saw you."

"That was three years ago. And I'd be a poor friend to your mother and her memory if I turned you in. And anyway," Kellen said with a wrinkle of her nose, "it's not like I've been keeping up on you since then. Last I heard, you and your merry band of terrorists were still putting people off their lunch with your musical vomit." She smiled sweetly.

Speth laughed. "That's really what it boils down to for you, isn't it? Aesthetics. Kellen, you can't hide behind that anymore. You never could. Maybe before the Hum crammed its suffocating stink into the world, music was something to be debated and tinkered with in some academic vacuum. But it's *real* now. Lives are at stake. Everything's at—"

Kellen held her hand up. "You'll not rant in my kitchen. Not over milk."

M-BRANE SF #24

“Ah. I see. Prim and proper. But I know exactly where and how your primness and properness stops, don’t I, Kellen?”

Kellen stared at her for a moment, unreadable, and then cocked her head. “Do you know what you need, young lady? A girlfriend.”

“Excuse me?”

A girlfriend, Speth. *Someone* to care about, rather than *something*. Someone to share with, to compromise with. Someone who uses you as much you use them.”

Speth squirmed in her chair. “You know damn well I’d make a monstrous girlfriend.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, I’m ugly, mean, stupid...”

“Don’t forget self-deprecating.”

“Right. Self-deprecating. To a fault.” They both smiled.

“I’ve missed you, Speth. And I wish you were here because of some overwhelming desire to see me. But I’m assuming you need something more than an afternoon nibble.”

“Sorry, Kellen, but you’re right. I could use a place to crash for the night, if you’d be willing to give a potential fugitive a warms spot to sleep...” She left her sentence hanging.

“Indeed. There’s a divan right next to the fireplace in the drawing room.”

“Ha. I guess I deserve that.” Speth dunked the last of her cookie in her coffee cup and gazed out the window at Billow City’s halo of waste. The Hum suffused the room like warm light from the setting sun. “I also need to gather those things you’ve been keeping. My mother’s things.”

Skeletons of tiny elephants and deer-horned dogs hung from the ceiling, brushing Speth’s head like cobwebs. They were built from sticks of some papery wood and crude blobs of children’s glue. She winced. She hated this place. A stench of ozone and aftershave crawled through the stale air. The nurse who had led her in closed the door behind Speth, and a brief spasm of panic seized her. She held the box she’d brought with her to her chest. “Hello?”

JANUARY 2011

she called into the dimness of the room. “Dad? Are you there?”

A whisper came, sibilant and sharp. “The early signs of scars...”

“Dad, it’s me.”

A shirtless man, scrawny but with a turgid belly, got up from a bed against the far wall of the room and clicked on a small lamp. A soldering iron, skeins of yarn, and what appeared to be hunks of some dissected mollusk littered an adjacent nightstand. The man’s eyes seemed to spiral behind thick-lensed spectacles. His lips fluttered.

“The early signs of scars. The sink filled up with hair. Circling. Then silkworms, and then a monkey. And then their most efficient women...”

“Dad, it’s Speth. It’s your daughter.”

He looked through her, then focused his eyes on the box she was holding. “Elspeth, yes. It’s me, your dad. Where did you get that?” He sounded for some reason out of breath.

“Look, I need you to pay attention. Please listen.” She crossed the room and sat down on the bed, then put her hand in his and pulled him down next to her. “Dad, what is this? What is this box?”

He took the box from her hands as if he were handling a hurt animal. “Your mom. This belonged to your mom. I built it for her. I made it out of her song.”

“I know.” She slumped. It wasn’t long after her mother’s death that her father—a fragile man trained as an engineer, an irony that never escaped him—had been sent to live in a hospital. She traced his silhouette with her eyes; he still resembled the tender figure that watched his wife become swallowed by the ether one night on a flickering television screen.

Then, as if in epiphany, he turned to a drawer and began digging through a heap of pieces of metal. Stripped gears and dissected hinges clinked in delicate protest as he pulled out a ring of tiny keys. He flipped through them, singled one out, and fumbled at the small brass clasp caked with verdigris on the front of the box. A dusky purple on the outside, the interior of the box beamed. Chiseled bits

M-BRANE SF #24

of quartz hung frozen in orbits defined by ellipses of silver as thin as fishing line. Together they formed solar systems in miniature, or nuclei magnified, all intersecting each other in spliced planes and exquisite fugues of angles. It was an abstract tableau, yet one flush with a sacrosanct aura.

Speth found a tiny knob and wound it until it resisted. Then she let go. The mechanism purred like clockwork, slowly at first, then launched into a cascade of calibrated motion and pealing notes.

It was a music box.

The song was a simple, folklike lullaby that maypoled playfully around the Hum. There was none of the disintegrating matrices of intervals or head-on collisions of asynchronous scales that Speth once taught her Orghs to wield. She could still hear her mother's chanted verses anchoring the waltz like the fulcrum of a cradle's rock:

*The stem of the ether, the stern of the ether
Other gray things, other gray things.
The warp of the ether, the woof of the ether,
Other gray things, other gray things.
Hush, can you hear them?
No need to fear them,
Other gray things, other gray things.*

“Other Gray Things.” That was the name of her mother's song, engraved by her father on a plaque inside the lid of the music box. Her mother used to wind up the song and sing along softly with it all those nights that the Hum kept Speth awake. It turned the Hum from a frightening murmur into just another piece in a toy-sized orchestra, one that her mother cupped confidently in her hands and conducted as if by magic.

It was also the song Speth had played at the Parabola two nights before. The song that had moved her audience in a way that all her years of raging, orgiastic Orgh performances never had. It was also the song that had caused its unsuspecting namesake—her band—to disown her. She bit the inside of her cheek. The tears came

JANUARY 2011

anyway.

“Elsbeth?” her father said.

“Yeah, dad?”

“Where’s your friend?”

“My friend?”

“Your little friend from down the street. Lydja.”

Speth froze. “Lydja is... gone, dad. The Hum killed her. I... I killed her.”

“Ah, that’s right.” He tapped his chin. “I remember. The flute. She was a weak child, Speth. Mutation. Remember how her odd little body would curl up? All those little nautiloids? Snail shells. Seahorses. Anuses. Hurricanes. Helixes and galaxies.”

He stopped and glared at her with a steely sanity, his jaw cocked grotesquely. “*Ears.*”

“Kellen, get your wrinkly ass out here. *Now.*”

Speth had been banging on the door for half a minute, but it was half a minute more than her temper could take. Finally the door opened, and Kellen, wearing a petticoat and with her hair pinned up in a bun, stepped onto the porch and shut the door quickly behind her.

“It’s the middle of the night, Speth. Do you have to be so loud—”

“Cut the shit, Kellen. I paid a visit to my dad today. I know about the music box. I know what my mom did.”

“Speth, your father, bless his heart, he’s not... right. You know that.”

“I know when he’s gibbering, and I know when he’s being lucid. I got as much truth out of him as I could before he just... fell apart. But I need you to be straight with me. Fuck, all these years of your guilt trips about being a bad daughter and a bad student and a bad lover, and all along *you* were the one being the utter bitch.”

Speth stood there, her breath steaming in the humid pollution.

Kellen clutched her collar tight around her throat. “What did he say?”

“Look, maybe we better go inside —”

“Tell me.”

M-BRANE SF #24

Speth tried to untangle her thoughts. “He told me about mom’s mission. Not the final one, but the exploratory flight a few months before that. She saw something out there in etherspace, didn’t she?”

“Well, that happens. All the ethernauts experience some kind of disorientation, delusions of grandeur, distortions of time. We still understand so little about etherspace.”

“Don’t get fucking encyclopedic with me, Kellen. You know what I mean. She came closer to the Hum than anyone had ever been.

“She met them, didn’t she? The ones who make the Hum.”

Kellen opened her mouth soundlessly.

“Damn it, Kellen, you were my mother’s friend! How could you let her do what she did? You fucking *knew*, didn’t you?” Speth held back a sob with clenched teeth.

“Your mother did what she felt she had to do. Speth, everyone in the world knows your mother was a hero. They just don’t know how much of a hero she truly was. She made some kind of contact during her first exploratory flight. She never told the Ethernautics Council. They wouldn’t have understood. No one would’ve understood, Speth. Your father surely didn’t, even when he figured out most of it. Your mother, she... she sacrificed herself.”

“You mean sabotaged,” Speth spit.

“Call it what you will. She was the only person in the world who knew the truth about the Hum. The Spherists, the Sworn, your Orghs—they’ve all only grasped a fraction of it.

“We’re developing a new sense, Speth. Think about it. How do you suppose light was perceived by the first creatures that evolved eyes all those millions of years ago? The first tastes by the first tongues? It must have been sheer sensory confusion at first, an excruciating chaos. The ether is the medium, Speth, and the Hum travels through it. We need to open ourselves to those vibrations. We need to hear the Hum.

“It’s the next step of evolution, Speth, or at least that’s

JANUARY 2011

the only analogy that makes any sense. And the others beyond the ether are helping us. They're reaching out to us. They're bombarding us with this, this new stimulus so that we'll develop this latent sense that's been locked inside us for millennia. The new sense that points us beyond this dead-end world, that will let us one day come into alignment with their sphere of existence.

"Everything—every atom, every being, every world—will raise its voice to form a single, universal, eternal chord. Don't you see? But it will require some... allowances. We need to grow new ears, Speth. We need to *become* new ears."

Speth shivered in the damp smog. "So the madness, the mutations, the goddamn Dampening itself—this secret—that was all justified? Because some aliens or angels or ghosts or gods want to commune to us?"

Kellen touched Speth's shoulder. "You've always said I care more about aesthetics than duty, Speth. You couldn't have been more wrong. That's a false dichotomy anyway, and you know it. I hold duty above all else."

"And so did my mom."

"Yes, Speth. Her final mission was this world's last desperate attempt to extinguish the Hum. She needed to make that mission fail. She needed it to be so catastrophic, so traumatic, that no one would ever try to extinguish it again. Her mission had already exhausted the last the major nations' alchemical resources. She needed to exhaust the last of their hope, as well. It was the only way humankind would finally give up and let the Hum take its course.

"It wasn't easy for your mother, Speth. But they came to her on that exploratory flight. They came and they sang."

"Who, Kellen? Who sang to her? What the hell *are* they?"

"Other gray things," Kellen almost whispered. The acidic wind from the Burroughs loosened strings of her hair, which writhed about her head like wisps of fog. "Your mother said that that was the closest human language could come to translating the name they call

themselves. Ancient, intangible, other gray things.”

At last Speth wrenched the window open. In the end she had to call the nurse to fetch a crowbar.

“God, dad, when’s the last time you had fresh air in here?” She yelled inside the room.

Her father sat on his bed, his hands folded on his lap, as a rush of cool night air flooded the room. The strange wooden figures hanging from his ceiling began to twirl.

“See, doesn’t that feel good?”

“Yes, Elspeth. Thank you.” He stayed perched like a praying sculpture.

Speth put her coat and her guitar case in the closet. Her show at the Parabola that night had been insane. It had been sold out for weeks, and the tiny club could barely contain the excited patrons. After all, as the members of the audience kept murmuring among themselves, it was rare that Speth, the notorious former Orgh, came back to play the tiny venue where she got her start as a legitimate musician a few months ago.

The crowd—well-off Aurinths, kids with fake IDs, middle-aged couples slumming it—buzzed and fidgeted as Speth brushed past on her way to the stage. She climbed the short flight of stairs to where her guitar and a microphone waited. The faint ambience of live circuitry that seeped through the monitors somehow soothed her.

She sat down and picked up the guitar. Her fingers, as supple as swan necks, drew out the first chord. The crowd instantly recognized the song. It was, most assumed by its title, a bittersweet tribute to her old band.

Then Speth started to sing. Her voice mixed with the stark chords like magma with molten glass.

“Speth? Are you there?” It was her dad.

Fuck, daydreaming again, she scolded herself.

“Yeah, dad. Just thinking. You know, I wish you could come and see me play sometime. Maybe if you keep getting a little better every week, the nurses say.”

He mumbled than made a chirping noise. “We all have to make our sacrifices, Elspeth,” he said in a faraway voice. “Even me. I let your mother go, you know? I knew what

she was doing, and I let her go.”

“Yeah, well... I can't, dad. I can't let her go. I can't let *anyone* go anymore. There's no one left. The Orghs won't talk to me. Kellen's some kind of damn Spherist now. At least the Sworn are leaving me alone. It's just you and me now, dad. You and me and the audience.”

Speth plunked down cross-legged on the floor, reached into her bag, and pulled out the music box. Without being asked, her father got off the bad and sat next to her. She opened the box, and the luminous apparatus threw shadows across her face.

She wound it tightly, held it for a moment, then took her hand away. Protons and planets resumed their interrupted trajectories. Pings and clicks coalesced into melody.

Her dad put his head on Speth's lap. She hummed along.

Jason Heller is a Denver-based writer whose fiction has appeared in Apex Magazine, the Descended From Darkness anthology, Sybil's Garage, Brain Harvest, Kaleidotrope, and twice previously in M-Brane SF, among many others. His nonfiction has been published in Clarkesworld, Weird Tales, Fantasy Magazine, and The A.V. Club, where he's a regular contributor (and a co-author of Inventory, Scribner's A.V. Club book of pop-culture lists). Frequency Rotation is the title of his weekly SF-meets-music blog for Tor.com. Quirk Books will publish his Pirates Of The Caribbean tie-in book in 2011 and his debut novel in 2012. As a guitarist, he's played everything from punk rock to tribal noise; he currently makes noise in the power-pop band The Fire Drills and the post-hardcore trio 25 Rifles. He's also a lapsed cartoonist who still doodles stupid pictures on napkins.

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