

The Deaf Poets Society, Issue 4: May 2017, *Crips in Space*

Guest Editors' Note

by Alice Wong and Sam de Leve

Greetings, corporeal crips and non-crips:

As guest editors for this special issue of *The Deaf Poets Society*, we are excited and honored to share the brilliant creations and perspectives offered by contributors to this issue.

Crips in Space was conjured by a mundane activity: Sam had reconceptualized their movement on wheels as an analogue to movement in zero-gravity, which in turn sparked speculation about the ways in which crips are particularly suited to life in space. Their tweet about #CripsInSpace went viral when Alice amplified it and encouraged community input.

The outpouring of interest from dozens upon dozens of people serves to highlight not only our enduring fascination as a species with space, but also how strongly speculation about the future resonates with d/Deaf and disabled people in particular. As more and more people suggested artmaking around this theme, Alice proposed a collaboration with *The Deaf Poets Society*. The expertise and interest of *The Deaf Poets Society* and its editors allowed the burgeoning

idea of Crips in Space to come to life here in this issue. We are filled with gratitude for this opportunity and partnership.

While space may exist in a vacuum, the idea of Crips in Space did not come from a cultural vacuum: indeed, it can trace its roots to a long history within speculative fiction and within the d/Deaf and disability community. Despite the erasure or diminishment of d/Deafness and disability in major touchstone media, it is far from absent. Disability and d/Deafness, acknowledged or not, are present in stories from independent authors and publishers, all the way up to blockbuster media like *Star Wars*. Whether they #SayTheWord or not, there have always been stories about crips in space--and our presence in those stories underscores the underlying truth that d/Deafness and disability are and will always be a fundamental part of human existence.

By sharing these stories, poems, essays, and art, we offer a sample of visions that illustrate that existence. We hope that this issue will provoke further discussion, creation, and imagination. Space truly is the final frontier and our ingenious community of pioneers are prepared to explore it.

POETRY SECTION: "POETRY PARTICLES"

Jay Besemer

Definition

it's the nighttime of the
blood.

moment by moment
the cells stack up &
tethers make fast &
everything manages.

when the tissues collide
with stone & bark
with wind & silk

contraband of purpose

evidence accumulates
like crusts of bread
on café tables

the body changes
begins to erupt

codes in motion
slow storm
of particles all
shifting state.

fractures open,
heal.

metabolic swarm
astonished in love:
definition of a living thing.

Geological Time

once my body was a fall of rocks onto a highway cut through a bank
of hills.

now it is the dominion of practical stains.

with enough time, i can learn from this earth, the parts of it that i
know.

the parts of my body that heave, glisten, spurt.

the ruby, the moonstone.

geological time in a biological entity:

how little logic enters into it.

Possible Forms

I.

the real gives way to static
& we stretch into it,
make a trellis-thing & call
it increase.

noise is full

of information, & the mass
of information bends space/time

around our
pylons.

now, bodies. bodies
that radiate in the
shift of want. we have
bodies

that want.

we have

that want.

as the breath gives way to panic
we shrink into it,
recede into a kernel & carry
this in a pocket.

dying stars
do not move
like we do.

learn how

in the cosmos

the loss
& the gain
are one.

learn how

in the cosmos

failure does not exist

& what exists
does so unapologetically.

there is no weariness. only heat death.

yearning for deep space
is yearning for paradise
for some great mouth
to smile & thank us
in words we can remember
& carry home for display.

earn the affirmation of the everything
without betrayal.

it isn't
what we think.

II.

carbon has no gender.

likewise hydrogen.

wait for some clue
to possible forms.

behavior is this
matrix—

what is done becomes
what we seem becomes
what we are

like weather we are
outside the selves

the shelter holding
energies together

the shell of question &
answer

me & you—

what if the measure itself
is flawed

what if it isn't human
but person
we mean
we try (& fail) to be
or see

what if this place
is also person

o ignorant stain
o face in the dark

windowpane

the hole in your

eye

so

crowded

Jay Besemer is a poet, performer, artist and editor whose books and chapbooks include the forthcoming *Crybaby City* (Spuyten Duyvil), *Telephone*, *Chelate* (both Brooklyn Arts Press), *A New Territory Sought* (Moria), *Aster to Daylily* (Damask Press) and *Object with Man's Face* (Rain Taxi Ohm Editions). He is a finalist for the 2017 Publishing Triangle Award for Trans and Gender-Variant Literature. Jay is a contributing editor with *The Operating System*. Look for him on Twitter @divinetailor and on Tumblr <http://jaybesemer.tumblr.com>.

Marlena Chertock

On that one-way trip to Mars

If I didn't have a bone disorder
I would go to Mars
and never come back.

I would go to Mars,
send an application to NASA,
tell them my coding is so-so,
I've never peered into a robot's circuitry
but I'd like to learn how.

I would go to Mars,
someone who has to
look and write and revise
to understand. Someone who believes
there's other life out there,
not because of scientific proof
or a god told me, but because I want
humanity to feel less lonely.

I would go to Mars and send back news
of the Sols. I'd create the first
Martian newspaper, publish

the first book of Martian poetry,
paint the Martian soil with my words.

I would go to Mars if I wasn't too short
for NASA's height restrictions.
I'd tell them you can fit more short people
into a rocket. Don't worry
about my bone deterioration rate,
I had arthritis at 13. Walked like an old lady
at 20. It'd be nice to float
and give my bones a break.

I would go to Mars
if I didn't have bones
clicking against each other,
if I was a jellified blob. If the genetic
letters within me
didn't spell out feeble,
different, unfit for space travel.

"On that one-way trip to mars" originally appeared in Crab Fat Magazine.

Application to NASA

Even if all the pain I've felt in my whole life doesn't equal
the pressure an astronaut experiences in G-forces on reentry,

even if the fact that I've been staring up since I was born —
at people and the stars — isn't enough,

even if I was born with arthritis,
cushioning between my bones faulty,

even though I'm beneath your stated height restrictions,
I was shorter than every water slide and roller coaster I've ridden on
too,

even when my lower left back feels like
it's been hollowed out with a jagged spoon,

even through the spreading unfeeling,
numbness from my butt to my toes,

even if my room at 10 and 25 shines
with green glow-in-the-dark stick-on stars,

even when sneezing feels like I'll push

my spine out of alignment,

still I'm strong. I may be one of the strongest candidates you've ever had.

"Application to NASA" originally appeared in Noble/Gas Quarterly.

Moon, or no moon

excerpts from GQ, 2014

Buzz Aldrin was burdened.

His grandfather shot a bullet

into his brain. His mom swallowed

pills a year before he took off from Earth.

Moon or no moon, suicide was in his blood,

“a genetic association.” He had a mental breakdown

after returning from the moon. He drank, divorced, went

to the psych ward, was broke. Like a new moon on a cold night

in February, frost crunching under his boots. Melancholy ran in the

Moon side of his family, his mother's maiden name Moon. When he

climbed down

the ladder and first saw the moon, spread out, really in front of him,

he called it “magnificent desolation.”

The martian comes to me

while I'm waiting for the Metro.

It's late again, and she says
she wishes she could use her spaceship
in the city — no-fly zones or something.

The martian is on a mission
to learn about all forms of transportation.
She's always on the go. She loved
the subways in Paris. Underground,

a familiar sense of being lost. In Chile,
she took a 12-hour bus ride,
tried to sleep in the non-reclining seat.
German submarines do wacky things

to the martian's ear canals.
When she gets back on land it takes weeks
for her hearing to rise back like bubbles.
American airplanes are where the martian

feels most at home. She doesn't love
having someone else pilot,
but at least the turbulence
of flight is back in her body.

"The martian comes to me" originally appeared in Calamus Journal.

A speck of pain

in the immense black.

A whimpering fleck of dust
in endless starlight

what does it mean

to ache always.

Will someone, some life

form understand

me, a speck, one tiny part
of one race

on one small planet

in our small solar system

in the vast galaxy.

I give a cosmic middle finger

The black hole in my lower left back
wants to swallow me whole. But
I'm trying to have more good days
than dark. My back sucks my energy
like a fat leech living in my spine,
transforms it into the biggest invisible
middle finger light-years wide.

You can't see it because black holes
are invisible. My back adheres
to their laws of gravity —
absorbing my smile and confidence
and blasting out darkness.

I give a visible middle finger back at
my back, tell myself I know how
to talk to the universe's most feared
unknowns. Look it straight in the
event horizon, stick out my tongue.

Aging with the solar system

I would not even be born yet
on Pluto. I'm still in my mother's womb.
It's the 18th century there, while on Earth
we're sped up to a technologic 2016.

On Jupiter, I'm in my terrible twos,
snatching toys from my siblings
and throwing tantrums for every reason.

Mars, I'm just becoming a teenager,
my spine beginning its curve,
I'll need to wear a brace next year.

On Venus, I'm almost 40.
I spend my 243 days to Earth's 1 reading.
Maybe I have kids by then.

If I live to Mercury's orbit,
I'm 99, almost an Earth-century,
a galactic centennial. There,
my bones would be even more brittle.

"Aging with the solar system" originally appeared in Black Heart Magazine.

You magnify the universe

with your dreams. You'll never get to space
without a science degree, hours of
test pilot training, actually exercising.
But in your dreams you're floating
in black, planets and asteroids
spread around you. Don't get stuck
thinking how you'll never be
an astronaut. One day you may
witness people landing on Mars,
sharing your love for the stars.
Keep magnifying the universe —
because it's still expanding, with or without you.

*Editors' note: Some of these poems originally appeared in Marlena's first full-length poetry collection, **On That One-Way Trip to Mars**.*

Marlena Chertock's first collection of poetry, **On that one-way trip to Mars**, is available from Bottlecap Press. She is the Poetry Editor for *District Lit*. Her poems and short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Crab Fat*, *Dear Robot: An Anthology of Epistolary Science Fiction*, *The Fem*, *The Little Patuxent Review*, *Paper Darts*,

and *Wordgathering*. Find her
at **marlenachertock.com** or **@mchertock**.

Mari Kurisato**Love Letter**

My Lady, you and I
will be long gone
before the depths
of my love for you
are ever reached,

the universe is not
so wide, so oceanic
so impossibly huge
that it can contain
the depths of my
need for loving you,

out past the racing
edge of time's first
notes spills my love
for every part of you.

let the cosmos be
my love letter to thee.

Mari Kurisato is the pen name for a disabled, LGBTQIA, tribally enrolled Cote First Nations Ojibwe woman who lives in Denver, Colorado with her wife and son. She has written two self-published books, and her short fiction has appeared in *LOVE BEYOND SPACE AND TIME*, the *THINGS WE ARE NOT* anthology, and *ABSOLUTE POWER, TALES OF QUEER VILLAINY* by Northwest Press. She is currently hard at work on her next novel, seeking an agent, and spending too much time on Twitter & in MMO's. Find her on Twitter at **@CyborgN8VMari** and at **polychromantium.com**. Be warned, she cusses like a motherfracker.

Ciel Sainte-Marie

gifts of my sweet body

if I took this pill
would my head still fill
with dreams of the
singing stars?
if my brain conformed
would I lose tooth and horn
to guide me through
dimensions beyond?
if I lost this leg
would I have to beg
to feel the tremors
of the earth again?
did nature say
we can't delay
for diversity
and change?
or was it a human oath
uncaring of what i broke
that turns gifts of
my sweet body so strange?

Ciel Sainte-Marie is an elusive catdeer who likes to bite, romance, and talk about symbols & personal myth. She is a Black, Caribbean, mixie queer spoonie who is slowly venturing out of the wilds of liminal spaces. Faerie is dead, long live Faerie.

Larry Thacker

Disorder in a Far Dark

Just calm down. Don't panic.

It's a colonial cliché. *Relax.*

Have you tried meditation yet?

*It really does work anywhere
in the solar system, you know.*

She's not that convincing.

You are still on your meds?

You know what is convincing,
though? These millions of miles
from my old security blankets?
How a false heart attack feels.
How easily you're convinced
this is the one. Finally. Or, if not,
how the idea of crawling back
into a completely safe skin suit
causes something strange to happen
in your brain. Or waking up
having forgotten how to breathe,
as if your O2 gave up on you
out there down in a crater. Alone.
It's a singular horror that nothing –
no doc or meds – ever fully get.

*If things were a little better,
what would that look like?
Can you describe that feeling?*
Yes, I say. It's as if dying here
would be fine. As if the planet
itself wasn't out to kill us all.

Larry D. Thacker's poetry can be found or is forthcoming in more than ninety publications including *The Still Journal*, *Poetry South*, *Tower Poetry Society*, *Mad River Review*, *Spillway*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, *Mojave River Review*, *Mannequin Haus*, *Ghost City Press*, *Jazz Cigarette*, and *Appalachian Heritage*. His books include *Mountain Mysteries: The Mystic Traditions of Appalachia* and the poetry books, *Voice Hunting* and *Memory Train*, as well as the forthcoming, *Drifting in Awe*. He's presently working on his MFA in both poetry and fiction. Visit his website at: www.larrydthacker.com.

PROSE SECTION

Brianna Albers**One**

“Do not go gentle into that good night, ... / Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” —Dylan Thomas

The church is silent. Small. A scattering of colored shards, though she supposes that’s what happens when stained-glass windows are shattered. Bibles are flung halfway across the nave, pages ripped, soiled. Graffiti:

YOUR GOD WILL NOT PROTECT YOU

A few pews are upturned, denting dusty carpet—a shelter for the kids who take refuge here, but only at night. Never during the day, with sunlight filtered through the painting of St. Lucy, looking down on the building’s apse.

Suddenly, a shadow, just at the edge of her vision. There’s nothing but the vague outline of a form—curved hips, tight coils of dark hair—, but it’s a form she recognizes. “How come I never hear you when you sneak up on me?”

“Practice,” Tabietha says, “makes perfect. You have to learn to blend in.”

“I hate to break it to you,” says Blaire, gesturing at her wheelchair, “but I’m pretty sure that’s impossible in my case.”

Tabietha scoffs. It sounds vaguely sacrilegious. “When did you become such a defeatist?”

She shrugs a shoulder. Or, at the very least, she tries to. “The world’s ending, Tabi.” “Just our little corner of it.”

“Still.”

Footfalls. Clothing rustles against a pew, and Blaire turns from the pulpit. It gleams in the late-afternoon sun—auburn, chestnut, a hint of carmine—, the only thing in the church deemed worthy of preservation. That, and St. Lucy, venerated for her martyrdom.

“So,” Tabietha says, sliding into a pew. The word is sharp, razor-edged; a breath escapes her. Like popping a balloon. “Why here?”

“Because.”

“You don’t even believe in God.”

“I believe in a god,” Blaire says. “I just don’t know if I believe in this one.”

Tabietha quirks a brow.

“Catholicism doesn’t do it for you?”

“I wouldn’t say that.” She almost feels like she should apologize.

“There’s a lot to be said for saints. And Catholic churches are always nice to look at.”

There is silence for a long while. Tabietha shifts, and the sound echoes, bouncing off the walls, the vaulted ceiling.

“You’re going to do it, aren’t you.” It’s not so much an accusation as it is an affirmation. Something nameless, but buoyant, fills her—a kind of knowing. Liquid, golden warmth.

Blaire nods.

“I knew it.” The woman’s voice sharpens imperceptibly. The edge of a dulled knife, glinting through the air. It pops the balloon, again, but this time, there’s no relief. Only discomfort. A slow hissing. “You were always going to do it, weren’t you?”

She's not sure she can deny that. Not in good conscience, anyway, and she's trying to be truthful. "I don't have a choice." Her voice is small. "It's this or—"

"Don't say death."

"That's what it is, and you know it."

"They might not take you," Tabietha offers, after a moment. "I mean, people have been setting up... safe houses, or whatever the hell they're called. Or we could leave. We could just pick up and— and—"

"And what?" "I don't know!" Tabietha makes a sound, deep in the recesses of her throat; it sounds vaguely like a groan.

Another sacrilegious sound. "I don't know, but there has to be *something*."

And, just like that, the nameless solidifies—collapsing in on itself, leaving a scar in its wake. Something claws at her insides, the vase of her throat, yanking fistfuls of air from her lungs. When she speaks, her words come in punctures. Quiet, desperate gasps. "You think I'd be doing this if there was an alternative?"

Tabietha doesn't reply. Instead, she pushes herself to her feet, and the sudden expulsion of energy is almost too much for Blaire to

handle. “I’ve heard rumors,” she starts, only to stop. Her eyes flick from Blaire to something in the distance. “I’ve heard rumors of people... getting out.”

Blaire stares at her, unblinking. “Of the country?”

Tabietha nods. “You can’t be serious.” “I’m not saying it’s a great choice,” she says, “but it’s a choice. Right? Which is what you want. You want a choice.”

She huffs out a breath. There’s a throbbing behind her eyes, just beneath her brows. “I’m not going to let you smuggle me out of the country.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s dangerous?” The words stick to the roof of her mouth—gummy, thick, entirely impassable. “Because I don’t want to leave? Because— I mean, even if they did manage to get me across the border, where would I go? What would I do? Who would—” Brush my teeth, dress me, put me to bed every night, but she doesn’t say that. “There are too many variables,” she says, finally.

Tabietha sighs, shifting her weight from foot to foot. Then, she steps forward, crouching, and the woman’s hands are on her legs—warm, heavy, encompassing the entirety of her kneecaps. It’s a familiar

touch, and the knowledge angers her. She fights the urge to rear back, to skitter away, like some kind of frightened animal.

“You don’t even know if the operation will work,” says Tabietha.

“The doctors are optimistic.”

And, just like that, the softness monsters. Grows an army of talons, hooking into her skin. “Don’t call them that.”

“That’s what they are.”

Tabietha shakes her head. “They’re—”

“Rebels,” says Blaire. The word perches on the tip of her tongue, swinging its legs. “But that doesn’t change anything.”

“It should!” Tabietha’s palms turn inward, skimming skin, squeezing. They leave faint red marks. “It won’t be at a regular hospital. It won’t even be at a regular facility, with— with machines and medicine and, like, the stuff they use to sterilize everything. They’ll probably do it in the basement of a warehouse somewhere, on the outskirts of the city, near the drainage pipes with the rats and the— the trash—”

“I know all that.”

“Okay!” Her brows draw together, jagged lines—dark, angry birds.

“So why—”

“Because I’m tired.” The words come out in a rush of air, one after another, a string of near-profanities. “Those people are gonna me throw me in a warehouse somewhere, and we’ll all be packed in, like— like sardines, and I’ll starve to death, probably, and it’s all because I—” she presses the heels of her hands to her thighs, harder, harder— “can’t walk, and no one’s doing anything to stop it, which says—” A lot, she wants to say, but doesn’t. She’s not looking for guilt. “And I’m just— I’m tired of defending my own humanity, you know? And, sure, maybe the operation will fail, but at least I’ll have done something. Something permanent, because it’s not like leaving the country is gonna do anything, not in the long run. And if it works—”

If it works. She can hardly envision that, what it would be like—mostly because she’s always refused that luxury, that longing for a kinder world. But the image is there, lingering, like something from a dream. She’ll close her eyes, and the weight will be gone, and it’s like she’s never stopped running. Like movement is a part of her, that missing rib, a fluidity of body.

Her lashes flutter. If it works, like something from a dream. But the dream is just that—a dream. A quiet horizon, fingers stained with the blood of a peach.

“If it works,” she says, quietly, “I’ll be free.”

Silence, again. In the distance, a shattering—glass, probably, from the sounds of it. A window, or a door, or maybe something worse. The soft murmur of voices. Shouts. There must be soldiers nearby. She thinks, dimly, of moving, but the thought leaves as quickly as it’d come. They won’t hurt her here. Her, or Tabietha. It’s why she’d chosen this place, a house of worship, as protected as it is reviled.

Tabietha sighs, sitting back on her haunches. Her hands follow, and the spaces they leave behind are just as violent, if not more so. For the first time, the emptiness of the church—the pews, the pulpit—strikes her as something to mourn. Grief shuffles through the door, a dark creature, its back hunched in silent prayer.

“What if you die?” Tabietha asks.

“Then I die.”

A pause. Then, “I don’t want you to.”

“I don’t want me to, either.” Something blurs her vision, and she blinks, scrunching her nose. “But it’s my choice, Tabi, and I choose to *choose*.”

Tabietha stares at her hands, at her hands turning fists. After a moment, she presses her lips together, and Blaire sees that for what it is: surrender.

“I can’t be there,” she says, finally. “I can’t watch you—”

“That’s okay.”

“It’s not.” She won’t meet Blaire’s eyes. “I should be there.”

“I don’t want you there,” she says, because it’s true. “I don’t want anyone there. I’ll never go through with it if you’re—” *Begging me not to.*

“You need to learn to be more selfish.” Tabietha lifts her head, and there’s... something. The beginnings of a smile—fractured, pieced together, like the painting of St. Lucy on the stained-glass window. Her stomach tightens, loosens, releases a breath.

“I’ll get right on that.”

“I could teach you,” offers Tabietha.

“Too selfless.”

“Fair enough.” Another pause. “When’s the operation?”

“Tomorrow.” She hasn’t admitted it aloud before. Her lungs seize, a trapdoor swinging shut, dousing her in a thick black.

“Seven in the morning.”

“So this really was just a courtesy call.”

“My choice,” she says, but the refrain doesn’t necessarily ring true anymore. She would never choose this—not in any life, any world. “I’ll be okay, Tabi.” A lie. She wonders, dimly, if the god of this place will strike her down. A pillar of salt, or maybe it’s fire.

“We’ll see.” Tabietha smiles. The mirage shimmers, bucking beneath the weight of reality. Still, she appreciates the attempt. At the end of the world, you cling to the familiar, and this moment—Tabietha, shattering glass, the scythe of grief—is as familiar to her as her patterns of breathing. “I won’t say goodbye.”

She exhales. “I’ll see you soon?”

“That’s better.” Tabietha stands. Her hands flounder, filleting the air.

“I’ll see you soon.”

Above, Saint Lucy. Hands folded, eyes a drop of solemnity.

—

Tabietha comes anyway.

“Just to see you off,” she says, shifting her weight from foot to foot. A lie, but Blaire has always been able to see through to her truths.

Oftentimes, they are one and the same.

“I still don’t want you to be there for the actual... thing.” She can’t say the word, like they’re still in the church, her body—the steps she takes to preserve that body, even if it’s apocalyptic, a violent epilogue—a kind of sin.

“I just want to make sure you get there safely.”

Another lie. But at the end of the world, no one really cares much about truths. It’s all irrelevant in the light of eternity—or, she supposes, the absence of.

They leave at dawn—the sun blurring the horizon; the sky stained violet, satin. The clinic is only a few blocks away, but there are patrols everywhere; their shadows bob against the walls, headless, vaguely gruesome. An appropriate backdrop, considering the graffiti:

*THERE WILL BE NO MIRACLES
FEAR IS USED TO CONTROL YOU*

WE ARE DYING HERE

The city feels strangely penitent, especially at this hour, in the shadowy noose of curfew.

Tabietha leads them through alleyways, thoroughfares, abandoned cul-de-sacs. Apartments line the streets. Some of the windows are shattered, and Blaire skirts the shards of glass, keeping to the curb. Tabietha points out a pile of rubble, occasionally, or a license plate; the carcass of a rodent, the body of a scorched car, the remnants of a sneaker...

The neighborhood's abandoned, but she still feels like they're drawing attention to themselves. Their presence echoes, gorging on the stillness.

Every once in a while, they pass through a watery halo. Streetlights flicker. Her shadow looms. Blaire sees grief again, a stake in its hand. Her head sits atop it, disembodied, floating. Death foretold. By the time they reach the clinic—a small building: squat, with boarded-up windows—, she's named it *Bliss*.

The door sits ajar. Tabietha nudges it with the toe of a boot, peering inside. Too dark to see anything, but Blaire recognizes the building from before the war started, before the world ended. But even that's a lie—the war is always starting, the world always ending. And the two

of them, trapped, like insects in amber, mouths stretched impossibly wide.

A kind of horror, Blaire thinks. The worst kind.

A siren goes off, and she startles. A raid, probably. But Tabietha lifts a hand—*wait*—, and after a moment, the sound fades. The air shudders, leaving them breathless, uncertain.

“I should go,” she says. “They’ll be waiting for me, and I don’t want to accidentally screw up their schedule for the day—”

“I doubt it’s as complicated as all that.” And there’s something there: a smile, like the one in the church. They’re both trying so hard. But it always comes back to St. Lucy, *to I won’t say goodbye, to I’ll see you soon.*

I’ll see you soon. That, too, is a lie—the war, starting; the world, ending. If only she could rely on death. But in its place, Bliss, with its cowed hood, and its dark, beady eyes.

“You’ll be fine,” Tabietha says.

Another siren. The soldiers are moving away. Relief trickles through her, if only for Tabietha’s sake.

“I’ll be fine,” echoes Blaire, aware of the lie. Surely god will strike her down, now. And perhaps that’d be a better fate—at least there is certainty in the pyre.

When she steps through the entrance, she wonders, dimly, if this is what it’s like to surrender to the flames.

—

Conversations swell, deflate. A baby screams, somewhere, and a mother—frantic, fearful—shushes him, a stream of you’re fines and it’s okays and mama’s not gonna let you out of her sights. The words echo, bounce, against damp, darkly-stained surfaces, filling the room with ghostly sounds.

She wonders, dimly, just how far underground they are. If passersby can hear the screams, or if that veil has yet to be torn.

From down the hall, a sound. The creaking of a door. She lifts her head, just in time to see... a nurse. Or a doctor. Or maybe both. His eyes are kind, skin puckering at the corners, but there’s still a sharpness to him—a restlessness, like the building is incapable of containing him.

“Blaire Taylor?” His voice is soft. Sunny, and she is reminded of Tabietha—that warm, golden feeling, spooling inside her.

She nods. Once, twice, three times.

“I’m Jacen. Jacen Rand.” He doesn’t offer her his hand, and for that, she is grateful. “I’ll be performing your operation today.”

The question sounds before she can stop it. “Are you a doctor?”

His lips quirk—upwards, upwards, until he’s smiling again. A strange sight, really, amidst all this ruin.

“I got my Bachelor’s at Yale, did my residency at Johns Hopkins. I was in the process of getting my PhD when—” He stops, frowns. “Well, you know.”

She knows.

“I was afraid you’d be some sort of...” She doesn’t know how to say it. What words to use. “Novice, I guess.”

The baby screams, again.

“I wouldn’t risk your life,” he says, and the weight of it—of his words—surprises her.

She nods, again. Pressing the heel of her hand against her controller, she clicks her chair into gear, following the man down the hallway.

The clinic is larger than she'd first thought it was. A network of corridors surrounds the main building; hallways branch again and again, curving in on themselves, leading to side rooms and closets and small, cramped offices. It's an impressive layout, undercut by the overwhelming sense of abandonment—disrepair, decay. The cement floors are cracked in places, filling the tunnels with thin, spidery fractures, and the plywood sheets that serve as interior walls lilt to one side. There is an unmistakable stench of piss. And, always, the echoes: footsteps; the jackhammer of a baby's wail; low, grueling moans.

She passes another patient, lying passively on an examination table. Gnarled hands rest on the woman's stomach, cradling her sternum. Blaire's eyes flick to sharp, exposed wrist-bones. Spindly legs, bent at the knee. Another one of her people, forced underground. No better than a burrowing creature.

He leads her to a side room, not unlike the one she'd just seen. An examination table is pressed against the far wall, with overhead lights, suspended by copper-plated wire, blinking overhead. Cabinets take up what little space remains, with tubes and cords trailing across the tiled floor. Her chair slows to a stop; in the absence of its motor, sounds, like machines beeping. It takes her a moment to find the source, but once she does, she finds herself unable to look away. A cart, with one of its wheels rusted to the point of uselessness. Gauze, sterilized needles, a handful of syringes. The workspace is cluttered,

disorganized, but clearly sanitized; unlike the rest of the facility, the room smells strangely clinical.

“I know it doesn’t look like much,” Jacen says. His eyes are on her— heavy, but not unwelcome. “But we have what we need.”

They’ll probably do it in the basement of a warehouse somewhere, on the outskirts of the city, near the drainage pipes with the rats...

She takes a breath. And another, and another, until she can feel—or, at the very least, imagine—the apprehension slipping away. She inches into the room, skirting the edge of the cart. “Where did you get all this stuff?” She recognizes some of it: oximeter probes, oxygen masks, a defibrillator. All obsolete, as far as she knows. “No one sells it anymore. Government regulations.”

He crosses the threshold, rummaging through one of the cabinet drawers. “Not everyone agrees with them, though, or abides by them.” A pause. After a moment, he withdraws his hands, sheathed in skin-tight gloves. “We have... suppliers. And when they can’t slip us something, for whatever reason, we— well, we take things into our own hands.” Another pause. “For the good of the people.”

“You don’t sound like you believe that.”

“I know what’s right,” he says, shrugging a shoulder. “And I fight like hell for it.”

“But what if—” She sighs, curling her fingers against her palms. “What if you’re wrong? What if we’re wrong?”

“We’re not.”

“How do you know?”

There is silence for a long moment. His back is turned to her, but she still manages to glimpse a pile of equipment: scalpels, a bottle full of clear liquid, something she wishes she didn’t recognize. They clatter against the countertop, filling the room with a fragile shattering sound. Like the world breaking in two.

Finally, “There’s something a rabbi said. ‘You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.’ And it’s... how I view all—” he gestures to their surroundings with a flick of a wrist— “this. I may not agree with everything the Resistance does, but that doesn’t mean I can just— stand to one side, watch people die. Not when there’s something I can do about it.” He sighs, and the sound is ragged, weary. It fills the room. “We may be politically wrong, but we are morally right. And that’s what matters.” A quiet rasping, like the breath has become a ribbon, twisting violently in the air. “That’s all that matters.”

He turns, then, and the look on his face is ancient. It grizzles him.

“I’ll be replacing your malfunctioning neurons with neurons grown here, in our lab. They should slowly begin to override the corrupted strands of your DNA and, with time, will return your motor skills to normal levels of functioning. The process can take up to two years, and isn’t always permanent, so we may need to revisit the procedure at a later date.

“Of course, there can be... complications. The procedure is incredibly invasive, and has been known to cause both hemorrhages and stroke, as well as minor brain damage. We take steps to prevent that, but...” He trails off. Blaire swallows, pressing rosy half-moons into the flab of her thighs. “I’m assuming you know all this.”

She nods, again, because it feels like the only thing she knows how to do.

“Right. Of course you do. I don’t know why you wouldn’t.” He presses his lips together, squinting at her, and there’s something akin to pity—no, grief—in his gaze. Maybe both. He feels sorry for her, but for the first time in all her life, she doesn’t feel the need to refuse it—the worst of all gifts, like a punch to the gut. “I’ve done a dozen of these, and nearly every single one of my patients has walked out of here. And by ‘walked’ I mean—”

“Nearly?” The word bubbles forth, frothing, lashing out at empty air.

“We have an eighty percent success rate,” he says, and his voice is soft— too soft— infuriatingly soft. Her thumbnail sinks into her skin. A dull pain, throbbing, just out of reach. “Which is actually pretty impressive, considering the experimental nature of the—”

She knows all this. “I know all this.”

“Okay.” And again, that softness, a blade between her ribs. In another world, it’d be something kinder, like a blade of wet grass. Her nostrils fill with the scent—imagined, but no less real. “Okay.” Pushing himself off the counter, he crouches in front of her, arms hanging. Dangling. “We don’t have to do this, Blaire.”

Something clenches inside her. “I know.”

“Do you?”

You’re not the one with your life on the line. “I’m not going to die.”

Now that she seems him like this, up close, vulnerable, she realizes: the softness was always there, lurking. A small, silent shadow. She wants to press her palms to his face, smearing that thick black all over him, monsterring what remains.

“We could smuggle you out,” he says, slowly. Measuredly. Taking his time. “We’ve done it before, and not just for people like— for people who are—”

“Say it.” Her voice is taut. A thin red thread.

“Disabled,” he sighs, ducking his head. She doesn’t understand why so many people fear that word, like they’ll summon her if they speak it. “I’m just saying it’s an option.”

“I know it’s an option,” says Blaire, “and I don’t care. I want—” *To walk, to live my life without fear, to be free.* “I’ve made my choice, and I’m not going to change my mind, so you may as well just—” *Get on with it,* she wants to say, but can’t. Her throat constricts. “Please.”

He stares at the floor for a long while. She fights the urge to twist the knife: *I know there are other doctors here, so if you won’t do it, I’ll just find someone else.* Eventually, though, he lifts his head, and she recognizes the look on his face. The same look on Tabietha’s face, but softened. Blurred, maybe, around the edges. “Do you want to stay in your chair?”

She nods.

“Okay.” His hand envelops her knee for a quick moment, squeezing once, a gentle reminder. “Give me a minute to get the anesthesia ready.”

It doesn't take him long. In another world, she would've slipped from the room while his back was turned—whether out of defiance or cowardice, she doesn't know. But there is no other world. There is only this, her fear, sharper than it's ever been. Every time she tries to hold it, to subdue it, it slips from her grasp. A glittering white fish.

Something whirrs to life. A machine, probably, or a computer. Jacen turns, gripping a mask. “Ready?”

No. But yes. But she'll never be, but she has to be—

Her lips part. “Yes.”

He steps forward, pressing the mask to her face, and it engulfs her—one large swallow, straps pressed against her temples. Moments later, white smoke, and her fingers twitch against her thighs, tracing the contour of those forgotten half-moons. She takes a breath, swallows. Sickly sweet. A fall of flower petals.

“Count back from ten for me, will you?” Jacen's voice, softer than it's ever been. She can barely see him through the haze, stark against the light of the room. “Ten. Nine...”

Eight, she thinks, and says it aloud. “Seven...”

She doesn’t want to die. But it is this or death. This, or—

“Don’t stop counting, Blaire. Six...”

“Five. Four...”

This is better, she thinks. *Better than death.*

And then, she sees it. Bliss, again—hunched, swollen. She stands in the doorway, talons clutching her body, clutching her. *Three, two...*

“One.”

Brianna Albers is a storyteller, located in the Minneapolis suburbs. In 2016, she founded *Monstering*, a magazine for disabled women and nonbinary people; she currently serves as the Editor-in-Chief. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in *DIALOGIST*, *TYPO Magazine*, and *The Offing*, among others. Contact her via email at briannahopealbers@gmail.com.

Timothy Allen

HRBE

Often as I drift off, I see the faces of Jules Verne and Samuel Beckett. I wait for one of them to speak to me, but neither ever does. I guess I'm searching for some advice; I have the feeling I'm merely winging it here. I'm living in perpetual anticipation, infused with anxiety. But, on occasion, I think of Oscar Wilde. When I do, his quip: "The suspense is terrible. I hope it will last," also drifts through my thoughts.

I'm having a hard time wrapping my mind around all of this, where I am, what I'm doing.

Oddly, of all of the things I've done in my life, it was the geology degree, the surveyor's assistant job, and the MFA that got me here. All those years of teaching philosophy were largely for naught.

So I muse. And now, this is outside my window.

It's never been confirmed, by the way, that iron oxide is really responsible for the red color here. I think I made that clear in the interview. Nobody would have thought that something as mundane as this would have been the tipping point. I still can't believe the questioner from MIT had the audacity to ask if I knew what red was. Chaos theory at work here, no doubt.

Boy were they surprised, the way things went, but they knew there was no way out of it. Signed contract, notarized by one of their legal team. The rhetoric in that Congressional hearing sealed it; I wish I'd seen the looks on their faces.

But I digress.

I lived in a modular house for a while in Kentucky. They are eminently practical; and to think I bought it on a credit card! I remember the day they delivered it, the two flatbed drivers flummoxed by the narrowness of the road. And then, the ASL user hoisting each half high in the sky with that giant crane. I'll never forget it. The foundation cost almost as much as the house, not to mention running that water line 3800 feet. That poor lowest bidder with the backhoe, he didn't realize how rocky that ridge was. Oh, well.

I'd have never guessed that I'd be living in a glorified one of them, here. To be honest, I never guessed I'd be here.

But yes, to deal with the problem at hand. There are a lot of rocks here too. More than any place I've ever been, actually, except maybe Arizona. I don't have to worry about the nuts and bolts stuff, though; the others have to deal with that. They sure got the short end of the stick on this. And worse, I'm not sure how having four in one of these pods would work out. They can talk to each other in real time, and that's a big plus. But it may not outweigh the negatives. Hell, I feel

pretty freaking cramped in this one, and it's just me. And actually, I can talk to any of them, basically in real time too, even though they're on the other side of the equator. Not those back home, though. Five and a half minute delay, each way; eleven minutes just to hear: "Fine."

Okay, this is all doable. I can't believe all the flack they gave me about Herbie, though. It almost cancelled the whole project. It was only the Congressional hearing, again, that saved my ass. It does weight over 50 pounds, but it's still lighter than the books that Ken would have brought. And, don't forget his fancy monitor. We're allowed 200 pounds of discretionary stuff, after all, and even with 6 reams of tractor paper, I'm well under that. And why would Herbie be considered discretionary? Touchy topic; better not go there...

No more procrastinating; I need to roll up my sleeves and get cracking on this. Step one: headphones. It was just a lucky fluke that my idea of horizontally and vertically triangulated LIDAR technology actually panned out. All those people with impressive STEM credentials were left speechless at the demonstration. Even after that, none thought it would work here, in this thin atmosphere; still less, having me operate it.

So, what have we got here? Ah, it looks like there's a prominent ridge, of some kind, over there, at about 10 o'clock. Right, but I can't say 10 o'clock anymore, I have to be scientific: it's 300 degrees. More

specifically, looks like it stretches from about 290 to 310; horizontally, that is. Elevation from the base line, a little over 21 degrees.

You know, even though it was my brainchild, I hate the sound of this thing. It reminds me so much of a theremin. I can tolerate it, I guess, for the roughing it out stage anyway. At least I don't have to listen to people mocking it, the way they did at...better not go there, either. Thank God, there's Herbie, for where the rubber meets the road.

So, what kind of distance are we talking about, here? Where's the gun? Why wouldn't they mount it right into the tiles? Regulations, they said. Okay, at least it will work through this port. Where's the jack? This takes a lot of juice. That colonel kept joking that I was like a cop in shades, looking for speeders, trying to aim this thing. He probably never got why I was grimacing so much at his remark.

Okay, what have we got here? 961 meters; 959 meters; 958 meters. Wow, this face is pretty sheer; it must look a lot like El Capitan. No, wait; it's more of a butte than a ridge. Let's get the outline of the whole thing. Geez, there's another one, off to the right of it. Wow. This is more like Monument Valley! If there are more of them, anyway.

Holy shit. I don't think anybody anticipated this. I've got to get all this into the computer.

Well, it's all loaded. Let's see what we've got here: Ctl-F2. Need to see what Herbie has to say about this! Alt-P-I: H R B E. Bingo!

Boy is he loud, even here. Nine pages for what was on the screen, 3 by 3. I've got to make sure I keep these in order. Scotch tape, now that's high tech. Sure hope I don't run out. Let's get all this on the drawing table.

"What does somebody like you need a drawing table for?" that jerk from NASA blurted out. I felt like choking him. He was never convinced. I'm not sure if he actually quit, or just threatened to.

Wow, this is good! The resolution is better than I imagined. Look at this strata, will you! This is all sedimentary, and it goes right to the edge of the butte. Ice has been verified at the poles, but this would mean there'd definitely been an ocean or something here at one time. It sure seems like it, anyway.

The Rover, Curiosity, got some shots of what appeared to be shale, some years back, yet not everybody was convinced. But there's no denying this. So much variation, too.

Holy shit! This layer is dense. Could this really be limestone!? No fucking way! It's so much like those shots from Utah I practiced on before I left, though, and that all IS limestone. Let's follow this vein across...

Quite a gap, here. A few random dots; dust? More likely just image noise. Wait, here's another butte. Unmistakably. Wow, this really does look like Monument Valley. Let's see if that strata shows up in this one, too.

It does! It's as clear as it can be. Let's blow this up a bit; I think Herbie can handle it. Don't forget CalTech's dynamite software; Herbie can print only what the driver sends him. Nine more sheets. I need to be careful in how I marshal out this scotch tape.

Okay, what have we got here? Oh man, I might need a little lemon juice on the finger tips for this! Look at the angle in this layer.

Sandstone, it seems; yes, I'm certain of it. I need to go back to see what the preliminary analyses said about this quadrant. I'm pretty sure that nobody had thought any of these formations were butte-like or were stratified like this.

It's amazing how vivid this is; just below the sandstone...whoa!...I can't believe it; this one (*ITALICS*)definitely, really is limestone(*END ITALICS*). And, limestone can be formed in only one way...you know what this means! Nobody at NASA is going to believe it. I'll be branded as a crackpot, for sure...

Wait, there's one way to settle this. It could actually work, too; it's not going to be easy, though. FOSY will only get a reading at really high temperatures. The surface here, even in direct sunlight, won't get

over about 18 degrees C. The only way to heat it up enough for FOSY to get a reading is to really zap it. The concave mirror on the roof could possibly do it, if I could deflect a beam of sunlight over there and focus it on a small spot.

No easy trick, though. It's programmed to follow the sun to keep the batteries charged. Moving it would require manual override. It's doable, in theory. The manual says it can be done visually; good luck with that...

What's the strategy for this? I need to make a model to get the logistics right. I've got a ruler, somewhere, but I'll need something else, a straight edge, anyway. The pencil tray on the drawing table might work; I'm not going to be needing it for pencils, that's for sure.

At any rate, I'm going to have to be fast. As soon as the mirror is turned away from the sun, the batteries begin discharging at an alarming rate.

Where's the calculator? Got it; thank God I put it back in the case.

According to this, then, the mirror needs to rotate 57 degrees horizontally, 6 degrees vertically. Let's see what this looks like in the real world. Horizontal, first: ruler against the pencil tray; up 45 degrees. All right, 12 more degrees. Wish I had a protractor; APH has a prototype, but it's not in production, yet. Oh well, I'm just going to have to estimate it, and hope for the best.

This is as close as I can get it. The beam should be focused right on that layer. It's now or never. Click. Fiber Optic Spectrometer activated, JAWS tells me. No data. Crap. No, wait, there is some coming in. I can't tell what it means, though. I'll have to graph it. Herbie can likely do it, he did a great job on that strata. But I need to recalibrate this first.

Okay, let's see what we've got here. Click; High Resolution Braille Embosser, JAWS tells me. This will all fit on one sheet, I think. Yes.

Wow! Just wow! The verdict from Fosy and Herbie: between 55 and 60 percent calcite, CaCO_3 . I can't believe it. Actually, I *can* believe it. How is this going to go, though? I'm sure some are going to think it's fake data, and I'm going to be the butt of all kinds of jokes.

The others will come next week; they've got the MRV, after all. When I tell them, they'll go over there and chip off a sample to take back with us and get the credit for this. I'll need to get this all written up and submitted before that, then, with all the data laid out, else no one will believe it's all in the dots.

Timothy Allen is a native of upstate New York. Much of his childhood was spent in Arizona, though, which whetted his interest in geology and, especially, in rock formations. He studied geomorphology as an undergraduate, and worked as a surveyor's

assistant, resurveying the original boundaries of the Daniel Boone National Forest in Eastern Kentucky. Pressing social and political concerns eventually drew him into a graduate program in philosophy; adventitious vision loss, however, has more recently kindled an interest in poetry and literature. He lives in the Allegheny mountains in upstate New York.

David Flexer

Ancient of Days (excerpt)

Author's note: The following is an excerpt from the short story "Ancient of Days," which takes place in the close future, when American secular society has dissolved into a series of tribes centered around a creator god, the mystical embodiment of modern day corporations, that provides all of their needs in response to strict conformity to their tribal norms. The language features play on words, both in English and Hebrew, of contemporary corporate and pop culture language. These literal interpretations of abstract corporate names form the basis of the manifestation of these deities. They meet once every seven years in an intertribal celebration for the Ancient One to induct three individuals into the cult of Preservatives, who will discover the secret to immortality and live forever as he does. It is the time of a creation of a new world. The story is told from the perspective of the three inductees. This is one of their stories. The excerpt explores a dystopian scenario for disability future, where the progress in mobility equipment used to allow disabled individuals to interact in the world is fetishized into a means of the able bodied to escape into an isolated world while still exerting their power.

USER NAME: Rachel Johnson.

STATUS: At 36th anniversary celebration in coliseum.

I remember the first time I saw one, a person inside the vial. I was five or six. I've never been so scared in my life - like somebody tried to eat from but fell into a giant glass of blueberry jell-o. Her eyes followed me as faintly glowing orbs amidst a shadow in the haze. But how quickly that fear turned to love. It was my mother, after all.

The programs have predicted that I will win. Not that going to Make Done Olds to become a Preservative is terribly important to a GooGill. Our containers preserve us from death just as well if not better than that Make Done Olds hocus pocus. It is the fruit of life that we live within, the gift of our creator to us at the start of our 18th year. I will always remember my first tasting of the fruit of life.

They tell you to savor your last meal, for it will be the last time you will taste food. But how can you do that when you're 18, and they tell you that you can order whatever you want? I have no memory of what I ordered, only inhaling it - not so different from how I eat now, though I'm quite sure I didn't order any blueberry jell-o. After my meal, they gave me the seed of the tree of knowledge of good to eat, which descends down your throat and decapitates the serpent, permanently closing off the esophagus, making an uninterrupted passage to the lungs.

I still have some vivid memories from those hours in between tasting the seed of knowledge of good and partaking of the tree of life. My little brother teased me because boys go thru the ceremony one year

later than girls. He danced in front of me, shoving huge fistfuls of cake into his mouth. His face was half covered in frosting he was doing such a horrible job of it, crumbs all over the grass. Mother was in the corner of the yard with her eyes closed, clearly in Eden and paying no attention to us.

You should not let him disrespect you so. My arms started moving on their own. You should not let him disrespect the fruit of the tree of life. My legs started moving toward him. You have made a mistake in holding your tongue, Rachel. The look in my brother's eyes slowly changed as he realized I wasn't in control of my body. My mouth opened, and my mother's voice came out.

"You do not have respect for the tree, Danny, and you will be tasting it in just one year! Such an insolent thing tasting the holy fruit, still so full of mistakes. How will we ever correct all these mistakes in such a short year? To begin, I will show you the fruit of your mistakes."

My fist clenched and flew into Danny's face. He fell to the ground. My body climbed on top of him and rained punches across his body. I couldn't move my mouth to scream - my own voice reduced to a noiseless echo trapped in my head. It is a mistake to feel bad for him, Rachel. Danny is full of mistakes. He must be corrected before his time comes to eat. You have been a good channel for my actions these 18 years. I am sure that you will use your powers in Eden to bring much good into the world. Now come, Rachel, the time has

come for you to taste of the tree of life. I wish to look upon this event with my flesh eyes. Be a good girl and bring me with you into the holy chamber.

I got up off the ground slowly, my newly reusable limbs weak from the exertion, and staggered in a fog to mother's vial. Her whole body turned to follow me I could tell, though I could only faintly see its outlines. I grasped the metal handlebar at the back of the vial and pushed her toward the great temple. She was now totally turned around so she was facing me as I pushed her. The tower of the temple gradually emerged as we approached, its rainbow transmitter connecting and supplying power to all who have eaten. Mother's face was pushed against the glass now, and I could distinguish her features for the first time. Her face was gaunt but elegant, with a small and pointy nose and chin, like my own. Her eyes protruded much more than I expected, however, giving her an uncanny resemblance to a fish. I averted my eyes when I noticed this deformity, and her form disappeared again into the haze. Her voice came from her vocalizer instead of in my head.

"This is one of the proudest days of my life, Rachel, to be able to give these gifts to you and share Eden with you. Nothing can describe or prepare you for life in Eden."

We came to the great metal doors of the temple. The black box at the top saw us, and the doors slid open to the sides. A bell tone sounded

three times to let the programmers know we were there. Two vials emerged from a hidden passageway overhead and hovered above us.

"You are Rachel Johnson?" One of the vocalizers asked.

"Yes, this is Rachel," my mother quickly replied. "Are you ready for her?"

"Of course, we are ready."

They slowly turned around and glided toward a half full vial, presumably waiting for me. I hesitated at the sight of the container where I would spend the remainder of my life, a mistake that my mother, fortunately, seemed to miss, her focus being so intensely set on the empty vial. When they reached it, they slowly rotated back around to face us.

"The fruit is just about prepared for you to taste, Rachel. Before we begin, I'm going to explain how it works, for it can be a fearful thing to be submerged in the fruit at first. Many people think that they are drowning and panic, but the fruit is not like water. You cannot drown in the fruit. As long as you are in the fruit, your body is able to absorb and remove everything it needs through the medium of the fruit: oxygen, nutrients, water, everything. The most unpleasant thing for people to get used to is the way the fruit fills your lungs. But it is important to the absorption process that you be able to inhale and

exhale the fruit because your lungs can absorb things from the fruit much more efficiently than your skin, and it also creates a current within your vial so the fruit is circulating.

"Now, as for your sensations while submerged, there are other radical changes that can cause people to panic at first before they get used to them. Your ears will be completely obsolete within the fruit. You will hear a constant oscillation of flowing noise, but nothing will be distinguishable. It disorients many people at first, but after a few hours, you won't even be able to notice it if you try. The sense of sight pretty much remains the same, though everything has a blue tint to it, for obvious reasons. One person, after hearing that, have asked if maybe the fruit came in the color red, so it would be as if they were wearing rose colored glasses..."

The programmer burst into hysterical laughter at his joke. His shadow could be seen thrashing within his vial. The vocalizer does not translate laughter very well, however, so a robotic repetition of ha ha filled the air for the minute it took him to recover from his joke.

"But seriously, the fruit of life is blue. That is its color. We don't make this stuff. It is the gift of our creator. The person who asked that question... well, let's just say it was a big mistake. So your sense of sight will remain the same, though the visual cortex is so heavily involved in Eden that most people rarely open their eyes in the course of a day, depending on the extent of their external obligations.

"Now, the sense of smell, this is the one that gets people. Your sense of smell will be about 20 times more acute. You will be like a bloodhound. The fruit conducts the small particles that cause smell extremely efficiently and allows them to be sensed more powerfully, so your sense of smell will be your biggest tie to the world outside your vial. For many, this is a great inconvenience, for you cannot close your nose. But most get used to it and learn to find it useful. For instance, you ate pepperoni pizza, french fries, Peep See Cola, and chocolate ice cream for your final meal. I can smell it on your breath very distinctly. You've been rolling around in the grass and... my goodness, you've been hitting somebody. I can smell the blood. Well, I'm sure you had a good reason to do it. You can imagine, perhaps, how this can cause you to feel you know uncomfortable details about people with whom you're in close contact..."

"What about Eden?" I quickly asked before he had a chance to jump to the next uncomfortable thing. "How do I connect with Eden?"

EVENT ALERT: Speech of the Ancient One commences

STATUS: Accessing live feed

There's the old man teetering up to the podium like I'm watching a turtle climb a mountain. The programs have predicted I will win, but I

wonder if their programming doesn't contain some mistakes. Oh, he's finally made it up to the counter, and he's starting his speech.

“Peoples of Amaracowach!¹ Today, we celebrate our 36th year since the establishment of the coming to manifestation of the creators!”

But when you think of the importance of all the work I've done, how could I not win? Has any other single person in all the Lands of Amaracowach accomplished what I have accomplished? I have proven beyond a doubt the positive effects that GooGill children experience for their entire lifetime because of the programs implemented for them by the GooGill people. Not only that, but I've fought and struggled to bring these practices to the other peoples, helping thousands if not millions of children have better lives, especially in the impoverished These Knee people. Why, I went through those very same programs since I was born, and look at all that I've accomplished.

The key principle of GooGill education is to begin early, especially while the children are still in fetal stages. The brain is built by sensory input, and we've discovered absolutely conclusively and without error that the more sensory stimulation occurs, especially in those stages where the human mind absorbs everything and is shaped for the entire lifetime, the more intelligent the person will be, the fewer mistakes they will make, and the more they will succeed. I did it with my children. I spared no expense to have the programmers fit me

with special sound speakers to my stomach that would play the great masterworks of music and the most eloquently written pieces of literature. Also, a series of different colored high intensity lights were fitted to my stomach that the fetuses would be able to see. They flash in predictable and subtly changing patterns, so that the fetuses learn pattern recognition. All the GooGill children of the elites who receive this programming start talking inevitably before they are a year old and are reading by the time they're two. I only wish the technology had been available when I was a fetus.

This year's recipients are... Rachel Johnson of the GooGill people, Steven Smith of the Cause Koh² people. And the final recipient is Timothy Jacob of the Alms Art people, the youngest recipient in the history of the Lands!

No doubt my children are jumping up and down in front of the screen screaming for joy. Yes, they will have a mother who has achieved the highest honor possible in these Lands. Just let one rise to tell them I have any mistakes now. They will know the truth before the person finishes their sentence.

When I open my flesh eyes, the whole stadium is a blur on either side of me. It feels like I'm freefalling down to the field at the bottom. I better turn on the vocalizer and find out what's going on out there.

"Smitty! Smitty! Are you there?"

“Yes.”

"What on earth are you doing?"

“We need to get down to the counter as quickly as possible if you're going to get that discount, Dr. Johnson.”

"What discount? Do I look like a person who needs a discount? Slow down! This rapidity is highly undignified. Once you get me down to the counter, leave at once as fast as you can. I will take it on manual controls from there."

It feels more like a camera zooming in than moving, the counter rapidly growing in size and its details coming into the focus of these saggy flesh eyes. I'll get a better view here with the Angel Eyes. Ah yes, look, I'm almost to the counter now. Look at all these people! Half of Amaracowach must be here. This stadium is gigantic. I'm not even as big as an ant. Let's zoom in some more here... just a few more steps. And there goes Smitty. Wow, I've never seen him run so fast. He can really book it. What's that? It... is somebody tapping on my vial?

I open my flesh eyes to see the old man pressing his face up against my vial. What disrespect! Does he let people rub their faces all over his body when he first meets them? His whole face leaves a huge smudge mark every time he moves it the tiniest bit. Smitty will have to clean that up. His face... it's so grotesque. Thank the creator I'm not

exposed to the harsh elements that would do something like that to a person's face, even though they're a Preservative. His face seems to have no bone structure to it whatsoever. His entire face conforms to the curve of the glass. Doesn't he have any teeth? Or a skull? How can he do that? Maybe he's just so old that his bones have gone soft. I've heard of that happening in the really old Preservatives.

Thank the creator, he's pulled his face off the vial to go look at something else. It is clearly taking some effort, parts of his face remaining stuck even after his head has pulled several inches from my vial. That sound... why, I think this is the first sound I've heard with my flesh ears since tasting the fruit of the tree... like a giant rat tearing a phone book. That must have been his face peeling off my vial. Oh my, he looks quite angry. They're carrying up one of the other recipients. Looks like he fainted. The old man is bent over and is slapping him in the face, trying to wake him up. He's saying something... I better turn on the Angel Ears.

That sound! Just a deafening roar comes through! My goodness, how loud all these people are. I better focus in on this platform. Here we go.

“Did I make the sale?”

“No, you did not. All items will be full price for Timothy Jacob!”

Oh god, the screaming. Gotta turn it down even more here. I don't think I'll be able to use the Angel Ears at all with how loud these people are.

The old man says something else into the microphone. Maybe I'll try using the lip reader. Here we go. Now, the old man and one of the other recipients are heading towards the ramp down to the Great Freezer. I better not get left behind. It's been so long since I've used this thing manually. OK, here we go. There, following right behind them. Where's the other guy, that fainting kid?

There was one time I fainted when I was a kid. I was his age, maybe a little younger. My mother was with me. She was in her vial in the corner as usual, but she was with me, making me move. That was how she was with me. I never viewed her actual body except through the fruit of the tree. She was instructing me on something in the back yard... some task, I don't remember much. It was a brisk spring day, but with a really hot sun, so you could just sit in the sun and be made warm to the point of sweating but with a nice breeze constantly cooling you off. I didn't like to do much on those days, just sit in the sun, so I guess I wasn't being a particularly attentive student that day.

Mother, I don't want to do this. But this is how you are with me, Rachel. But I can't feel you, Mother. Rachel, I can make you move

according to my will. But what else, mother? Can you do anything inside me other than control my movements?

There was silence. I kicked my leg out in front of me and pouted. I was shocked because I didn't think I had any control of my limbs when mother was inside me. Even the notion was regarded as the highest mistake, the notion that the one being controlled by the eater of the tree of life had any control of themselves whatsoever. All of a sudden, my hand came up and slapped me on the cheek. The moment it hit my cheek, I regained control of my arm and held my hand there, pressed into my soft, reddened cheek. My hand struggled to free itself from my cheek but eventually submitted. This was the closest I ever came to embracing my mother.

Rachel, I didn't want to have to tell you this story, but since you have learned this secret, I have no choice. The fruit of the tree of life is not this gelatinous substance that I float in. This is the manna that was given by something beyond our creator. I was in Eden before in my body but had to leave. I instructed the GooGill how to get to Eden. The tree of life I ate in the Garden of Eden, it was actually a piece of bark off of the tree, which was the same as the fruit in every way except one. This being beyond the creator told my husband, your father, not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. My husband then went and ate from the tree of life and found that it gave him the power to control any of the living things that this being had created. So he went to me and took control of my body, made me

walk over to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, pick off a fruit, and eat it. All the time, his voice in my head soothed me, told me that only he was commanded not to eat, not I. I had nothing to worry about, I was assured. When I ate, a serpent jumped out of my mouth and swallowed the fruit himself. The being beyond the creators appeared before me and said quickly, you must eat of the bark of the tree of life and leave this place as fast as you can. Outside, you will find the Lands of Amaracowach. You will be able to live there. You are in danger here now. So I left and came to live with the GooGill people. But Mother, that doesn't make any sense. The hand on my cheek started to move in a loving caress.

We are at the gates at the base of the ramp.

"Timothy Jacob! Come at once."

The old man's shouting at the top of his lungs. He turns to me with a striking look of solemnity in his face and gravity in his voice, "I hope you've said goodbye to your children, Dr. Johnson."

[1] Hebrew, roughly translated: the power of speech

[2] Hebrew, Koh is usually translated as thus, is an abstract word used by later prophets to introduce the words of God in their prophecy, "thus spake the Lord."

Petra Koppers

Dinosaur Dreams

Tomorrow, Melanie will fly off to her new college. All will be new. She dreams.

It's the dream of the forest of quadruped giant legs. Wrinkled, in dark colors that she can barely name, the legs march, majestic. She sees one wrinkled mass, a muscle contracted, skin in folds shifting against the backdrop of another giant pulsing piston.

She realizes that she is tiny, a dewdrop, clinging on. A tiny-ness beyond words, her eyes too small to take in these dinosaur legs articulating against one another with each long stride.

Earth is a round marble on the edge of a hair's hair. Deep in her dream, she feels the infinite smallness of her home, and herself. Every time the dream comes to her, the smallness constricts her throat, her torso, breath barely escaping. These dinosaur trees are too big to notice her existence, Earth too small to warrant a brush. So small that even touch would not dislodge the round planet, so small that it would pass between molecules, hovering without gravity, held by frictional affinities. Earth is insignificant. It will not matter. The legs will piston on, and Earth is gone or not, oxygen or ozone, radiant or

radiated. It has no bearing on the course of the big creature striving toward something she can't hold in her mind.

The dream contracts again. Melanie's hip distances itself from her collar bone. Small displacement. A vertebra nudges itself toward the left. A lung alveolus twists out of shape into the new hollow released by the bone's curve. A hair's breath's shift. Yet, Melanie's respiration charges through her chest, unfamiliar territory opening under her pelvis.

She remembers the time her dentist left a ridge on a tooth's filling, shifting her bite. She had been in agony for weeks, trying to adjust to the new slivery reality of this jawbone's articulation against the skull. She hadn't been able to, and had to go back, ask them to file down the barely noticeable edge, embarrassed by the side eye of the dentist.

Now, here on her bed, she can feel the energy leaking out of her right side, the kink of dream torsion deflating the internal balloon between hip and shoulder. In her half-sleep, Melanie is close to weeping. Hates sensitivity, her inner space rigidity. The single tear, when it tracks loose from the eyelash, is lava on her cheek. Salts burn epithelial cells.

Near dawn, Melanie shifts, volcanic terror at her core. Then, a cool web drapes over the sensations, pulls down, and cradles her into

sleep.

#

He waits, lets the motor idle, cool as an air-conditioned cat at the foot crossing, rivers of people gushing out of department stores and fast-food joints, hip-hugging bags clutched to sweaty bodies long overdue for a sit-down, sundown, a space of rest unburdened of Monday mornings.

...

Akilah walks along the street.

Never oblivious, never just stepping, her feet mark the hot pavement, a faint indentation of her heel remains in the tar. Akilah's hair magnetizes the gaze of the white man on the scaffold, the white man in the subway station, the white woman at the coffee store.

...

Across the well-travelled road, he marks her, compares her to the photo in the folder. Hair, posture, the tilt of the neck. Yes.

He rolls into traffic, carefully, slowly creeping, like a tourist ready to be unpredictable, unclear, lost in the big city.

...

She cannot demagnetize her hair, drape it casually, thrown into the

wind. She remembers other spaces. She remembers home space, family space, a diaspora she reaches toward, where the cut of her cloth or the pattern of the skirt mark her, not the hue of her skin, the flap over chastised bones. She walks.

...

His foot descends, clutch into gear, shift space, forward motion glued to her retreating back. She arrows, and he can see that she has not a care in the world, bone-certainty about her goal and her destination: the next protest action, standing in the wave of white and standing proud.

...

She walks, forty years and counting, walking the ruins of slavery's game. She does not look anybody in the eye. Cattle calls of city center, she despises the easy money, easy clothes of the whore brides, the fat barons that trample the pavement into uniformity.

...

He is nearly level now, the game thinning, his game sure as he slides the gun out of the shoulder holster, its fine calf honed to the softness of an inner thigh. He does not know how often he fingers it, deep beneath his clavicle, his buffalo refuge, veldt certainty of the side his fingers are on. It's a tell, and he had to work to control and suppress the urge, the fingering, now only in free flow when he knows himself to be alone. Or just before he kills.

...

Akilah moves eel-like now, a clot of people stopping the road, queuing for theater admittance for the Saturday matinee. Her

shoulders slope past ermine, white softness with a deadly odor. Shimmering sequins, high-hipped on high heels. Here, Akilah enjoys the press, the give, the weft of her dreadlocks swishing over velvet, her own sharp short blazer cutting into a common cloth. Fish weave, water flow.

...

He has not lost her, follows easily along through the throng of people in front of the theatre. Her high coiffure, knot upright, one lance of lock sticking straight, points the way. The gun's plastic in his hand is warm, smooth. Check.

...

She exists the crowd, her hips shimmy from the warm human sea. This is home, too: the easy weave in a sea of excitement, anonymous fish swish. Alone, now, forward.

...

He is pulling level, the street emptier now, soon, soon.

...

She has escaped the policemen in the riot, in the car check, at the protest's borders. "Are you carrying a gun, ma'am?" "Step aside from the crowd, ma'am." "What is in your pocket, ma'am?" Akilah hears the echoes in her head now, oozing out of the pavement's cracks. Her feet lose purchase. She does not want to hear the questions again, wants to go about without anybody assuming she's packing, wants to undulate her spine without anyone profiling her, charting her course. But the questions press in, surround her, arrow in.

...

The target is weaving, like drunk, like infected with the high spirits of the crowd, like poisoned by the SoMa vibe, a spirit high, and he is wondering, comparing the picture one last time to the woman on the street. This is her, right? The cell organizer, protest queen, defiant woman pushing her chest high her forehead open and lofty into the wind?

...

Silent startle scream stuck in her throat. Where is she? When is she? Had she lost track of side streets, of the pavement's direction, of the place where she can step without encountering memories too hard to process, black skin splitting open on police batons, purple welts rising against rough brick walls? She goes down.

...

What happened? He has lost sight of her, hair bobbling down as passers-by obscured his vision. He looks, hand shoves plastic stock back beneath his jacket, mustn't offer a tell to the street. Where is she?

...

The crack in the street, widening, moaning downward. Sadness pouring in dark tears, a wailing. She falls into the street, beneath it, away from eyes and calls, from hails that forebode no well wishes. She falls, and she knows she does not need to scream. She gives. Cloth smooth, equatorial warmth, streaming reds and oranges. Akilah releases, opens, knees soften.

...

She is gone. The federal assassin scans back and forth, has stopped

the rental car at the side of the road. He looks back – no opening in the facades, just placid blank walls, no shops with open doors or invitations. Gone.

#

Akilah comes to, assembles, a calm over her. Twists wrist, clavicle shrug, knits pelvis to spine. She's lying on something rough, scaly. It is dark. There are glints in the darkness. They move. Is she moving? There is wind against her skin, in spurts: something seems to be pressing her along, in convulsive turns, but the something is too large for her to feel a direction. She is lying on a surface that shifts in space. That's all she knows for sure. To keep her fears beneath her, she presses her palms down, feels rills beneath her finger tips. She spreads her weight, in control.

The rills: these plates are not machined, not smooth poured metal. These are organic grown things, accreted. She scratches with one fingernail, like meeting like: is this horn? She is back at the image of a scale, articulating against others. She palpates. She's on one continuous surface. Akilah contemplates standing, but a sense of wind bursts dissuades her. She inches across the plate by turning on her front, on her hand and knees, pushing forward. Soon, she reaches the outer edges of the plate: a thick rind-like edge, horn, yes,

layers and layers, as her hand reaches down. She lies on her belly and stretches. Her fingertips reach another surface, beneath, and yes, there is movement between that next plate and hers. Articulating scales or plates, indeed, in a counter motion, as if wrapped around moving limbs of some unseen giant beast. Akilah scrambles sideways, maps the contours of the plate. The shape feels ovular, but it's hard to be certain.

After a while, Akilah lies down on her back, face upward. She takes stock, retells what happens to cover over a blank in her mind: from the SF street to this strange bed of darkness. She remembers the sidewalk, moving amid the theatre crowd, on her way to the protest action, the thinning of the sidewalk, even, now, in the back of her mind, the slow car advancing, a sense of dread that stumbled her feet. The sidewalk, opening like a door, a crack too regular for a normal earthquake, and her falling. She breathes, and senses behind her collarbone an answering breath: a beingness. A perceptual opening. Akilah is not sure what that means, exactly, but she takes it. She walks through.

“Hello.”

“I am glad you are here.”

“Where am I?”

“You are safe, for now. Safe from the gun. From the assassin. From the street.”

“I belong on the street, though, with my sisters.”

“You are a fighter. We know. We need you.”

“Who are you?”

“We have been prophesied. We are here.”

“What are you?”

“We are breathing beneath you. We hold you and see you. Receive this.”

There is a pouring, a warmth, a water liquid, starting from a point inside her head. She accepts the water, diffuses it throughout her aching body. Fear trembles, then drowns.

She remembers when she had made that decision before, accepting the water. She had been six years old, and she had been visiting, her one visit outside the US. She had been flown all alone to Guyana, to grandmothers she cannot quite recall now, ancient hands with calluses caressing the spaces between her hair, a strange tickling. That day, she had been playing outside, near the jungle’s edge, and there was a little stream, just so small, just the width of her young

thigh, and she had knelt in it. And the water had swarmed over her, had climbed over her brown twig legs and arms. It had dripped off her head, spurted across her chest, glided down on her narrow back. And it had spoken, too, a far away murmur she only now remembers again:

“We are here.” Deep liquid inside her forehead, inside the precious round, a peach stone warming outward.

Akilah remembers telling one of her Guyanese grandmothers, in the home by the side of the road, on the porch nibbled by creepers.

“The little river spoke to me.”

That’s all she had said, and then she had fallen silent, and just stared at Nan’s face, the mouth open, golden yellow teeth an intricate gate to a different world. A curled tongue hovered, trembling, in a pink gullet.

Akilah hadn’t been scared then, not of the voice, not of her grandmother. She had been interested, had leaned into Nan’s void, until the old woman had snapped shut her mouth and had not spoken. Akilah knew then that the small hidden river had to be hers alone. The waters dripping so freely, so wide, was something that had to be kept apart, even from this elder love. And so she had shut it away, a turn of an iron key sealing the memory.

Now, here, on this scale, the key had shifted, had turned, and she bathed in the warmth of her six-year old self, the flooding of sense and contraction new to her limbs, the ache of liquid love.

She wasn't hurt, and wouldn't be, not by government assassins, not by anybody. She was safe. But she was alone, and she missed her comrades. What world was this?

#

Tony shovels forkfuls of salad into his mouth. His left hand grips the edge of the table, hard, energy humming through, rattling the bolt that run down into the floor's steel plating.

"Tony, relax."

Arina speaks quietly, but with insistence. He lowers the fork, consciously releases his death-grip on the steel tabletop. Opens his hand a few times, shooing away the cramp that threatens to descend. His ears are full with waves, with sounds like steel wool scratching: the planes thundering outside, beyond the plate glass window, the passers-by, thousands of feet drumming just feet away. Tony's heart beats alongside their pounding. He looks over his shoulder, till he feels Arina's cool hand on his arm.

“It’s ok. She will be back soon.”

He is not sure that he wants to hear the platitudes: his daughter has flown the coop, is off to school, a few states away, and he had not even been allowed to drive her there, collapse her wheelchair for her, ready to pack. His daughter, who wants to take on the world, all the time, has to chain herself to inaccessible school buses, defy drivers who try to carry her up the bus stairs. His pepper baby.

He turns toward Arina’s voice. There is her beloved mouth, still naturally pink against her wheat-white skin, small lines weaving across the fullness as if someone was making sure to focus hard, to paint each corner of this little face. He smiles at his wife of forty years.

Then he stares over Arina’s shoulder at the concrete apron of the airport. Out there is Melanie’s airplane, maybe waiting, last pre-flight checks, maybe already in flight, the old days of tracking the planes as they rumbled on their ballet long over. Out there.

Something is not right.

The concrete valley in front of his restaurant window heaves upward, a depression, then a boil, a breathing up and down. Halfway between their terminal and the opposite side, on the desert smoothness of light grey, something is being born. Up again – the yellow demarcation on

the concrete shimmers in the afternoon sun as it undulates across the tarmac.

Arina turns around, looks where Tony's staring.

She looks, first quiet, and then begins to scream when the first tentacles begin to shoot in the air.

Tony is up, shoving Arina in front of him as they shoo backwards from the window. He runs, dives into the main corridor of the terminal. Arina has not stopped screaming, and she is running out of air. He lifts her, a small weight compared to the heavy machinery of his body shop. They sprint toward the exit, out to the other side of the airport. He looks back, backs away from the nightmare, wet-looking fronds waving, tangles, growing out of slits in the concrete, weaving on the other side of the glass, exploring the airliner still peacefully waiting next to the bridge. Is this Melanie's airplane? The tentacles taste their way over the curved white skin of the plane.

The terminal doors still open, the electrics hadn't had enough time to shut down and lock down the airport. He rushes through, his heart pounding too loud in his ears. In the body shop, the heavy machines get moved about by cranes now, and it has been a long time since he carried something as heavy as a body through the world. Arina glides from his suddenly limp arms.

"Tony. Sweetheart. Not now! Focus!"

With an immediate task at hand, Arina takes charge, and hits Tony across his massive chest, startling his heart back into their predicament. Yes, he can walk. His girl might be in trouble, tentacled trouble beyond imagining. He turns, and tries to sprint in bursts back into the terminal. A river of humans passes by. They see people drag carry-on suitcases along, nearly falling but reluctant to release their grip. One family is running from the terminal, blood dripping off the mother's face, a cut flowing freely. Many have dumped their bags, and run with the abandon of unfettered limbs. Others, seeing their example, seeing the blood, drop their bags, too, and start to sprint away. The bags remain, though, and create a new obstacle course, spin with their old momentum only half spent. One large purple bag rolls down the slope under its own steam, trundling across the intersection, and folds into a thin white woman, knifes her legs out from under her. Tony sees it, and sees it for what it is: the beginning of a deadly panic. Some of these people will be trampled, long before any monster can reach them.

Arina wails, claws at him, tries to reverse their direction and leave this space. He pulls them both out of the main flow, back toward the windows, tries to quickly explain what he saw, the tentacles tapping their way over the airliner.

“Arina. Wait. We need to check on Melanie. What if she's still in the plane out there?”

They turn, together. Look out of the huge bay windows, out at the airport. Beyond the terminal, on the tarmac, it happens. It blooms. The tip of the airliner is sucked in, then out, shooting outward on a fire storm. The plane is an inferno, its flames a heatwave rushing outward. Tony sees the tentacles in the airfield loop, then whoosh down, vanish. Time expands, then the deep boom of the explosion travels over Arina and Tony, and all the other fleeing people.

#

Melanie isn't on the disintegrated plane, bombed to bits by terrorist fire. She isn't on the tarmac, either, burning up in kerosene flames. Melanie isn't quite sure where she is, at this point. She saw the tentacles emerge on the runway, saw a rubber-like tip entwine the titanium spokes of her wheelchair, carefully, lifting her high up, and then down, through the earth, just as a boom above sent a heatwave down after her.

She is in darkness. A deep vibrating sound pulses through her bones. She is lying against a giving wall, not cold exactly, but cooler than flesh, warmer than earth. Smooth, with ridges that press into her own contours. She can't quite get the sequence right. Mum and Dad had driven her to the airport, sure, had hugged her goodbye, and she had

wheeled through security. She had been ready to enter the airplane, had been about to transfer from her wheelchair onto the aisle chair to be loaded. And then...

She just can't quite recall, although there is a ripping sound in her head, a sound sheet metal might make if sheared apart, a spatial sound, like something shifting direction as the metal curves downward. Then the tentacle, grey and pink, and so careful and caring. Were her parents alright? What happened to everybody? Now there is ... thickness and rubber. That's what the surface feels like, like the inside of a car tire, not the smoothness of the inner tube, but the rough substantial feel she remembers from crawling around her dad's wrecking yard, playing hide and seek in the tire pile.

Her hand explores. Tire, tire, tire, rubber welt, another – then a slit. Her hand goes in, sideways, deep. She immediately takes it out again, not sure what her left small pinkie fingertip had felt deep in there: slime? Water? She pulls the hand closer, in the darkness, and smells the side: no odor, really, just a whiff of airport soap and, just beneath it, something a bit mold-like, dank. Huh. Melanie remembers old cellar rooms, Michigan basements, with that smell deep in the corners where the spiders live. She had enjoyed visiting with the spiders, bumping down the steep stairs on her butt. As a tiny one, she had delighted in the feel of small legs on her limbs, the frantic spider climbing a smooth, white, rolling mountain.

Laying her hands again against the rubber, she concentrates on her feet. She can feel them, much more than usual. Secure, on a small ledge or ring, circular, raised against the equally circular wall she's leaning against. She tests the ring, and it holds as she drops her weight harder, bounces up a little, as much as her weak knees allow. No problem there.

And then there is. The curved surface in front of her shifts in the darkness, and gravity becomes a player. And tips her. Her weak feet lose the ring ground, and grope, scrabble, as the ring lifts backward, away from her. Her hands hold on for a second more, tension between them creating an adhesion, but not for long. Melanie falls, but everything feels too close, too dark, to really panic. She stretches out both arms as she tips backward, spread-eagled in descent, eyes open. No light falls in.

Falling. Is this a second yet? She is curiously comfortable. Melanie is not counting, is spinning silk in her mind, ropes to hurl and sail on. Concentrate.

Abruptly, she stops falling. Without much sensation, she is pressed against a second hard surface, this time against her back. Her hands feel out, and again, the feel is rubber-hard, hard like old rubber, like rubber past oil and street grit and water hosing and maybe even a fire hard. There are ridges, again, these ones uneven, older, as if more exposed to the elements than the earlier surface.

There was no impact, and she does not hurt. She can hear that she is no longer alone. Which feels good.

“Hello?”

Melanie asks of the scrabbling off to her side, a human touching noise, not an insect pattern.

“Hello.” The answering voice is deeper than her own, but a woman, too. Alto. Calm.

“I just arrived. Where am I?”

Melanie ventures.

“I do not know. I arrived here a short while ago, from a pavement in San Francisco.”

“Really? I was at Denver Airport, just getting onto a plane. I had just left my parents. I need to make sure they are ok. But where are we?”

“Can you remember what happened?”

“No, not really. Just a sound. An opening. A tentacle lifting me up. Then falling downward, but soft.”

“Yes. That’s me, too. No sound, just a sensation of going down in the street. Like something opening. No tentacle, but yes, some kind of creature. Big. And now I am here, and there are voices.”

“Voices?”

As Melanie reaches out with her mind, full of curiosity, she hears them, too: voices around her, beneath her waist, echoing in her lungs, trembling along her femur. She sits up, much easier than she had ever done in her wheelchair, and listens inside.

“Welcome.”

Melanie hears the voice, recognizes its cadence, as if all terror and uncertainty rush out into the world in one word, then transform. She faints.

#

Akilah hears the tumble in the blackness of the scale night, and rushes forward. Melanie folds into her arms. They sit, one draped over the other, on the scale moving in the night. Akilah fears nothing, knows no pain, as she sings to and is sung to by the voices, waiting

for Melanie to come back. She is a young one. She is glad to have a comrade again. A girl, twisted lower body and legs, but breathing.

Melanie's eyelashes flutter against Akilah's neck, her breath changes rhythm. Now she is back.

"What surprised you?" A warm mouth whispers in her ear.

"I know that voice. It's been a long time, I had forgotten."

Melanie whispers back, keeping close to the warm human skin and blood that is holding her now.

"Tell me."

"It's the spider voice. In the cellar. Spun me in softest silk, right across my eyes, one night...." Melanie's voice recedes a bit, in memory, soft like a warm river in Akilah's ear, open and vulnerable.

"I heard it too, before, in a small river far away. It's good."

"It's good. It has come back before." Melanie remembers nights that had terrified her co-protestors, lying on cold pavements in school bus yards, limbs twisted over chains that they had padlocked shut.

Campaigning for ramps and access points, against nursing homes and locking people away. Bringing it all out into the open. They had thrown the keys away, long parabolas of tiny silver twinkles into the

far bushes. She had heard the spider voice then, rolling, holding, spinning cocoons. She had heard the spider voice when they had broken into a juvenile care facility, lifted each other over broken windows, to visit with incarcerated youths, their alter egos, holding each other on slim cots. The voice had draped silks over her and her cot mate, a round brown teenager, hair shaved, softest down, eyelashes trembling. The voice had whispered to them. The youths they visited had been frightened, elated, and then exhausted, adrenaline mixing with the juices of lying close, sensual touch.

Melanie shakes away this memory, uncurls from Akilah's lap just a bit, to open a space for talk.

“What are we doing here? Where are we? Who are you?”

They shift apart, introduce themselves.

Melanie. New student, disability activist, access specialist. On her way to head out to Pitzer College, Southern California.

Akilah. Poet, dancer, on her way from a Black Lives Matter protest in San Francisco.

They are flying, alive, into the night, together into their futures. This scale is too small to hold them, and it is not their place to stay here, they both know that. They are needed elsewhere. But it clear that the world is shifting, that something is being born. What does it want of

them? Melanie thinks of her parents, misses them. But that is not the way forward.

Melanie takes Akilah's hand. She is ready to respond to the voice. Akilah is ready, too. She grasps Melanie's hand, transmits her resolve. They get up. Melanie teeters on her weak legs, leans against Akilah, feels her own side melting into Akilah's hip. In that other woman's hip, she can feel echoes of water, rivers, of green against street grey. Melanie is full of resolve, of spider warmth, metal spokes, and tensile strength. Akilah feels the smoothness, clarity, in Melanie's warm palm.

The darkness around them is full and warm, an entity pressing against their eyes. The voices come.

"Help us rebuild."

"Where are my parents? Are they ok?"

"We do not know."

Akilah hurts knowing that there is no one person who claims her heart right now. Her grandmothers are dead, her parents, long settled far away. Her comrades, in fight.

"We do not know, but we need you. They need you, too, after the bombs and the fires. We need to build. Are you ready?"

Together, they step to the edge of the scale. They step off.

Petra Koppers is a disability culture activist and a community performance artist. She is a Professor at the University of Michigan, and she teaches on the MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts at Goddard College. Her most recent poetry collection is *PearlStitch* (2016). Stories have appeared in *Drunken Boat*, *The Sycamore Review*, *PodCastle*, *Future Fire*, *Capricious*, *Wordgathering*, and *Accessing the Future: A Disability-Themed Anthology of Speculative Fiction*. Her *Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction* (2014) offers practical exercises for classrooms and studios. She is the Artistic Director of The Olimpias disability culture collective. She lives in Ypsilanti with her collaborator, Stephanie Heit. Website: [**petrakoppersfiction.wordpress.com**](http://petrakoppersfiction.wordpress.com).

Ivoriania Phillips

The Galaxy in Her Hand

They turned their lips away so I couldn't learn of what they were speaking, but I heard them as clearly as if the world wasn't mute to me. Hands covering mouths, eyes darting towards me and away, fidgeting and clearing their throats.

How will she be able to do the work required if she can't hear?

Can we really afford to do special accommodations for someone with her condition and special prayer schedule?

She's not fit to join our crew...

I know that when the chief turned towards me again to share with me, "Miss Budur, we are quite impressed with your outstanding studies in the astronomy field and space travel training, but we feel..." he spoke from ignorance.

Right then, through the cemented wall of confidence and willfulness I've built in my mind, regret and doubt seeped through the cracks I didn't know were there.

I should've gotten that hearing aid surgery, I thought. I should've submitted my extensive research on quantum leaps for faster travels instead of giving it to my superior to butcher it before handing it in. I should've poured more time in my work instead of praying—

I cleared my throat, sat up taller, and fixed the fissures before they grew big enough to send my wall crumbling. I spoke with as much clarity as my voice would allow. “Sir, with all due respect, this will be a mistake on your part. I know that there are very few station workers willing to go through the perilous experiment of Flash Travel, and of the dangers the other universe may present upon our arrival.

“SUPARCO could use as many volunteers for this as they can get.”

The chief's lips pursed, and again, he exchanged looks with the other members of the conference sitting on either side of him, looking for sound rebuttals to drive me away.

That was an entire month ago, and since then, SUPARCO has worked diligently with NASA to prepare my seating in the traveling craft. It is quite a beautiful ship, pristine and durable, promising a magical travel if not a completely safe one. It was all I could watch from the window of the conference room, where all who've passed the process celebrate our coming departure with our leaders and team members, as well as our family and friends who wanted to see us off.

I know I should be with my father and sisters who, despite the wishes of my traditionalist mother to avoid the “stain on true Muslimahs’ name,” came to see me and wish me well, but I can’t tear myself away from the glass to join in conventional small talk, not when I’m already in the stars, watching frozen rocks shoot across, entire planets consumed by fires or breathtaking clouds, all of it zooming past quicker than the speed of light itself.

And it’s not like I’m completely broken away from my colleagues, despite my fascination with our new home for the few years’ time and my complete deafness making it seem so. There was a reason that I refused that surgery, and that reason is that I found it totally unnecessary compared to this odd skill I have been developing since my youth: skin reading.

I couldn’t recall how old I was, but long ago, I discovered that when I pressed my hands to the speakers of any electronic, the sounds come to me as easily as Braille. Because of my inquisitive nature, I had to use this ability, had to see how far I can stretch my capabilities. So, I tuned my body to the air around me, so that the sounds may come to me. To some, it may seem such a foolish decision to pass up a surgery to bring a vital sense back, but I must say that what came next was worth it, for it was something that those who can hear could never understand. Words danced on my skin, conversations enveloping me like I’m submerged in water but safe from drowning; cars honking on the street, children laughing in parks,

glass clinking together after a heartfelt toast, as easy to access as simply listening.

And the stars! Oh, I would not have ever imagined in all my years that I could use this ability to connect to the stars. Whenever I sat out on my family's balcony while everyone slept, I'd feel them, all the ones closest to us. Explosions, gushing gases, howls of pain as stars died, and gentler, yet still mighty screams of stars being born, like the cries of newborn babies. It was good that they were so far away from me, because my younger self would have been even more overwhelmed by it all if the sounds of collisions and destruction were closer. But I am now ready to be among them, to live the collisions, the destruction, the devastation and birth in other universes.

As my breath hitched from the magnificence of the worlds I have yet to visit, I started to calm myself by pressing my free palm against the window, feeling the work of humans and machines as they added finishing touches and thorough inspections on my *Saint Elizabeth*. Even though nothing could take my attention away, my skin did pick up on the vibrations of approaching footsteps through my uniform sleeves, steps that were bold and loud, heavy from the person who commanded respect and who is a little on the chubby side. Baba.

His face appeared on the glass's reflection, a smile buried beneath the grey and black forest of his beard. I watched him lay his hand on

my shoulder and say to me, “So, Budur, it looks like you’ll be meeting Allah. Are you ready?”

“Baba,” I said, “you make it sound like I’m going to die.” And if the calculated risks are correct, then he isn’t entirely wrong.

It is something that he knew, too, the probability of my team and I dying, yet instead of letting the gloom of it poison our conversation, he said, “I can’t believe that one of my own will fly off into the heavens beyond ours, going to new worlds, meeting new species! Oh, Budur, you may be able to share the love of Allah and the wisdom of the Quran—!”

“Baba! Baba, please!” I spun around, careful to not spill a drop of clean champagne from my glass. “We must take this slowly, remember? And, sadly, we cannot involve religion in our journey and research. I’m already pushing it with my daily prayers.”

Baba scoffed and stared into his drink. “Pushing it, how despicable; I heard that there will be a small chamber dedicated to Christian prayer, *and* it can be rearranged to serve as a synagogue for the Jewish passengers.” His eyes then travelled to the people gathered across the room, picking out the ones he’s seen bearing their cross necklaces or traveler’s Bible.

Admittedly, I, too, was sour about having to fight for my right to prayer when it’s treated like a luxury to some of them, but I refused to lose

sight of the purpose of this mission for something that is meant to be private to begin with. So, to soothe my father's burning fury, I reach to hold his hand and direct his attention to my sisters, whom seem to be at ease conversing with the other astronauts without the condemning glower of our mother.

"It looks like Ameenah and Farha are handling my trip well, too."

"Yes, they are. Bragged about their big sister space cadet to every nosy old lady at the market. Oh! That reminds me..."

Baba dug into his pocket and instructed me to hold my hand out. I did so, and for some reason, he thought that my hand was big enough for his gift, for he dumped possibly a dozen tiny rolled parcels into my waiting grasp, and so many fluttered to the floor.

"Baba!" I yelled. We both knelt to pick up the scattered pieces and decided it was best to set them on the nearby table. I picked one up and unrolled it. "What are these?"

"Prayers for a safe travel, well wishes, requests should you meet Allah or His angels." Baba raised his glass. "The old ladies were very busy once they've learned of your mission—"

I missed the rest of what he said as I read the scrolls one by one, my heart swelling with each message, every fine character, written with as much intricacies as embroidery on silk. I pressed a scroll to my

lips, and sniffed the old oak scent and light perfume. “Baba, tell them thank you. Thank you so much...”

Baba leaned in and planted a gentle kiss on my forehead, felt even through my hijab.

I had to sacrifice my last bit of sleep to do my Salat al-Fajr, but sleep was the last thing on my mind once I hopped out of bed. I bowed and whispered my prayer to the mat lying beneath me, all while bathed in the light of the moon and the murmurs of the stars. Such music to my skin made it difficult to focus, because apart from my private session with God was a small part of me bouncing, giggling, and ecstatic for the mere fact that soon, I was going to be close enough to them. Death, though terrifying, felt worth it.

When I finished my prayer, I sat in bed, reading through the small scripts of paper until the soft whispers of the moon gave way to the lively, uncontrollable screams of the sun. Then came the drilling sound of the alarm to rouse awake the others. We all went through our daily prep routine, made sure our suits fitted perfectly and had no deformities, our health was optimum, and that we all understood the mission ahead of us, that any of us feel doubt about this have one more chance to forfeit their position. No one did.

We existed out to the launch field, my hand over my breast pocket to feel the bulk of those scrolls, and thousands of people seated around

us to witness our flight to heaven, thankfully from a safe distance. I couldn't tell from the cheers running up and down my spine like blissful static, or the indistinguishable faces, but I knew that my father and sisters were here with me once more. Into the spacecraft and taking our seats, we started activating the systems and communicating with the station workers. At least, my cohorts did; although my telecommunication screen worked perfectly, they didn't trust my lip-reading capabilities nor the captioning to translate their works well, so I was left with following the instructions of my team members and tapping into memories of my training.

The ship came to life, and I never would have imagined how stimulating it would all be. My chest felt tight, my skin rolled from all the noise and activity like waves of the ocean. I laid my head against my seat's headrest and felt a hand drape across mine. I looked over to my left, into the sweet, brown eyes of Captain LaQuisha Howard, whose dark skin seemed to glow warm from the lights of the screens. The countdown began, and it felt like it was a countdown to my heart imploding instead of its intended purpose.

The blast of jet fuel shot us up, and up, and up. The air became syrupy, too thick for me to swallow easily. I squeezed LaQuisha's hand.

I can't breathe!

LaQuisha squeezed back.

Deep breaths, honey!

We broke through the atmosphere and I inhaled, exhaled, regulated my breaths throughout the turbulence. There was one final rough shake as the boosters fell away. And when the flight stabilized, we all heaved a sigh and looked out the window.

Will the planets we're traveling to be as beautiful as this?

We were going to find out. Once in a safe distance from Earth, our three techs ran off to prepare Omni-1, the smaller of two energy-conversion and propelling cylinders built within the ship to accelerate our exit from out of the solar system before activating Omni-2. I am prepared. We all are. We didn't go through months of quantum leaps training and physical conditioning to not be. But it was harder to convince my quivering body and jolting nerves of that. Even in my deafness, I can hear my heart pump blood to my head and back downstream.

LaQuisha and the others started to put on their radiation-protection suits, and after being prodded by our Captain, I did so, too, embarrassed and a little frightened that I had forgotten such a vital step. The scrolls in my breast pocket crinkled as I attached my oxygen mask and helmet.

“May Allah bless this traveler’s journey with His love and grace.”

Because my nerves were still recovering from this overwhelming launch, I may have missed something passed between our technicians and our flighters, because soon, the Captain began entering codes and flipping switches, meaning Omni-1 was ready to take us off. Our suits’ interior began to collectively cool. Through all the wonderful chaos, through this thick suit that gave me assurance as well as fear, I felt the thrum of Omni-1 like the ship’s heart racing. The techs returned and buckled in, slipping on their added safety gear as well, and with one slow pull of the lever, Omni-1 rocked our very foundations. I only had time to inhale for a scream before we were swallowed into light, light that broke into fractures of pinks, violets, sky blue, red, maroon, blasting in swirls around us.

And when it was over, I screamed, then choked when I tried to stop myself from screaming. Fighting down the bile that threatened to pollute my mask was too difficult to achieve in my—our, as I now saw—disoriented state. Everyone laid their heads back on their headrests or bent down as far as the control panel would allow, trying our best to gather our senses and recover our health. Tyler, one of the techs with an apparent body of steel, was the first to get back to work.

“Tyler...” Captain LaQuisha panted, “Our, er, our unit readings...”

Tyler coughed and replied, “Readings from Beagle 2 says... Christ, my head—um...wait...” he tapped in some quick keys, scrolling through his reading slower and slower, until he continued, “It’s a little weak, but it says ‘10,000 units’. We’re freaking 10,000 units away from our solar system!”

We all shot up from our various recuperating positions to share confused and credulous glances at each other, until someone started laughing, and her laughter had spread to everyone else, until the pit was ringing with laughter that tingled my hands and soothed the last bit of my nausea. I hiccupped and sniffed, thanking all the written prayers that shielded me from danger—

“Prepare Omni-2 then.”

All attention turned to LaQuisha. She ignored us all to simply reboot the system for another, bigger jump.

“Captain, you can’t be serious...” Tyler said.

“When have I joked about our missions, Tyler?” LaQuisha retorted.

“But, ma’am, we can’t. I don’t recommend it at all, at least not so soon!” He searched for support of his claims in the information glowing in the screens before him. “The ship needs time to cool, and our bodies barely reacted well to our smaller jump! If we try again so soon, we could die!”

“And we *all* knew of that risk when we took on this task.” I couldn’t believe the sureness of her words when her voice felt so weak and ill. Even the way she reached for her controls were weak and unsteady, like she was on the brink of collapse. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, and the first part was a success. It’s at this point that most would lose nerve and get too comfortable. So, give us coordinates of the nearest black hole, get O-1 and 2 going, and let’s go like the heroes that we’re meant to be!”

However long it took for Tyler to get the coordinates like LaQuisha ordered, the rest of us used the time to prepare for more great leaps. Whatever power these scrolls held I tried to glean in these moments, to call on Allah’s power. I wasn’t alone; looking left and right, I saw that some of the others were pressing their fingers to their chest, likely where their crosses hung, or bowed their heads to ask their deities to make this work. The nearest black hole was only 2,000 Astronomy Units away, and held enough power to cross us over to another universe. Tyler, another technician, and a randomly assigned assistant left to work on the Omnis, returning with blanched and sweating faces.

A black hole was that close to us. So, it wasn’t my mind so out of whack that it was a messy stream of senseless thoughts; I was taking in the screams of stars swallowed whole. Stars were being consumed of their very existence, and she wanted us to share in that doom.

How could she even think of going headfirst into this so soon after our previous, perilous leap that we barely survived?

Once the questions rang in my head, I saw the truth in LaQuisha's statement. It became too easy to want to rest, and after rest, it'll be easier to convince ourselves that all along, the danger wasn't worth it, and whatever power we had in our cylinders we should use to go back home. This sudden compliance with her direction may have something to do with the high of our breakthrough, but I'm going with it.

LaQuisha steered *Saint Elizabeth* towards the location of the black hole, then put as much power into the fuel burners to speed us along in a "running start." Everyone checked their suits' conditions and the tightness of the seatbelts. Stars rushed past our views in the window, and *Liza* rocked with the same turbulence as before. At first, we broke beyond the speed of light, but the river of glow and colors faded away so quickly, I wondered—feared—that O-1 burned out, or we've consumed all the energy close by, but it made sense when spotted just ahead was our next stop: a dark force that engulfed stars with a ferocious hunger, yet was eerily calm and delicate, like a dancer spinning their ribbon in the air.

If my teeth weren't chattering from the stars' screaming burning my insides, I would've thought—no, it *is* beautiful.

Despite the black hole devouring all atoms, Omni-1 still fought to push us through, until Omni-2 took over. The mass of fire and gas swirling the black hole started to split, a fork of the debris swarming towards us, breaking into invisible particles for O-2 to decimate, remake, and burn into the powerful, possibly lethal, fuel to get us going. Next, with the stars taken, O-2 went after the black hole. O-2 couldn't get all of it, not from something so big as a planet, but if we could get enough, just enough to temporarily make a way...

I bowed my head and inhaled as O-2 fought to keep us together, while the black hole, like all the stars that had the misfortune to cross its path, tried to rip us apart. A chorus of screams, my own included, eased away into soundlessness that even my flesh and bones couldn't feel. We'd breach the event horizon; because of Omni-2's powerful acceleration, the pull wasn't as slow, as intense as previous research had stated, but it was still enough agony to make me regret for those few minutes that I joined in this project.

And so, I bowed my head once more and whispered voiceless, "Allah, be our shield!"

I opened my eyes. It seemed I was the last to awake, since everyone around me were wide-eyed and gaping mouths, gawking into the window. I waited for my vision to stop swimming, only for my eyes to sting from the sweat pouring down my face. I didn't think of the risks when I removed my helmet to wipe my face dry, but I knew that

something warped in our oxygen supply. My sight blurred so badly that I blinked multiple times, but no matter how many times I did so, it continued to swim, and all that I saw became brighter, more saturated and harsh.

I yanked off my glove to rub at my eyes. “Good gracious, what... what happened? What’s going on?”

“We overshot.”

I stopped, staring at the blurred face of Tyler. “We, we what? What do you mean?”

“Omni-2,” LaQuisha spoke up, “it... it may have taken us too far.” She shook her head. “We don’t know what that is...”

I had a moment of frozen fear, of cold liquid filling my every vein. I had faint sensations of murmurs and crying filling the pit, too indistinguishable for my damaged senses to make into words, but I could sense the source of terror. I kept my eyes down even though I can now clearly see even the small print on the panel’s keys in front of me.

Did I want to see my death, if it means my last sight will be my dream come true, and that my last breath will be taken away from me in the most beautiful and damning way?

My answer came in another gentle touch from LaQuisha, and a soft, “You have to see this, Burdu.”

I didn't die. None of us did. In just a short, harrowing hour, we've survived atomic leaps that should've killed us, yet we've mostly suffered banged up heads, extreme nausea, and inconsequential amounts of radiation poisoning. And what reward are we given? A globe of ice melting into sparkling, crystal waters; dry lands growing in lush of greens and pinks and white; smoke from angry volcanoes dissipating into mineral-rich clouds to feed the life below. We were still within the event horizon of the other side, so the evolution we as humanity never got to witness played through in rapid sequence.

And just beyond the bent horizon, this planet's source of light and life was swirling, morphing, squeezing into a tight orb of fire and wrath and hope. I rose in my seat. I thought of the many journal entries and notes I've written when I was younger, all the prayers I've said, all the dreams I've had, to someday live this. I reached my bare hand to the glass and jumped at the electric zap that struck my fingers, then pushed harder.

Never have I ever felt the beginning of life, of births, deaths, growth, destruction, renewal, in such a massive scale. Never have I felt like I'm going to explode from the song of a new Sun filling me. And for all of it to rush into me, barely slowing even as *Liza* pushed through the black hole's barrier, I wasn't sure that I was going to last much longer.

And I believe the others thought the same way, because the next thing I knew, I was yanked back by my waist and settled down on the floor with caution. LaQuisha took my face in her gloved hands to examine my complexion while Tyler checked my oxygen intake.

“Burdu!” LaQuisha gasped. “Burdu, honey, can you read my lips?”

My arms lied limp at my sides, I clung desperately to consciousness, but I clenched and unclenched my hand. “I...I had the Sun in my hands.”

My name is **Ivoriania Phillips**, a bisexual Black being diagnosed with Depression and Anxiety. Ever since I could remember, I’ve been writing until my fingers were sore and my ideas exhausted, yet still write beyond that. Writing has been many things for me: a career, a hobby, and a means to cope, and like Stephen King said, if you write for joy, you’ll write forever. And I intend to write forever.

Steven Archer

(Art is on website.)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Steven Archer is a multifaceted musician, artist, and writer. He is best known for his work with the electronic rock band Ego Likeness (Metropolis Records) as well as his abstract electronica projects Hopeful Machines and Stoneburner. His music has been used in several feature soundtracks including the recent award-winning documentary *Small Small Thing*. He has also been commissioned to score a video for NASA on the upcoming OSIRIS-REx mission.

A live-painting video of one of the oil paintings published here is available on YouTube. More videos, art, and music are also available from Steven Archer's Patreon page. Original art pieces are available to buy on Etsy.

Holly Morningstar

(Art is on website.)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Holly, like many people, fell in love with fairy tales (and all things fantasy and animated) as a child and never outgrew them. As an adolescent, she developed an admiration for portraiture and figurative art. The portraits she paints today are snapshot celebrations of perseverance, hope, love, and sexuality. She embraces a pallet of bright colors to echo the zesty and playful approach she still takes to life as an adult. Through portraiture, she explores the faces people present to society and exposes pieces of humanity that sit just below the surface. She doesn't believe people have skeletons in their closets, rather, they have dragons under their skin. Her work can be found at <http://www.archaicmiles.com>

Derek C.F. Pegritz

(Art and music is on the website)

ARTIST STATEMENT

Oneirophrenia is the culmination of nearly three years' worth of work to cobble together a full album of original tracks exploring one of my favourite sources of inspiration: altered states of consciousness.

Here you'll find musical molecules to unlock strange mental journeys into the liminal realm of brain-states where dreams, near-death experiences, hallucinogenic trips, and psychotic breaks all blur together into painful revelations and revelatory agonies. Here are the shades of Lord Dunsany and H. P. Lovecraft drinking ayahuasca with Terence McKenna and Carl Jung on the banks of the River Yann. Here are inquisitive zoogs and mindless gods of infinite fecundity; choirs of Machine Elves stitching together timelines as quantum events trigger multiversal expansions; wisdom gained through blood-soaked madness; and the awful blessing of the drill-toothed Buddhas whose trephinations free the self from the holocaust of "the real."

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Derek C.F. Pegritz is a musician (producer/composer), freelance graphic artist, and occasional fiction author living in the haunted ruins

of southwestern Pennsylvania's coal country, from which he derives much of his Lovecraftian-inspiration. [His website exists.](#)

Se'mana Thompson

(Art is on the website)

ARTIST STATEMENT

It's important to tell the stories of my ancestors, of the present and the imagined futures of my children and their children; I do this through art and through my zine queer indigenous girl. I'm deeply influenced by my cultural teachings, my children, my community (especially my URL community) and other artists.

I created *(O'Otham) New Moon in Aries* depicting the colors red and yellow, with the color red representative of the root chakra (located at the base of the spine) and yellow the solar plexus (located two inches above the navel) chakra. In this collage, the red rose (and individual) channels feminine energy and grounds us as people to the Earth; the yellow rose (and individual) is masculine energy that strengthens our will as individuals and community. This is precisely what red jasper and yellow topaz activate and stimulate within the root and solar plexus chakras. Rose quartz activates the heart chakra (located at the center of the heart) and is ultimately love - love of self, for others, the universe, for everything; it is healing and a love so great as to encompass the divine. I envision *(O'Otham) New Moon in Aries* as O'Otham in space and as our past, present and future. I see myself

here standing/sitting strong in my queerness, disability, sickness, neurodivergence and motherhood.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Se'mana Thompson is of the Red House People (mother's clan) and born for the White People (father's clan). Her maternal grandfather's clan is the Hopi People and her paternal grandfather's clan is the Flat Foot People (Pima a.k.a. Akimel O'Otham). In this way she is a Navajo woman. Se'mana is enrolled with the Gila River Indian Community which is comprised of the Akimel O'Otham and Pee Posh indigenous peoples and located on the southern boundary of the Phoenix metropolitan area. She is the editor and creator of the zine *queer indigenous girl* as well as the editor of the zines *Decolonizing P@renting* and *Black Indigenous Boy*. Se'mana lives with her children (creators of *Black Indigenous Boy* zine) and mother in Glendale, AZ.

Ulfgrim

(Art is on the website)

ARTIST STATEMENT

Ulfgrim was born of a desire to peel back the veil of mysticism and the unknown -- chasing a concept that we call "The Eyes in the Dark." We create narratives and dialogues about the violence in our histories, the candor needed to normalize the Outsider, and the damages that define the drive to create. In a balance of personal lineage, folklore, and songs in tongues long forgotten -- we seek to open the doors that have been locked for generations.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Self-creation and education with a history of rejecting traditional education and methodologies is the hallmark of the members of Ulfgrim. They can be found in performance environments, conventional fine art exhibitions, experiments in social interaction or through their academic research and outreach into religious and cultural spaces.

The feminine force of Ulfgrim: Cass Luger cut her teeth as a musician in 2009 with the goth/ EDM act The Crüxshadows, studied for a time at Florida State University in their Fine Arts department before

choosing to pursue her own avenues and paths as Ulfgrim. She has shown her traditional work in New Orleans, Atlanta, and South Florida; as well as performing up and down the eastern seaboard as Dire with her partner, Sköll in alternative lifestyle events and outreach. Her academic and anthropological research has been featured in a number of religious journals and projects.

Ulfgrim currently resides in Tallahassee, Florida with their two four-legged canine companions where Cass works in the stage industry to continue building material for her PTSD project, Tactical Bartending.

Thomas Muething

Review: *The Right Way to be Crippled and Naked*, eds.

Sheila Black, Annabelle Hayse, and Michael Northen

Too often, consumers of art can feel an uncomfortable feeling of intimacy where there ought to be none. Indeed, one of art's chief purposes is forcing us to deeply introspect about our own experiences, the attitudes borne from them, interact with the characters on the page, the stage, or screen, and reconcile the differences between the two, weeding out prejudices belied by the art's unfaltering commitment to its perception of truth. Indeed, as a physically disabled gay man, I frequently resent feeling as though I sit on a microscopic slide for careful clinical eyes: is that not itself a form of objectification? But a daring team of writers and editors endeavors to examine disability holistically that in the provocatively-titled collection *The Right Way to be Crippled and Naked*. In it, works are featured across the disability and sexuality spectrum, and it is remarkably chaste and free of explicit depictions of sexuality in its works. However, the collaborators do strive to challenge the common myth of the docile and childlike disabled person, forever innocent. Rather than describe intimacies, its writers focus on relationships between the disabled and the able-bodied, and the relationship that disabled people ourselves have with each other and our bodies.

Narratives around relationships offer the richest and most ready

opportunity for readers to glean personal lessons for themselves. In this respect, two works are especially strong: Christopher Jon Heuer's "Trauma" and Floyd Skloot's "Alzheimer's Noir". As pieces of fiction, they do not have a singular focus on disability, nor do they have clichés that become wearying in the modern world. Heuer concocts a story with Chekhovian qualities with his pleasantly winding narrative about a young deaf boy in Wisconsin. The narrator describes the social ritual of note-writing as a "delicate system of avoidance" between him and hearing people, an experience a majority of deaf people can relate to. The story's heavy dialogue allows readers to gain an intimate understanding of the characters, their baggage, and what they bring to the dynamics: the narrator and his family are referred to with no specific names. Heuer's recounting of an alcoholic father being removed instantly piqued my attention as the story progressed and the narrator united his deaf identity with the titular trauma: his father had broken a picture-frame on his head. My reading this caused me to grapple with the reality that many deaf and disabled children deal with regularly. The story's strength is in its empowerment of the narrator—adequate empowerment and self-direction of one's life is in my opinion the most potent treatment for ongoing trauma. Although this may be triggering for survivors and witnesses to domestic violence, Heuer's masterful writing does not blitz the trauma in detail by stating in the final page what was done, matter-of-fact, devoid of imagery; thus, it may not be re-traumatizing for all readers.

Lest one think this anthology is wholly comprised of stories from a disabled point-of-view, Skloot's "Alzheimer's Noir" recounts the emotions and experience of narrator Charles, husband of Dorothy, who has Alzheimer's. Skloot handles the disintegration of reality that is common in Alzheimer's with great compassion. Charles mourns for his wife's forgetting their son's dying: "It broke my heart. Filled me with despair, all of it: Jimmy gone too soon, then Dorothy slowing leaving me, now Jimmy somehow back because of her confusion so I have to lose them both again, night after night." Yet Skloot's characters are not printed from stock: each is animated, relatable, and lasting beyond the story's several pages. As a reader, it is easy to empathize with Charles's worry about his wife when she appears to have walked off. The story ends with a note on the equalizing force of death, relating the images of the mausoleum with their son's ashes, and the narrator's future ashes, with the ashes of Dorothy. Indeed, I would refer others to this story who are in need of literary therapy who are dealing with Alzheimer's in any capacity. It—and the anthology it is found in—are examples of how art can do more than distract or entertain, but heal and teach. Of course, no anthology with this provocative of a title would be an honest one without a glimpse into disabled intimacy in both the physical and inter-relational senses.

Bobbi Lurie's "The Protective Effects of Sex" focuses on a husband and wife and their sex life. The wife has been struggling with cancer and feels utterly devoid of sexual prowess, owing to her treatments.

Yet the spouses did try lovemaking, and Lurie calls the husband “patient” about his wife’s illness. Owing to its extreme brevity—the story is only one page long—the action of the story is not the act of lovemaking but feeling, as it focuses on the emotional intimacies between the spouses and the body image and biological anxieties of the wife after her cancer treatments. “The night before they held each other in bed for over an hour. / It had been two years since they had had sex” is mated with a line about the wife being “embarrassed by her body, thinking of the chemo and the anti-depressants which took away the previous intimacy...” and finishes with a display of strength from the wife: “she lay still, unmoving, unmoved by the way he kissed her cheek, got up, and left.”

The titular work of the collection centers on a young gay man’s personal identity development in two contexts: a Jain monastery that requires total nudity, and earlier, at a bathhouse or sex-club. This makes for an interesting development of its protagonist, and eventually fuses the two in a resounding way. I’m impressed at this story for a great many reasons: religion and spirituality and homosexuality are often incorrectly seen as discrete social circles into which one may be one but not the other. The subtle way the author weaves in the two realities to form a single narrative is effective. Additionally, there is no moralizing in this story: the narrator makes no judgment as to the ethical superiority of both images. The closest the narrator comes to moralizing is in the following statement, “Crazy people can still make decisions. Crazy people have been making

decisions for years.” How true this is! This is, in contrast to Lurie’s excellent work, longer by necessity, and some readers may find it a mentally draining read. Additionally, there are explicit descriptions of what goes on in a bathhouse. Thus, readers ought either temporarily arrest their shock or risk missing the larger point of the story: a harmonious unity of the self is difficult to attain. In the narrator’s case, the harmony between sex, religion, nudity, body image, and disability took many years. It would do readers well to take as much time to experience the character’s growth as necessary.

I would be neglectful if I did not also take the opportunity to extol this collection’s thoughtful inclusion of psychiatric and psychological disability. Although Heuer’s work obviously uses psychological trauma as a motif in developing his deaf narrator’s identity, stories with a sole focus on psychiatric diagnoses and treatment are good to see, too. With the semi-autobiographical work “Hospital Corners” by Alison Oatman, the anthology fills this void. The format is question-and-answer followed by longer narrative. I find this format ingeniously enterprising for no other reason than that psychiatric disabilities carry enormous stigma. The question-and-answer builds a rapport between the author and reader—in addition to mirroring a clinical interview—and then builds trust and understanding of a topic that, absent the success of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, is considered third-rail by pop culture. Lastly, Oatman’s courage in being honest about her personal background with the topics give it unshakeable authority and authenticity. Oatman’s work, like all the works in this book, is fiction:

nevertheless, when fiction is given the authority of real experiences, as art, it takes on a life of its own.

While this anthology's principal strength is the variety of viewpoints of the story, the life stages and conditions the characters face, and personal authority the stories' authors bring by way of real, personal experience, my one miniscule complaint—one that needn't be taken as diminishing of my numerous raves—is one of its editor's rushed afterword mention of accessibility. Michael Northen, one of the three editors of this collection, writes that accessibility is not merely “building ramps where there are stairs” and did not take the opportunity to make it known that so many places are simply not welcoming for disabled people where romances, friendships, and one-night-stands may start at: bars, informal get-togethers with friends and on online services such as Meetup, the majority of sex-clubs as in its title story, and other places are often explicitly exclusionary in whom can take part. In fact, without physical accessibility, it is all but impossible to foster attitudes around disability that are more in line with reality and would in turn foster actual relationships. Additionally, a design feature I appreciated about the anthology was its immediately following the work with the contributor's biography provides greater understanding between reader and author than in the usual format of an anthology, with the author bio at the end.

Nevertheless, it's undeniable that in the debate on why these places are not accessible has great deal to do with attitude—and it's my fervent wish that this book will achieve its aim of contributing to a discourse of disability built around empowerment rather than stigma.

Thomas Muething is a proud 2010 graduate of The Ohio School for the Deaf. As a gay man, he enjoys heckling local LGBTQ+ businesses to ensure they accommodate wheelchair users and other disabled people. As a person, he harbors a not-so-secret love for mathematics, and enjoys solving linear, quadratic, and trigonometric equations, as well as learning new math skills. In a past life, he was certain to have been a chorus member in the company of *Chicago* and *Damn Yankees*, and was a paramour of Tennessee Williams. He enjoys tragedies and cooking, and is based for now near Seattle.

Review: *A Body Undone: Living on After Great Pain*, Christina Crosby

Christina Crosby's 2016 memoir *A Body Undone: Living on After Great Pain* (NYU Press) delves into the ideological chasm between those who argue that disability is something to be treated and those who maintain that it offers up a cache of valuable epistemological resources. In truth, however, living with an impairment proves far more complicated than either of these formulas would have us believe, and Crosby isn't afraid of saying so. Throughout her book, she combats the "happy idea that disability leads to profound insight or higher understanding," which informs the "narrative arc that organizes so many stories about living with an incapacitated bodymind" (116). "Don't believe it," this memoirist exhorts us, because much of what she lives is "simply beyond belief."

Shortly after her fiftieth birthday, the athletic Crosby—already a tenured professor of English and Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut—embarked upon a bicycle ride that came to a sudden conclusion when a twig caught in the spokes of her front wheel. She was thrown to the ground, and her chin collided with the pavement. As a result, the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae in Crosby's neck were broken. Quadriplegia ensued. And it soon "became clear that [she] had lost the use not only of [her] leg muscles, but also the muscles of [her]

torso, arms, and hands” (3). What’s more, Crosby also “lost control of [her] bladder and bowels.” The struggle then became how to “put into words a body that seemed beyond the reach of language.”

A Body Undone is Crosby’s attempt to do just that—with, as you might imagine, a considerable focus on the “chronic pain and grief over loss” that become “unavoidable facts of lives shaped by catastrophic accident, chronic and progressive illness, or genetic predisposition” (7). Hers is a story that can even sound nihilistic, when, at one point for instance, Crosby admits that “[y]ears after [her] discharge” from the hospital, “there’s no discernible pattern that [she] can account for the good nights and bad nights” (28). Either way, she has to at least attempt to fall asleep, which involves an intricate evening routine: first, Crosby “lie[s] on [her] side, having positioned [her] legs so that the top one is drawn up, bent at the knee with [her] foot resting on a pillow so that the bony protrusion of [her] bunion, where thin skin stretches tightly over bone, does not touch the sheet and begin to throb” (28). “After arranging [her] foot,” Crosby continues, “she lie[s] down and put[s] one hand under the pillow, palm up and fingers spread, so the weight of [her] head will stretch it open.” And it’s only then when she occasionally realizes that “the electricity has been turned off and” she’s no longer in pain. “Unless I consciously try to move my legs,” Crosby concludes, “they’re just there.” Passages such as these, admittedly, may seem exhausting with their labyrinthine descriptions of how exactly this memoirist navigates her daily life. The sentences get long and knotty, clauses

piling atop one another with sinuous periodicity, and it becomes increasingly possible to forget, even, how or why we became entangled in the minutia of these moments in the first place. Then again, this is not just exhausting for us—but for Crosby too as she works through something so ostensibly simple as getting into bed. Certainly, in this light, disability doesn't seem to beget some greater truth. No, on the contrary, just more pain.

In other sections, too, Crosby doubles down on the pointlessness of physical impairment with strings of staccato laments that balance out their thematically similar but far more circuitous counterparts. In a chapter dedicated to lovemaking after the accident, she admits that “fucking is so changed from what it was that, try as [she] may, [she] cannot reconcile [her]self to [her] losses” (118-9). Then come the questions: “How can I settle for a life with deadened sensation that decrees I'll never again have an orgasm? How can I live on with profoundly compromised strength and tactile perception, especially in my hands?” And soon, as is wont to happen, interrogation capitulates to lament: “How I miss the way sex used to feel! My hands used to be strong and capable, and I used them to good purpose in sex. No more. Nor can I move my body with ease or pleasure. I can't even roll over in bed!” Crosby exclaims. Most significant is the diction of “decree”—or the way in which the author's forced to sacrifice her life to a ruthless tyrant under whose rule existence, and one's wellbeing, becomes increasingly precarious. Cue Crosby's queries which effectively underscore the uncertainty of such a life: the unknowns

that leave you with little else to do at times but question and bemoan. There's plenty of both, although the latter can be harder to pull off without sounding querulous. Still, Crosby succeeds, in part because she's earned her right to declamation after the specific and evocative details we get of her transformed sex life.

The true strength of passages like these is that they extend beyond identifying what spinal cord injuries change biologically to instead home in upon how these changes impact certain facets of one's life that prove far more invisible than moving around in a wheelchair. Take the example of Crosby falling asleep during a seminar—because OxyContin “slows down [her] whole system”—and then, to make matters worse, not attending a subsequent dinner that she had organized since “[t]he battery to the van was dead, which happens all too often because the adaptive technology continually draws down energy” (182). I doubt many people ever stop to consider the impact of drugs or the challenges of driving a modified vehicle. It's another time when we're left wondering whether there will be some silver lining to this otherwise bleak cloud.

There doesn't need to be, clearly, because part of what Crosby attempts—and accomplishes—is to relay radical metamorphoses in a life that now precludes sex, drinking, walking, teaching, and writing as she once knew them with the goal of engaging our awareness and empathy. Still, I think such a lining exists.

Towards the end of the book, Crosby cites Otto Kernberg's psychoanalytic account of the mourning process which includes the assessment that "daily reality militates against the full appreciation of loving relationships" (193). She disagrees: "No. Damn it, no! I appreciated every moment of the life that Janet and I made together and fully appreciated her. I knew what I had" (193).

But *A Body, Undone* complicates this knee-jerk response. It's a book that, in the end, reminds us of how it's possible to appreciate someone—and their presence in your life—without appreciating everything they do or everything they're willing to do should something go awry. Crosby herself admits that "the life [she] lives now depends on her day-by-day relations with others, as it did before, but to an incalculably greater extent" (20). This is an important lesson for us all, especially in a country that mythologizes rugged individualism and undertaking most tasks solo. More often than not, the futility of this approach will become apparent. Since, as Crosby puts it, "living *in extremis* can clarify what is often obscure, in this case the fragility of our beautiful bodies and the dependencies of all human beings" (10).

Her memoir, first and foremost then, testifies to the possibility of unconditional love even in an age when these dependencies are masked by screens and smartphones and inexorable stimuli. This is one of the messages she's gleaned from enduring a spinal cord injury with her partner, caretaker, and lover, Janet Jakobsen. At one point,

when Crosby was still in the hospital, she explains that Janet “climbed into bed with me, right there in room 120. She closed the door, walked around to the side of the bed, put down the rail, climbed in, and lay down behind me. ... She put her arm around me, her hand on my breast, and pressed her body along the length of mine. And there we lay” (121). These kinds of paragraphs—when Crosby begins to discuss the integral role that reaffirming intimacy plays in her recovery—tend to be more streamlined than the aforementioned excerpts while still including plenty of details, like the body parts listed above. But most importantly, here, the anaphoric repetition of “she” with the epistrophic reiteration of “me” stresses the burgeoning of a new connection. These lovers become one another’s alpha and omegas, if you will.

According to stereotype, disabled individuals often slip into morose self-pity. Crosby, on the contrary, reminds us that the opposite is just as possible: after fearing that she’s experienced a bone chip one night, the memoirist recounts how she “cried out, ‘I am so fucking fucked, I can’t believe how fucked I am,’ thinking of [her] broken face pinned together by the surgeons and wondering what else would emerge” (196). Janet, in turn, replies that when Crosby says such things, she undermines all the work her partner has done, “as if it were for nothing,” ignoring Janet’s “love for her.” Although Crosby may not appreciate her body any longer, Janet still does, and to say “you’re completely fucked is saying that my desire for you and my love is of no consequence.” What makes this passage work is the

author's honesty—curse words and all: the intimate rapport Crosby's willing to cultivate with an audience whose knowledge of the fights she wages with her lover doesn't seem to be intimidating. Perhaps because we emerge believing, like Crosby, that hers is a "life sustained by [Janet's] considerable and absolutely necessary labor and even more by her loving regard" (196). The memoirist shows how, by foregrounding one's dependence, disability can undermine narcissism and remind us, in powerful, imminent ways, that our existence indelibly affects and relies upon others.

This includes Crosby's university community too: she recounts in one chapter that Doug and Midge Bennet, the president of Wesleyan and his wife, "were in the waiting room, keeping vigil" right after the accident, even before Janet could get there (17). "We've been able to see her," Midge explains to Crosby's frantic lover. A hospital staff member asked, "Are you her parents?" and they "just lied," which sends Janet's tears cascading down her cheeks as she admits that she "was so afraid, so afraid, no one was here, she was alone." Midge assures, "No, no, we've been by her bed." It's one of the triumphant, and most heartening, moments of the memoir to be sure.

Crosby's spinal cord injury likewise brings her closer to her brother Jeff but in a far more heartbreaking way: having suffered with multiple sclerosis for years before his sister's accident, Jeff is an old pro at administering a bowel program—or, in other words, a daily routine of manually stimulating your anal muscles. Crosby once felt that his

experience was inaccessible; she could not imagine the life he was living. Though even before his illness, they had gone their separate ways: Jeff's "life flowed into familiar religious and familial channels," Crosby explains, while hers didn't (9). She never felt "alienated" from her family, *per se*, but ever since college, she felt that she "needed to love at a distance," in case she was "conscripted through [her] affections into obligations" she'd "quietly resent." Crosby thus kept her own company and became something of an outsider. It wasn't until the memoirist's own accident—and her own bowel program—that she "came to understand what Jeff faced" (104). In Crosby's post-accident world, then, her brother is able to ask how his sister's bowel program is going, and they have a "talk over the terrible fact that, unlike [Crosby], he [can] no longer push at all to move stool through the anal canal" (111). Although her injury is devastating, Crosby's disability lubricates pathways of conversation that seemed frustratingly clogged before.

It was right after her injury, in fact, that she began thinking about Jeff—and the "strangeness of being on the other side of the looking glass. Suddenly [she] was quadriplegic, too, just like [her] brother," with the operative word being "suddenly" (9). Too often, we consider disability to be an aberration, a departure from the wholly integrated, enlightenment view of the body, but nothing's farther from the truth: most people will become disabled at some point in their lives. Crosby, moreover, accentuates that rather than mark a deviation from the norm, disability elucidates certain fundamentals of the human

condition—dependence, fragility—in such a way that tends to deconstruct our difference and bring us, in turn, closer together.

The real point, however, is that even as we're sobered by Crosby's revelation of living in "a dark realm overshadowed by the life-threatening accident that didn't kill [her], but obliterated the life [she] had been living" (192)—and the meaningless realities of a spinal cord injury—we rejoice at the lives Crosby and Jakobsen live *together*. We celebrate, and learn from, the memoirist's accounts of relationships fully realized, all the while being called to task on whether we've made our own peace with the precarity of human existence.

Because of these many relationships, and ideas, the scope of *A Body Undone* is astounding: interwoven into the fabric of this text are many ostensibly unrelated threads of Crosby's life, from gender and sexuality to a number of various childhood experiences, from the dogs she once owned to recondite literary theory to insightful close-readings, and from her relationship with the Christian faith to the interactions she and Janet navigated with a plethora of healthcare workers. Sometimes, even, the scope becomes so capacious that we lose track of the intimate intensity Crosby marshals at her best, though her wide-ranging citations and anecdotes are suggestive of a brilliant mind wielding an arsenal of experiences and knowledge she continues to share with her students to this day.

These concerns are, at any rate, paltry when considering that *A Body Undone* brought tears to my eyes.

Maybe this is because Crosby and I have both undergone spinal cord injuries. So when she admits that, in the beginning, “she knew very little about the present and nothing about the future,” I remember the overwhelming uncertainty of those first days of living with a severely compromised nervous system (3). When she confesses that “the weight of a sudden spinal cord injury is crushing, and can at first be sustained only if spread out, as a suspension bridge spans great distances by hanging the roadway from cables that multiply as it reaches further across the void,” I realize someone else understands the emotional travails of learning to self-catheterize, to administer a bowel program, to modify one’s life, dreams, and hopes for the future while all the time grappling with excruciating pain (4). Like Crosby, I too “needed so much help” (5). Because disability often leaves people feeling utterly helpless, totally reliant, and truly terrified.

Even so, *A Body Undone* ultimately moved me in surprisingly intimate, even visceral, ways not because my spinal cord is injured, but because Crosby’s unmitigated candor tells the story of change and difference—of how those of us “who live on are not what we are, but are becoming, always becoming” (202). Perhaps, admittedly, Crosby’s becoming is more drastic; perhaps it’s marked by a dramatic turn of events beyond the pale of most peoples’ comprehension. But her efforts to find a new way forward through language and intimacy

and community stand as a testament to living on in an everchanging world amidst everchanging circumstances from which all of us readers, disabled and able-bodied alike, can find the strength to capitalize upon the lives we're living—alongside the people living them with us.

Pasquale Toscano just graduated from Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, where he won several writing prizes and was published in campus journals. Four years ago, he suffered a spinal cord injury that left him paralyzed below the waist. But with physical and occupational therapy, he slowly relearned to walk and now uses a cane and ankle-foot-orthotic brace. Toscano recently was awarded the Beinecke Scholarship to pursue a Ph.D. in English with a focus on disability studies after two years of graduate school at Oxford as part of the Rhodes Scholarship program. His work is forthcoming in *Breath & Shadow* and *The Deaf Poets Society*.