

Black Cat Magazine

issue 2:
Apocalypse



CONTENTS

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

FORWARD: BREAKING THE FUTURE

Shane Burley

Poetry

DECAYING DYSPHORIA

art by Fieni Aprilia

BLACK SAPPHIRE

P.B. Gomez

my apocalypse arrived quietly // and took all my breaths
away / with you

Anushka Bidani

GOD GUILTY

Jim Hanson

HOMELESS

art by Maheshwar Narayan Sinha

we only care about white bodies

Michelle Cadiz

WHEN SCHOOL LUNCH IS YOUR ONLY MEAL

David Arroyo



and

Marisca Pichette

CONCLUSION CONTROL

Michelle Granville

A NEBULA ON HER BIRTHDAY

Jess L Parker

**SELF PORTRAIT WITH BLOOD
AT ABDULHAMEED'S BARBER SHOP**

Abu Bakr Sadiq

THE READING

Dzikamayi Chando

PLANET C WRITES AN ANTI-LOVE POEM TO MANKIND

Erica Abbott

AS IF MY ANXIETY IS AT LAST DEPLETED

Beth Cato

ESCALATION

art by Tais Teng

THEY CAME

Lisa Timpf



Fiction

APOCALYPSE SURVEY BETA TEST

Gregg Chamberlain

REFLECTIONS

art by Shiksha Dheda

THE LAST RIDE OF THE POLARIS

Carmen Peters

PASSENGERS, ALL

Holly Schofield

ANYTIME'S THE RIGHT TIME

Marc Kennedy

(IM)PERFECT

Jordan Peeler



September 2021

The Beginning

my body bared clings to naked truths shards from your life

~Mimi German

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the second issue of Black Cat Literary Magazine!

Our theme for this second issue is Apocalypse. When we put out the call for submissions we had a feeling it was a theme that writers would be excited about. After all, dystopian and apocalyptic stories have been the norm in our culture for a number of decades. We truly had no idea how big the response would be. The easiest way to measure that response by the sheer volume of submissions we received. For our first issue we got a little over 200 submissions. We were over the moon excited about it, and felt a bit overwhelmed by task of reading through them all. That number more than doubled from our first to this second issue. We received over 400 submissions on the topic of “Apocalypse.”

Of course, we didn’t just ask for apocalypse themed stories, poetry, and art. We asked for stories that go deeper into the meaning of the word apocalypse, which going to back its greek roots means “to reveal” or “to uncover.” That definition, of course, has none of the negative and destructive end of the world connotations that the world is loaded with today. So we asked for apocalyptic stores of destruction and dystopia, but also of hope, joy, and positive change.

We got everything we asked for and more. This issue has stories, poems, and art that range from fantastic to mundane, from humorous to serious and poignant, from optimistic to dreary, this issue is a wonderful representation of the range of possibilites the idea of apocalypse elicits. And with a special forward by Shane Burley on the power of fiction to create radical social change, this is an issue that is not to be missed. We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

In Solidarity,
Justine & Mimi



Editors: Justine Norton-Kertson and Mimi German

Layout: Justine Norton-Kertson

Cover Artwork by [ToeKen](#), with special thanks to “Simmer” author, Tim Meyer.

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“my apocalypse arrived quietly // and took all my breaths away / with you.”
by Anushka Bidani was originally published by *Moonchild Magazine* in 2021.

“Passengers, All” by Holly Scholfield was originally published
by *Honeyguide Literary Magazine* in 2020.



BREAKING THE FUTURE

Forward by Shane Burley

I see little reason to not live in silver linings.

And we kind of have to. To survive the global collapse of everything, like a stable biosphere or economy, you have to live on the bright side. Your glass must be half full. Because without that you can only stagger through emergent tragedy, devastated that it didn't work out as it should. That mourning could last an eternity.

As I'm writing this, the newest United Nations climate report is all over social media. Without even a shred of irony there were two fundamental takeaways: we have to do everything we can to stop a 1.5 Celsius increase in temperature, and it's too late to stop it. The desperate moralism used to mobilize the public to do something about climate change was simply not enough. Maybe we can do better next time.

But this sense of failure is its own kind of fiction. The apocalypse is painful, but it's not permanent. Rarely does the eschatology of any religion or culture signal a finite end, and if it did it would be a non-event, nothing you could build up a cosmic significance around. The apocalypse matters precisely because it's not the end. There is a whole world afterward. If we are lucky, maybe more than one.

We bathe in a celebration of collapse, as if when the banking system goes under we will suddenly all become accomplished bow hunters or build a functional garden in the middle of an abandoned golf course. Even more so, we assume that we (and I do mean enlightened radicals, of course) will be able to create something even more magnificent, a liberated, revolutionary society that avoids the accumulations of power that poisoned our ancestors. Beyond naivete, there is still something here. Amidst the chaos and destruction there is one silver lining left: within the chaos, some amount of emptiness may form. Sure, nothing's ever over and even as things fall apart the social relationships that underpin them remain. But when something does begin to crumble, there is often, even for just a moment, some level of blankness. Even for just the flash of a moment, sometimes there is nothing. And these are the spaces that act as the fulcrum of a shift, a condition where change has even the shred of a possibility.

Revolutionary politics require a fundamental breakdown on the past. We hear about all kinds of revolutions: industrial revolutions, information revolutions, political revolutions. They promise to rewrite the rules, but they have something in common: they fail to tear up the roots. Radicalism questions the very fundamental precepts of our institutions, its basic assumptions. And to do that you have to have a revolution, not one that inundates us with an accelerating process of transformation, but one that tears down as good as it builds. So maybe it's just a coincidence that all of human society decided to get together and tear up everything they built.



Building something new is not just the product of material conditions. We certainly cannot exist outside of reality, few new societies have been built out of mindfulness retreats or a “vision board” from The Secret. But to assume that material realities simply prefigure the outcome is to splice out agency from human events, to make us passive contestants in a war of elementals using our bodies as chess pieces. The reality is that as we brush away our old society, anything could be built in its place. We know ourselves well enough to understand that our DNA contains the more astonishing cruelties, a creativity of suffering that has motivated many of our “revolutions.” We are visionaries of causing pain who draw on an al

most mystical well of visionary energy to uncover how we can inspire hurt in others. Material conditions only can bring energy, instability, and opportunity, they don’t erect our souls.

Instead we have a choice between socialism and barbarism, and we can decide exactly how we will implement the angst the inequality builds—the alienation, the triviality, that our political experience fosters. And to do this we have to submit to a visionary process, to actually tap into that energy at the heart of storytelling. We learn who we are not through chemistry, but through the alchemy of metaphor. That future world is built in our myths as much as it is in our stars. By rejecting the role of art, culture, and spirituality, the left seems to believe that it is making the practical choice, but it is simply misunderstanding how moments of change work.

Revolutions happen not in an instant, and certainly not at the hands of militias, but in the decades, centuries of fantasy that precede it. To have a new world we have to toy with it, to experiment in pictures and sounds until we can feel it in our bones. And when we build that new world it will feel familiar because it is something that we know was birthed from inside us. Then we can actually use the word “revolution” without feeling like a branding consultant: we tore out what was there and built something authentically our own, one that cannot cast us aside because it was built with flesh and bone.

People don’t trust revolution, and why would they? Our history of revolutions, right and left, is both a story of immense human cost and the reification of dominance and power. We overthrow one king to replace him with a shareholder, and despite all the marches, petitions, and even fallen arms, little changes. The goal here is not to improve the world, it is not to see a modicum of change in our lifetime, it is to build something entirely new. And to bring ourselves back to the high stakes gamble of world building we have to start in our hearts, the kind of self sacrifice that can forge something beyond meager reforms and token diversity. To engage in a revolutionary process takes every part of ourselves, and it never begins without a vision.

Fiction is a key part of this, a tradition of shared dreaming. Genre fiction takes this even a step further, where we conceive of parallel, future, and horrific worlds, all of which help us to understand what is missing from our lives today, or what pieces of ourselves are most cherished. This is the way we come to know ourselves and to conceive of the possible before we knew it was.

“Politics is the art of the practical.” That’s true. So fuck politics. I have no use for it. I don’t want to live in the realm of the practical. There is no practical solution to climate change, just like there is no practical solution to solving labor strife, or police violence, or the banking system, or a culture of depression, or the hopelessness of our lives.



There are only radical solutions, equal parts material and idealistic. So let's dream bigger. Bigger than we have before, more impractical, more ephemeral. Let's disconnect from our material conditions so we can envision exactly the kind of love we would have if we had never known the chains. Only then will we be ready when the conditions right themselves, when the uncontrollable lines up with the inferno inside of us. Material conditions are not the part we need to worry about, they are coming. We should worry about what we do with them when we collide.

Shane Burley (He/Him) is a writer and filmmaker based in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It* (AK Press, 2017) and *Why We Fight: Essays on Fascism, Resistance, and Surviving the Apocalypse* (AK Press, 2021). His work has been featured in places such as NBC News, Al Jazeera, The Independent, The Baffler, Jacobin, The Daily Beast, Truthout, and Bandcamp.





POETRY



DECAYING DYSPHORIA by Fieni Aprilia

Fieni Aprilia is a documentary photographer, artist, and researcher from Jakarta, Indonesia. They took MA Cultural Studies in SOAS, London, focusing on South East Asian culture. They're interested in decolonisation of photography, and horror as a means of social control. They recently published a photobook titled "Isn't This Home?" that scrutinises the concept of home and sense of belonging as a diaspora.



BLACK SAPPHIRE

by P.B. Gomez

Viridian hills in flames of sunlight.
Young trees dream of bearing sweet flesh.
Golden calves bask just above
As radiant birdsongs soothe the blue sky.

Fuming beasts rumble on a black river.
Steel trees with black vines pierce the hillside.
Rusted horses rot in the valley
As a rabbit drowned on the river.

We gawk at murder and call it economy.
Men admire monuments to their own arrogance.
Their brave new world demands blood sacrifice,
A sapphire turned to coal.

P.B. Gomez (He/Him) is a Mexican-American activist and writer. He is the Founder and President of the Latino Rifle Association, which aims to provide self-defense education to Latine communities which is both politically progressive and socially responsible. He attends UC Berkeley School of Law with a focus on studying civil liberties and environmental justice. He shares his thoughts about politics and current events on Twitter @MestizoLeftist.



my apocalypse arrived quietly // and took all my breaths away / with you.

by Anushka Bidani

what is it they say about apocalypses?—
that the world would be born anew:
bleeding red suns would be pinned to the sky,
and our hands would perpetually taste like thunder.
wide-eyed horizon. wet soil.
all of our shadows could look like phoenixes,
if only we are willing to be burned.

brows drawn together in consternation,
hands hummingbird-flapping. raging queues
waiting
for the bureaucratic evaluation.
blank forms. a pack of pens.
write: the price of your life.

soft mouths open. swallow rain.
teeth-less humans striding like predators.
we can be anything that does not bite.
in the thicket of the forest, a pair of eyes.
come closer.

Anushka Bidani is a 20 year old poet & essayist from India.
She's the editor-in-chief at Headcanon Magazine. You can find
her at anushkabidani.com. Twitter & Instagram: [@anushkabidani](https://www.instagram.com/anushkabidani)



GOD GUILTY

by Jim Hanson

GOD GUILTY

By Cosmic News Network

At his trial in the Milky Way District God was found guilty of murder after his chosen species devastated the environment and committed life extinction across the planet of Earth.

Prosecutors argued that the Garden of Eden was the primal crime scene where God failed to vet Adam and Eve then exiled them to earth to introduce sin and to pollute and despoil its life-sustaining environment.

Prosecutors stressed willful negligence because God failed to use his omniscience to detect flaws of character exposed at the Tree of Knowledge and to use his omnipotence to annul the result.

Prosecutors claimed God violated cosmic law and intervened to assist the homo sapiens species without due diligence and with reckless disregard for the right of ascension by alternative species.

Defenders argued murder was unavoidable due to flaws in the universe, biological laws permitting human ascendance based on competition and physical laws excusing entropy and mortality.

Defenders also argued other species were not fit alternatives but did not refute arguments that ants and toads were more cooperative and peaceful and grasshoppers who were also vegetarian.

God was sentenced to be exiled from the Universe and his whereabouts in other universes remains unknown.

Back on Earth healing began as amoebic life in the oceans scheduled to evolve on land in ten million years.



Jim Hanson is a retired Senior Researcher at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. He is a sociologist, lay-ordained Zen Buddhist, and member of the St. Louis Poetry Center. He has posted or published twenty single poems and a chapbook by Flutter Press.





HOMELESS

by Maheshwar Narayan Sinha

Maheshwar Narayan Sinha

is a self-taught artist, graduated from Ranchi, Jharkhand, India. "Nature attracts me, because, it's infinite and wild and contains layers of meaning which is never ending. Also, the hard realities of the life penetrate into our dreams to create something that is-anti-class!" Paintings are shown in the country and across, like- Mumbai, Delhi, Jaipur, Bengaluru, , Dubai, South Korea, Austria, London and Venice. Artworks are widely published in the country and overseas' literary-art journals. Also write in Hindi and English- short stories, (novels, too), articles have been extensively published.

<https://onlinepaintingexhibition.com/product-category/london-art-exhibition/maheshwar-n-sinha/?order-by=price>



we only care about white bodies

by Michelle Cadiz

tonight on the evening news
the anchor talks about germany
under water. houses swept away
and people gone in the blink
of an eye. this is familiar.

in an interview a german man says
you picture this kind of thing happening
in asia, but not here. last year
my country drowned again, twice
in a row, but oh, global north, oh first world,
did you think the climate crisis kept itself
to poor countries? to brown bodies?

listen, i'm sorry you are flooding
or freezing or burning, but why
does the world only weep for you?

Michelle Cadiz is a poet and a biologist. You can follow her on twitter [@michellyfishal](https://twitter.com/michellyfishal).



WHEN SCHOOL LUNCH IS YOUR ONLY MEAL

by David Arroyo

Like vanilla ice cream
cold air sticks to our skin
as we walk to school,
thin with hunger.

Charcoal crawled in my nose
but no smoke slithered on the ground.

Above, a sudden eclipse
as if God slid an Oreo
in front of the sun.
A red crack
scarred the moon
like an egg hatching.

I turned to my sister,
“apocalypse or genesis?”

She replied, “either way,
Our hunger prevails.

David Arroyo is a nerd and ex-catholic. His Dungeons & Dragons alignment is Neutral Good. He holds an MA in English from Florida State University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Stonecoast. He’s published poetry in *Stirring*, *Silver Blade*, and *Burning Word*. Future work is forthcoming in *Coffin Bell* and *Nocturne*.



and
by Marisca Pichette

Then I will dig my fingers into the clay
searching for maybe, for what,
caked joints with ash in the gaps
where questions once hung. Then
I will shed the pebbles & make way
for gravel to line my seams,
struck from what I was, patched,
glaring in the sun. Then I will
carve into myself the words
I forgot to speak, so when I sit
cross-legged in the field

my voice is legible

for ages into now.
Then all that I wrought or ripped out
of the soil of my beginning, falling back,
collapses with the dawn
And I am nothing more
than what rude armament was made
of me
when it all began.

Marisca Pichette is a queer author of speculative fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in PseudoPod, Daily Science Fiction, Mermaids Monthly, Apparition Lit, Grimdark, and The NoSleep Podcast, among others. Her debut novel, *Broken*, is forthcoming in August 2022 with Heroic Books. A lover of moss and monsters, she lives in Western Massachusetts.





CONCLUSION CONTROL by Michelle Granville

Michelle Granville (she /her) is a mixed media artist living in Sligo, Ireland. Her current work is a combination of printmaking and collage. Her work has appeared in Mayday, Analogies and Allegories and Riggwelter press among others. You can find more of her work on Instagram @beleafmoon



A NEBULA ON HER BIRTHDAY

by Jess L Parker

With my body cracked open wide, I know
where lightning and thunder come from.

A flash of light like a lopsided star beams
through, inking a stripe down my middle
and stopping time as if the entire equator

were a dusty fault line flexing to unfurl.
With the world on the edge of splitting,
a universe inside me grows pink and visible.

Some confused teenage doctor offers to
snip the skin, forbidding its right to rupture
and is swatted away as the earth quakes.

There is a doubling, wet thud of two moons
colliding, both shaken but unbroken...

time starts over again.

Jess L Parker is originally from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and lives in Madison, WI with her husband, son, and French Bulldog. Her work has appeared in Bramble, Poetry Hall, Millwork, Wallop Zine, and elsewhere. Jess holds an M.A. of Spanish Literature from UW-Madison, and an MBA.



SELF PORTRAIT WITH BLOOD AT ABDULHAMEED'S BARBER SHOP

by Abu Bakr Sadiq

what the trash collector does not tell any of
us at the barbershop is that there's a crowd
gathering around a body by the roadside &
that the blood on his fingers is not his own
& that the police would come asking after
names we'd nailed to our fathers' graves &
that a woman would hold my leg on the
street & ask if i'd seen the man who
killed her son if i'm her son & that her
face would follow me to bed & that i
would down bottles of alcohol as always
when i'm helpless to those who expect me
to know beyond the nothing i know & that
i would watch many nights strip to dawns
with my eyes falling out of their sockets
because i am the god who carries people's
tragedies and name them his own i cry
their cries with their voices breaking in
& out of my throat in & out of my
thoughts & i become them my heart
shrinks like theirs a wound opens into
an ocean on their tongues i fall on my
back into their mouths & become one with
the salt water the water forgets how to
drown a boy like me i gather what's left
of me into dunes & go wherever the wind
goes sometimes all i want is to disappear
& other times i just want to be here & alive

Abu Bakr Sadiq is a Nigerian poet. His poems have appeared in The Lit Quarterly, Uncanny Magazine, Iskanchi Press & Magazine, Knight's Library Magazine, Rockvale Review, The Drinking Gourd, Radical Art Review and elsewhere. He writes from Minna. Find him on twitter [@bakronline](https://twitter.com/bakronline)



THE READING

by Dzikamayi Chando

This poetry is prophecy of my ancestor's bones
falling from his hands like rinsed meteorites
spilling out of the nomenclator's mouth
his bellow bursting into a trance vibrating
in my veins five centuries later
this is a translation of tongues of trees
that spoke through the herbs that healed
incantations otherworldly transmission
stirring his bones into

ivory, gold, copper, tin, silver, diamond,
everything in the land & the land itself
into the blood of unbowed kings gunpowdered
into traps made out of telegram wire
into a downpour dousing the blacksmith's fire
into the ire of gods given other names

This is the bone thrower's burden
to close his eyes and see
hut tax, dog tax, livestock tax
the land apportionment act, the pits
of twelve hour shifts that fill lungs with death

This poetry is DNA a message preserved
on the cusp of a falling sky, a failing realm.

Dzikamayi Chando is from Gweru, Zimbabwe. He loves ice cream & still considers Pluto a full planet. He tweets @dzikamayic



PLANET C WRITES AN ANTI-LOVE POEM TO MANKIND

by Erica Abbott

What is it they say
about the loved
and lost? I am
an irrigation system
for all the crops
of barren promise.
Watering what has only
ever tried to make
a drought of me.
Put your hands on me
and I evaporate. Kick
up the dust once more
and watch my bones
take shape, one atom
at a time. What is a body
if not a home? I never
opened the door and you
let yourself walk right in.
Sealed up the windows
behind you and walked
barefoot across the creaking
hardwood floors. Blood-
cracked and flinging
your hands to navigate
the darkness. Grabbing
my ear and making me
hear what you have to say.
What is dryness but a lack
of exhalation? How you drank
and drank until this paradise
became a hostile organ? Nothing
could bring me back to life—no
water enough to resurrect
what has been lost. Listen,
because if you don't, you might
miss it. The tumbleweeds
and tornado sirens tried to signal
warnings of what godly disasters
were to come. The locusts



swarm on your tongue
and I only think to suck
them out like poison.
The apocalypse has nothing
on us. If this is a love poem,
then let it be a rapture.
A bouquet of fire encircling
our skin until even the oxygen
turns to ash. The horsemen
pounding us into the ground
where you've always belonged.
You just couldn't resist
bringing me down with you.
We both lose, time
and time again.

Erica Abbott (she/her) is a Philadelphia-based poet and writer whose work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Midway Journal*, *Serotonin*, *FERAL*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, and other journals. She is the author of *Self-Portrait as a Sinking Ship* (Toho, 2020), her debut poetry chapbook. She volunteers for Button Poetry and Mad Poets Society.



AS IF MY ANXIETY IS AT LAST DEPLETED

by Beth Cato

my therapist once told me that I
coddle my anxiety as if it were
a cute fuzzy puppy, and if
I see her again
if I survive these next
hours and days
I'll tell her about how
strangely calm I feel as I watch
a gigantic kaiju march
across the cityscape
buildings crunching
like metal potato chips beneath
broad robotic feet
sirens blaring all around
cars horns in cacophony
other people run and scream
but I
sip my coffee and watch
more at peace than I have ever been
in all my life

Beth Cato Nebula-nominated Beth Cato is the author of the Clockwork Dagger duology and the Blood of Earth trilogy from Harper Voyager. She's a Hanford, California native transplanted to the Arizona desert, where she lives with her husband, son, and requisite cats. Follow her at BethCato.com and on Twitter at [@BethCato](https://twitter.com/BethCato).





Escalation

by Tais Teng

Tais Teng works as a writer, cover artist, illustrator and sculptor. He also paints murals and decors for theater. When he was a bit younger he wanted to become a starship pilot, but writing and drawing those places isn't too bad.



THEY CAME

by Lisa Timpf

they came unbidden in the night,
insect soldiers armed for the fight
green carapaces gleaming bright
as neon in the full moon's light

insect soldiers with eyes of stone
they fought in pairs, and they fought alone
and conveyed, in nightmare clicks and groans,
disdain for beasts of blood and bone

a ship crash-landed in my yard
it came in fast, and it came in hard
its steel skin rent, its sleek lines marred
the pilot's body blackened, charred

I leaned in close so as not to miss
the final words from those bloodless lips—
a cloud of steam, a triumphant hiss:
Welcome to the Apocalypse

Lisa Timpf is a retired HR and communications professional who lives in Simcoe, Ontario. Her poetry has appeared in *New Myths*, *Star*Line*, *Polar Borealis*, *Liminality*, and other venues. You can find out more about Lisa's writing at <http://lisatimpf.blogspot.com>.





FICTION

APOCALYPSE SURVEY BETA TEST

by Gregg Chamberlain [414 words]

Greetings, gentlebeing, or whatever current alternative non-gender-specific address form is acceptable, and please excuse this interruption of your dream-state as we at Armageddon Inc. — where our motto is “The Horsemen are always ready to ride!” —ask you to consider taking part in a new project, inasmuch as our psychological profile indicates you may be someone with the potential interest and inclination to be part of a select subjects group to assist us in the beta-test of our new designer doomsday line of product services, which we are planning to introduce given the overwhelming popular appeal of the recent Mayan Calendar crisis, though this time we can assure one and all that every possible glitch is worked out to avoid a repeat of that fiasco, and also we can now offer a wide choice of cataclysms that will fulfill any apocalyptic fantasy, featuring such perennial favourites as: World War Three, with or without the atomic orbital bombardment option, along with ecological catastrophe, nuclear winter, solar flares or a full speeded-up expansion of the sun, plus we have a plethora of pandemic possibilities, and a new selection of current cutting-edge fads like robotic revolution, the biblical Judgment Day or other theological visions of doom like the Norse Ragnarok, complete with the Fimbul Winter, or, for the more intellectually-inclined, total global economic chaos, and, of course, we do have traditional fan favourites like alien invasion along with both a standard and a non-standard zombie apocalypse, and all of these have a 100-per cent satisfaction guarantee with this no-risk trial offer or Armageddon Inc. promises to restore your space-time continuum to its current steady-state setup, minus an acceptable minimum of collateral damage or change based on our certified accounting department’s calculations, and so before we return you to your theta-rhythm REM session, please take a nano moment to consider and take quick advantage of this exclusive, one-time-only, unique opportunity, our operators are standing by ready for your virtual signature on the contract, so be the first one in your demographic to end the world before someone else beats you to it, and please note this offer may be void, prohibited or subject to certain restrictions on some planes of the multiverse, and with that cautionary note we thank you for your time and attention and if you will just submit yourself now to our customer survey satisfaction scan, totally painless we assure you, once again thank you for your cooperation, good luck, and have a nice life.

Gregg Chamberlain lives in rural Ontario, Canada, with his mis-sus, Anne, and their cats, who allow the humans to think that they are in charge. He writes speculative fiction for fun and has several dozen published examples of his fun.





REFLECTIONS by Skiksha Dheda

Shiksha Dheda is a South African of Indian descent. She uses writing to express her OCD and depression roller-coaster ventures. Sometimes, she dabbles in photography, painting, and baking lopsided layered cakes. Her debut poetry collection, *Washed Away*, is forthcoming with Alien Buddha Press



The Last Ride of the Polaris

by Carmen Peters [3,027 words]

Brandon used his pocketknife to puncture the side of the Coors Light. Amber liquid splattered onto his pants before he managed to fasten his mouth on the hole he made, and he drained the whole beer in a few full-throat gulps. Collin looked down at the can in his lap, the first one of his life, still untouched. He grabbed it but hesitated, and the metal burned his hand and the pain came, and he let go with a hiss.

“Hot one today, huh?” joked Brandon. He let out a huge belch and tossed the can against the wall of the empty pool, where it clattered against the baked cement and rolled into the muddy dredges to join the others.

Collin snorted but didn't say anything. Sweat gleamed off both the boys, even though they were sitting in the shady end of the decommissioned pool, even though they were in nothing but swim shorts. Even though it wasn't much past 10 AM. But that's just how it was now in Sawhee, not to mention the rest of Nebraska and beyond. Collin had seen the live-streams of Omaha before the crackdowns began. Sawhee was getting along okay, all things considered.

Brandon grabbed another beer from the cooler, but his attention was focused on something above and behind Collin's head.

“Man, it's criminal they shut down the Polaris so quick,” said Brandon.

“It sucked,” agreed Collin. “But you saw what happened to the water tower.”

“That's a load of horseshit,” growled Brandon. “Ever hear of chlorine? Even the crazies wouldn't drink water from an aquatic center.”

That's what Sawhee called its water park, an “aquatic center”. Collin's mom thought the town was trying to be fancy, but Collin reasoned a pool, lazy river, and playground wasn't exactly Six Flags. “Aquatic center” sounded like what you'd call a water park with all the excitement sanded down, and truth be told that was Sawhee in a nutshell. The only thing that stuck out in the town was the Polaris, and it was the first to go.

“But it's the...” Collin struggled to recall the phrase he had heard on the news. “It's the... optics of the situation. It looks wasteful to keep a slide going when people are suffering.”

Now it was Brandon's turn to snort. “Just because the liberals claim that doesn't make it so. If you ask me the only ‘optics’ we should care about are what make people happy. And that's exactly what the Polaris did. It stood for something bigger.”



He sighed out what remained of his philosophy and stabbed a hole into his fresh Coors. There was no reason to do it, but if anything, that seemed to encourage Brandon to do it more.

Collin's eyes drifted up to the rim of the pool, where he could see the crest of the Polaris shine in the sun's glare. The water slide was four stories tall: gleaming jewel of the aquatic center and talk of the county when it opened. Collin had been ten when it was built and he was sixteen now, and it was funny how impenetrably long that stretch of time seemed. Compare that to last year, when the president stood behind his podium with head bowed, and announced that the top scientists were in agreement about Earth's new trajectory. Since then the months had flown by.

The beer in Collin's lap was burning his leg even through the swim shorts, so he placed it under his lawn chair.

"What got you working here?" asked Collin.

Brandon shrugged. "Always liked swimming I s'pose. Something about how when you're in water the normal rules don't apply. Only time you can float without touching the ground. Like flying, in a way."

"Damn, who's becoming the hippy lib now?"

"Go fuck yourself," Brandon shot back, although he laughed as he said it. He brushed the hair out of his eyes and looked up at the sun, and his humor pruned into a bitter chuckle. "The only thing I'm becoming is a lobster. Same as everyone else."

He took a swig of his Coors and Collin didn't know what to say, so he looked down at the pool drain.

The pool had been the final casualty of the aquatic center. The town had pulled the plug last week, after allowing all the youngest kids a day of free swimming. At that point the water level had evaporated down to the last couple feet, and at any rate the remaining water was so grimy that most adults had given up on swimming a ways back. Brandon and Collin had stood watch at both ends of the pool, but it felt purely ceremonial. When the groundskeeper drained the final dregs at sundown, Brandon had flashed Collin a cheeky grin and proceeded to give a 21 gun salute with his lifeguard floatie.

"What about you?" asked Brandon. He scratched at a scab on his leg. "What brought you into the wild and wonderful world of lifeguarding?"

The answer was that Brandon worked at the aquatic center, but Collin wasn't about to admit that.

"I wanted a distraction," said Collin. It wasn't a lie.

"Mom was taking the news about everything real hard, no different than anyone else I guess, but there was only so much stewing in that trailer I could take. Figured I could do something better during the end-times."

Collin didn't mention that back in April she'd got the news that his older brother had been found dead in California. A lot of the cults were doing mass suicides back then, when Earth crossed Venus' orbit. "Closer to the sun is closer to the Lord", or so they claimed. Collin didn't mention that, nor did he mention his mom's recent obsession with frying eggs on the sidewalk. Some things were better left unsaid.



Brandon whistled, and then hiccupped. “Not the best year to enter the workforce, bud. But I get needing something to do. God knows that’s been on my mind, and it’s not like anyone’s getting payed anymore.”

He crunched the empty can against his head with more force than was needed. Collin reached under his chair and gave an exploratory touch of his beer, but it was still too hot. It needed more time.

A red bird chirped in the maple tree overlooking the aquatic center. Collin thought it might be a cardinal. It trilled out a song and cocked its head, but there was no response. It called out again. The leaves of the maple were broad and green and fleshy, and they covered the bird in a cloak of vegetation. Collin wondered what it thought about its changing world, if it even thought at all. A passing breeze ruffled his hair, traveling upwards into the tree where it jostled loose some helicopter seeds still stuck on the branches. The cardinal stayed anchored to its spot, safe from the heat, and the Polaris loomed behind it. The world smelled of pollen and hot asphalt.

A typical summer day, if you ignored the fact that Sawhee was entering its second week of November.

“Were you always planning on staying in Sawhee?” asked Collin.

That’s how you needed to talk nowadays, in the past tense.

Brandon scratched his scab a bit more before replying. “Nah, I reckon not. Dad got a job at the res casino when he left us, and he always said it was good work. I could see myself dealing blackjack, sweet-talking the ladies.”

He grinned, and Collin felt his stomach drop on instinct.

“For sure, totally,” sputtered Collin. “You’re handsome enough to have them wrapped around your finger.”

There was a silence. Collin dreaded that he had gone too far, that he had played his hand wrong and was about to go bust. But when he snuck a glance at Brandon he saw the older boy wasn’t mad. Brandon was staring up at the Polaris, his expression inscrutable.

“You know, back when I was a little kid things looked different,” Brandon said slowly. “There were rules of course and the right way of things, but everything had this glow, because you hadn’t learned of all that could and couldn’t be done. You couldn’t see the edges of the box.

“I thought for a time I wanted to be an astronaut. Can you imagine that, me floating in space? I could watch everything happen from a distance. Just myself, in the quiet. It couldn’t touch me.”

Brandon met Collin’s eyes. There were tears there.

“Collin, I just don’t want to be scared anymore.”

Collin didn’t know what to say. He dripped sweat but his mouth was dry. There was something between them, something that he could puncture with the right words, but the will had been baked out of him.



So instead he reached down and grabbed his beer. It burned but he could withstand it, and in one motion he cracked open the tab and brought it to his lips and drank. The Coors had gone flat, the hops coating his tongue with bitterness. Collin gagged. Was this really what beer tasted like, the whole time? All that wondering and anticipation for this?

Brandon saw Collin's reaction and smiled with the corner of his mouth. His tears were gone, either wiped away or dried up. Collin felt his heart quicken. He hadn't blown it yet.

God it was hot. In a mad flash of inspiration, Collin took his can and dumped the rest over his head. Brandon cracked into fresh laughter.

"I don't think that's what the Reverend meant by baptism," said Brandon. "You're lucky he isn't around to see this."

Brandon gestured around him. Collin wondered how far that gesture was meant to go.

The scab on Brandon's leg was starting to bleed. Still chuckling, Brandon dumped the rest of his beer on the wound, washing it clear. Then he stumbled to his feet, pupils floating in booze.

"Let's get it going again."

Collin knew what he was referencing, but there had to be a mistake. What Brandon was suggesting was impossible.

"How? Where would we get the water?"

Brandon winked and tapped his forehead. "We never drained the Polaris, remember? We just let the water dry up. And who's to say the stuff underground isn't still there?"

The gears in Collin's head began to turn. The Polaris emptied out into a shallow pool, and the water in that was sucked back up to the top of a slide, recycling it like a garden fountain. What remained in the pipes could very well still be there, but...

"How do we turn it back on?" asked Collin. "For all we know the groundskeeper held onto his keys when he left town."

Brandon flushed with triumph, or maybe it was alcohol. "Had to cover for him a few times when he was hungover. There's a spare set under a rock by the breaker box."

Collin leaned back in his chair, objections spent. He looked up at the Polaris. It glistened in the blue sky, descending to earth like a platinum giant. What Brandon was proposing was stupid, dangerous even, but suddenly Collin didn't care. Here was a chance to stick a middle finger to what was done and dusted. A chance to rewind the clock, even if just for a second.

He scrambled to his feet before he lost his nerve, chest heaving. "I'm in."

Brandon whooped and pounded Collin's chest. "That's what I'm fucking talking about!"

The two boys climbed out of the pool and jogged over to the breaker, which stood at the bottom pillars of the Polaris. Sure enough, the keys were right where Brandon had said they were. Brandon unlocked the breaker box and went to flip the water slide to life. He hesitated.



“There can’t be much water left,” Brandon said, the realization sobering him up. “One of us should be up there when the switch is flipped. After one pump cycle there may not be enough for the other guy.”

“Who goes then?” asked Collin.

Brandon didn’t answer. The cardinal was singing again. Collin looked up into the maple tree but it had flown to a different spot. Closer, but unseen.

Brandon placed a hand on Collin’s shoulder. “You should be the one.”

Collin shivered at Brandon’s touch, but not because he was cold.

“It was your idea,” replied Collin. “You wanted this. It wouldn’t be fair if I took it.”

Brandon smiled again. It was like he didn’t know how to do anything else.

“Are you scared?” he asked, not unkindly.

Collin swallowed. He nodded.

“Then you should do it,” said Brandon. “Don’t worry about me; I can take care of myself.”

Collin steeled himself, curling his fists into tight balls. “One last ride. For Sawhee.”

“Fuck Sawhee,” declared Brandon. “For us.”

Collin wanted to go up the steps before his courage failed him, but then Brandon did something Collin would never have guessed, not in a million years. Brandon tightened his grip on Collin’s shoulder, and then brought the younger boy against him, and held him close.

Collin could feel Brandon’s heartbeat through his chest, measured and silky, slowed by cheap beer. Brandon stank of sour sweat, but underneath it was a crisp, green scent, like fresh-cut grass from the lawnmower bag. It smelled like older summers.

“Good luck dude,” whispered Brandon.

Collin once again found himself out of words. All he knew was he wished this moment would last forever, that he could go into the past, where time was unstuck and the years felt like centuries. Brandon let go, looking sheepish. He gave Collin a light shove.

“Now stop being a faggot and get your ass up there.”

Collin didn’t know if Brandon knew. In the end it didn’t matter.

Collin began his climb, but turned around after the first flight. Brandon was at the switchbox, watching Collin, fingers at the ready. Collin had to say one more thing.

“What’ll you do after this?” he asked. Future tense, for just this once.

Brandon thought a second before answering.

“Maybe nothing. Maybe I’ll drive up to see my dad before it gets much worse. Have him take me camping. We never got the chance to, before he left.”

Collin nodded. It was as good an answer as any. He resumed his climb. He wouldn’t hesitate again.

The plastic steps were shaded by those above. Collin put one foot in front of the other, winding up the staircase in measured paces. The world enlarged as he ascended, first to encompass the aquatic center,



then the surrounding trees, and finally all of Sawhee. Off in the distance he could see the ripped metal struts where the desperate, dehydrated mob had torn down the water tower. At the time it felt like that was the moment where everything ended, where everything couldn't go right again. He paused, just for a moment, and then kept going.

Collin cleared the last flight of stairs, emerging onto the top platform of the Polaris. The sunlight glared down, causing the ground to shimmer with false water. His skin burned, but it didn't bother him anymore.

The cardinal was perched on the slide tunnel. Its feathers were the color of flushed lips and fresh blood, and its eyes were shadowed onyx, shining with life. It cocked its head, looked at him defiantly, and sang. Another bird in the unknown distance answered, and the cardinal flapped its wings and was gone.

Collin couldn't look up to follow its path, not without blinding himself. He looked down instead towards the small form of Brandon, and gave a thumbs-up. Brandon responded in turn, and he flicked something in the breaker box and the Polaris roared to life.

It was not an easy resurrection. The beast groaned as the neglected machinery of its bowels began their old patterns. There was one shudder, and a second, as pressure built in the pipes. If there was water in the dark places, it would not come without a fight.

Collin peered into the mouth of the slide. The heat was oppressive, like all the worst times Collin had been stuck in a hot car rolled into one. He couldn't see the bottom of the slide, but he knew there would be little water to cushion his fall in the small pool at its base. The ending would hurt.

Collin's fingers buzzed where they touched the tunnel, and then with a final gasp of metal, the water came. It spouted into the gullet of the Polaris, precious as dying light. Collin didn't have time to consider, he went in feet first with the intention to pause at the lip, but his body had the momentum and he let go. He had meant to offer some sort of signal to Brandon, one last sendoff, but that was the Collin of seconds ago.

This new Collin shot into the blackness, back pressed against smooth fiberglass, pushed forward on fingers of roiling water. The slope of the slide plummeted, taking his breath away, and he pressed his hands atop his chest as if in prayer. Small holes had been peppered throughout the Polaris' hull, the sunlight peeking through like midnight stars. Everything smelled of the past and sounded like the future.

Collin thought of his mother cradling the phone in her lap after hearing about his brother. He thought of the cardinal, and the taste of beer, and the rhythm of Brandon's chest. He flew faster and faster. He felt his back thump against the ribs connecting the sections of the ride. He was between unbearable heat and wonderful cold, and then there was the light at the end, and then Collin was out of the hole and into the open air.

Collin remained on his back, palms clasped, eyes upwards. The sun was bright and red, larger than it had been even weeks ago. Collin had hated looking at it before, but now there was nothing between them



but open space. It stripped away everything unnecessary, leaving nothing but sun, body, and the remaining water below. And until Collin landed, that's all there would be.

Brandon had been right. There was nothing better than floating.

Carmen Peters (they/she) is a trans-femme writer living in Portland, Oregon. In their spare time they enjoy watching surrealist movies, reading tarot, and enjoying the scents of freshly-bloomed flowers. Her latest work can be read in the Evansville Review and the upcoming "Prismatic Dreams" anthology from All Worlds Wayfarer. On Instagram they can be reached [@Carmen_Dreams_Ghosts](https://www.instagram.com/Carmen_Dreams_Ghosts).



PASSENGERS, ALL

by Holly Schofield [650 words]

Cold Pacific waters drip from the river otter's fur as she bounds along the pebbled ocean shore, her hunt for shelter having led her to the edge of her usual territory. She blinks, staring through the shredded mist at the tilted ferryboat on the sandstone shoal ahead.

On the bank, a cedar groans, firs whisper in fear. To the south, where the trees dull into fog, the leaden gray bulk of an impending superstorm looms. A hollow log or shallow den is not enough to weather the violence that ever-changes the coastline. The otter's den has washed out in the last storm, the clay bank slumping under a watery onslaught.

She lopes toward the rusted ferry, down salt-weathered bedrock, past limp dead wrack, rotting sea stars, and empty mussel shells. A dozen too-smooth, too-round logs jumbled against the ferry hull make a convenient bridge. She bounds along the largest one, then dives under the ferry's submerged railing to arise on the slanted deck. She stops, wrinkling her nose at the foul odor of diesel, then scrabbles across the rust-streaked surface past huddled cadavers of cars and trucks.

A sudden click and the otter jumps sideways. From the solar paneled roof, an automated recording begins to blare.

Welcome aboard Cascadia Ferries. Your safety is important to us.

The otter's whiskers twitch, then she leaps from stair to stair, reaching the foredeck through the half-open door rusted in place. Dank waters lap the leeward side, and the otter paddles with her hind feet before slithering out onto the pristine blue carpeting that slopes upward. She slips between rows of vinyl seats and sneezes several times. No sheltering hollows here.

Please report any safety concerns or questions via the easily-downloadable phone app. Note that you may see government drones taking water samples, or the flashing of garbage patch warning lights, or vessels retrieving dead marine mammals. These are routine operations and are not considered hazardous.

Mid-way across the lounge, the otter bats at a shampoo bottle bobbing gently against an opened suitcase, the imprinted instructions of "rinse and repeat" still persisting a full decade after the tragedy. An abrupt gust of wind rocks the ferry, sending icy waves sloshing over the otter's back and against the intact seats.

An oolichan struggles feebly, caught in a swirl of plastic trash. The otter gulps down the tiny fish and glides farther into the room, eyes bright for burrows or tunnels.



Be advised that sudden weather events may occur. The continual underestimation of the size and virulence of recent superstorms by the Canadian government exempts Cascadia Ferries from any liability. Please see our website for further information.

By the stern door, fetid clothing jumbles with greenish bones. A broken skull juts from salt-crusted rags, empty eye sockets facing upward.

We appreciate your patronage and your trust during these trying times. Cascadia Ferries strives for the comfort and safety of our passengers.

The voice shrinks to an uncertain whisper as the solar cells' batteries near depletion for today.

The ferry rocks slightly and something metallic creaks loudly far below. The smell of diesel grows stronger. The otter slips out between the rear doors.

There can be no shelter here.

Thank you for sailing with Cascadia Ferries.

As the otter crosses back over the slippery logs, a faint rainbowed sheen appears on the water next to the rusted hull and begins to spread with each lap of the waves.

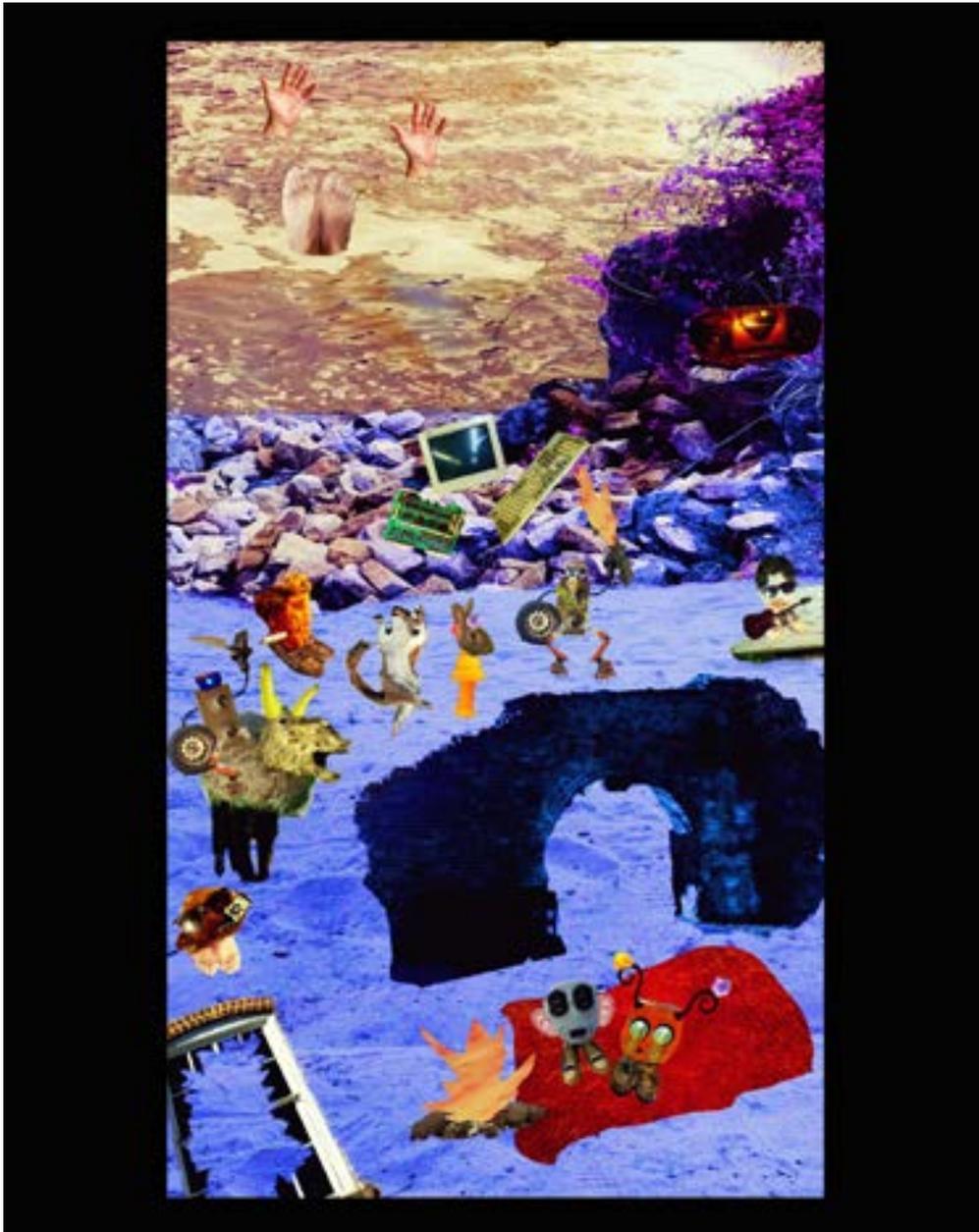
On the top rail, a cormorant shakes his head, once, twice, before flying off over the restless gray chop.

Clouds bruise the sky and the wind has grown chill. The superstorm will arrive soon.

The otter glances back and sneezes once again before heading north along the shore toward Desolation Sound. She runs swiftly along the high tide mark, dodging debris, bound to the earth and the ocean, a passenger still.

Holly Schofield's stories have appeared in Lightspeed, Analog, Escape Pod, and many other publications throughout the world. You can find her at hollyschofield.wordpress.com.





ANYTIME'S THE RIGHT TIME

by Marc Kennedy

Marc Kennedy Marc Kennedy created The Thick Un's as a digital art form after finishing a recording project under that name. It started as something he thought would be humorous on Instagram and then morphed into a style and characters and then t-shirts and then zines and then canvases and posters. Now here it is that he goes around to pop up markets with a full table of merch and basically resides in Thick Un's world.



(IM)PERFECT

by Jordan Peeler [1,901 words]

This is all the information you have on the target?" I ask, leafing through the practically barren file. All they've given me is a birth certificate, potential addresses, a slip of paper describing the target's diagnosis, and two photos: One of the target as a newborn and a much blurrier one of a teenager I assume is more recent.

"Yes, unfortunately. Our daughter says her name is Maya Craft," Mr. Fortunato responds, clear disgust in his voice.

"Your daughter?"

"We had a Perfect Child designed for us not long after...this occurred about sixteen years ago."

"As a replacement?"

"I suppose that's one way to put it."

"Surely all of this information isn't immediately necessary," says Mrs. Fortunato.

"It isn't immediate, I guess, I'm just trying to gauge the gravity of the—"

"Based on our urgent request I would've assumed the gravity of this ordeal was quite clear," the woman spits. My heartbeat speeds up as I force back my aggravation.

"Of course. In that case, give me until the end of tomorrow, tops," I say. "I require seventy percent upfront."

"Seventy?!"

I nod. "Given the circumstances, I'd consider it a nice deal. There are assassins out there who ask for everything upfront, charge twice as much at least, then take months to carry out the mission. That is, if they do it at all. But you know, you seem capable of handling a few more weeks of this disgrace to your bloodline walking around. She hasn't figured it out in sixteen years and hey, maybe your daughter won't let it slip."

I sit back in my office chair, fiddling with my electric pistol. I sneak a glance at my clients, who exchange annoyed yet desperate looks.

It's looking pretty good for me.

Mr. Fortunato pulls out his wallet and counts out a sizable stack of thin rose gold bills: Caelum's currency. He slides it across the table and I sit straight, looking through them to make sure I wasn't being scammed. Everything was in order.



I store the bills in my satchel and pull Maya's file closer to me.

"So, I presume we have an understanding? Everything will be resolved within forty-eight hours?" asks Mrs. Fortunato.

"No problem," I said.

I leave the conference room long before the Fortunatos to ease any suspicions. I had already put away my extra metal and electric bullet rounds and hid my handhelds away in my pants. I didn't want to be unprepared if I stumbled across the perfect opportunity with my target.

A sixteen-year-old girl, the Fortunatos' biological daughter. She was supposed to be dealt with not long after her birth, once all the tests returned claiming she would develop a mild "neurological imperfection," as hospitals were now calling autism and those sorts of diagnoses. Considering their status I guess the Fortunatos didn't want any of that information out in the public, and pretended the lifelike android child they customized was the one they gave birth to instead.

Perfect Children is what they're called. The Argosy was pushing for them, especially in Caelum. That's what my contacts said anyway. I mean I've never been around this territory—hell, I've only been in town a few hours—but I can already tell the Argosy has a firm mechanical grip on this place. As I walk down the street I notice a good amount of people have some sort of Perfection. Some are easy to spot, cheap bronze or silver metal attachments in various places on people's bodies, from prosthetic limbs to eye, ear, or brain pieces. Others aren't as obvious to the plain eye, but I've gotten good at spotting them. They're supposed to blend in perfectly with whatever body part they're meant to attach to, but they're all so empty, void of life.

That's none of my business, though. By the Argosy's standards, I was born "Perfect," so there was no need for any of that. Suppose that means I'm lucky.

I scan the streets more intensely for the target, hoping to catch her out and about in some kind of daily routine. This is typically a hit or miss method for me; I've been hired to take out twenty-two targets before Maya and I think I've only been successful thirteen or so times. The other times I was lucky to have clients with way more information about my targets than the Fortunatos. Clients who had time to plan and weren't paranoid about their somehow illegitimate daughter discovering who her birth parents were after sixteen years of no problems.

To my surprise, I spot Maya two streets down from where I started, walking into a jewelry store with a friend.

Eli, you are too good.

I wait a couple of minutes before following her in, taking particular interest in a tray of emerald jewelry off to the side. I strain to hear her speak, looking over every so often. I don't catch much but she seems



super knowledgeable about every little jewel on display in the store. Her friend nods his head and says a word or two, not necessarily uninterested but he definitely doesn't know as much as his friend. It's pretty engaging; I start getting invested before she makes her way closer to me, and I have to jump out of my trance and move farther.

By the time Maya's done there, the store is fifteen minutes from closing and the sun has set. She hadn't bought a single thing, and yet she was glowing like she went on a shopping spree.

This is the girl I am going to kill by tomorrow night.

I leave the store after I see her and her friend turn the corner, observing how the nighttime crowds have changed compared to the daytime crowds. There are fewer children and parents out and about, and now I could see more people my age. After roaming the streets for a bit I find myself downtown. People filter in and out of a small bar on the edge of a street, which interests me enough to give it a shot.

I'm able to find a good spot at the bar a fair distance away from people, ordering a double cosmo to start. I sit with one arm on the counter, turned to face the crowds of people strewn about the bar. Once my drink comes I down it with a few gulps, request another, and continue to people watch.

"Better make that two, Will," someone says as they take a seat on the stool beside me. I turn to see a woman—tall, maybe a year or two older, curly ginger hair tied up in a messy ponytail, insane blue eyes, and a small metal Perfection in the center of the veins on her hand—staring at me with some sort of unexplained confidence.

"Cassia," she introduces herself, holding out her hand.

I hesitate a second before shaking it. "Liz," I say. I'm not sure if I trust her enough with the name I typically go by.

"Haven't seen you around here before," she says, her hand lingering a bit too long in the handshake.

"Maybe we're just not here on the same nights," I respond.

"Hmm, I guess that could be it. You think I woulda noticed a girl like you walking around though?"

"A girl like me?"

"If you don't mind me saying, you're, like, super hot."

"I don't mind at all." I pause. "You aren't bad yourself."

Even in the dim lighting, I see her face turn bright red. I'd barely said three sentences, but alright.

I look down at her Perfected hand. "Can I ask what that's for?" I ask.

Cassia's eyes follow mine. "Oh, this? Gives me feeling back in this hand so I can move it. Had a weird accident a few years back."

"I see."

"Yeah. In this city you gotta have at least one of these, it seems. Everybody wears 'em around like a trophy. If you aren't fixing something that's 'wrong,' then you're not 'improving yourself' and becoming a 'better addition to society.'"

Cassia is using air quotes and rolling her eyes, making sure her voice is relatively quiet.

"I have a feeling you don't like that," I say slowly.



“Hey, you said it, not me,” she responds, smiling. “But yeah, those Argosy jerks are getting out of hand. Did you know they plan on sending a few of their soldiers to look over the city?”

“I didn’t, actually. You mean, their robotic troops?”

Cassia nods. My eyebrows narrow, and I allow that to be my only sign of frustration.

“Want my opinion? People are people, right? So why are we in such a rush to use all this tech? Don’t get me wrong, it makes sense in quite a few cases but aside from that, we’re turning ourselves into cyborgs with all these Argosy attachments,” says Cassia. Then she scoffs, “It’s almost like that’s their goal, slowly making us into robots to control. But again, you didn’t hear it from me.”

“You know what? That doesn’t sound too crazy,” I say. “That actually sounds pretty spot on.”

Cassia and I talk for another hour or so, although my mind is stuck on the things she said about the Argosy. I can’t believe someone from Caelum could actually see what the rest of the world could: The Argosy was getting a bit too comfortable. Caelum is the territory affected the most, the guinea pigs for all their technological advancements. They don’t know any different. They wear their Perfections like badges instead of embracing what distinguishes them from each other. It’s what drove people like the Fortunatos to hire people like me to kill their own children.

As if on cue, I see Maya run by on the other side of the street as I exit the bar with Cassia’s number on my forearm and a new bruise on my collarbone. I snap to attention. I could do it now. Easily.

I slink down the street after her, unhooking my revolver and electric pistol from where they were hidden in my pants. I make sure they’re both full of ammunition while also being careful not to lose my target.

Eventually, she stops, shoulders heaving up and down as she trembles a bit. She’s been crying.

I push away my concern, raising the electric pistol to the center of her back as I step closer.

“Maya Craft,” I say.

Maya jumps then turns to face me. She freezes, eyes wide and still glistening with tears. She’s hardly breathing.

“Someone hired me to kill you,” I explain bluntly, fingers tightening around the trigger. I get a little closer.

“Who?” she asks, surprising me. Usually, at this point I get begging and pleading from my targets, attempting to convince me not to end their lives.

What am I supposed to say? Oh, so you were supposed to be killed as an infant because your business mogul birth parents thought you were a disgrace! That seems like a horrible final phrase to hear before



dying.

Instead, I continue with my little speech. “You’re the twenty-third person I’ve been assigned to kill. And you’re the twenty-third person I’m gonna offer this to, if you keep quiet and listen to me.”

Maya nods slowly as I lower my pistol, replacing both weapons in their respective holsters.

For the first time since arriving in Caelum, I give someone my true name.

“The name’s Eli Tessaro. And I want you to help me in a little rebellion against the Argosy.”

J.S. Peeler is an emerging Black author studying English and Creative Writing at the University of Denver. She has one book, *The Wild Ones*, published in 2018.



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