



speculative fiction **FOR THE REST OF US**

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Icetide by Eric Del Carlo

Pepper got us ejected from the hotel, a vast porcelain dome of a site with fungal art phosphorescing on the lobby walls. He staged a tantrum, batting bags out of the porters' straining arms, clattering equipment across the oily wood of the floor; adopting a magnificently aggressive stance, up on his hinds, baring those teeth, famous from an interminable array of snarling ads. And here it came: the full-strength, lungs at capacity howl! A hot ferocious yowl to blast everyone to the floor, all the upscale vacationers here on Larabee's Earth for sledding and skiing, poshing at this hotel whose advertising flaunted the place so grandly. It was a luxury resort, to be sure; but Larabee's had a better site and damned if Pepper was going to settle for less.

The porcelain dome hotel's manager came scampering, a multilimbed Vronorian looking distinguished and preposterous in a many-sleeved version of the staff uniform, attempting--hopelessly--to appease the great furry beast rampaging in his lobby. Floateyes were present, and Pepper's image was going out everywhere. The champion icedog throws a public fit! Crandle Pepperdine, self-styled Greatest in the Game, provoked by poor service at hotel! He wouldn't care what the taglines were, just that the incident would announce his arrival on the world and roil up interest in him.

Of course, the advance commercial campaign had already done that, but this was Pepper's personal way; and of course, I'd known he would do this and had his suite already booked at the other resort. But, standing back as Pepper continued to frighten the many-worlded vacationers in the lobby, I had to snap on my amber ear and talk to a dead channel, pretending to frantically arrange the new booking. Pepper, perhaps, even knew that I knew, but it was expected that I play along.

By the time the much-gesturing Vronorian manager came to me with his indignant I-must-ask-that-your-party-leave speech, we were set to roll. I had our staff move out the tonnages of baggage, and we reboarded the convoy of skimboats and headed northeast out of the canton, through a landscape of gloriously shimmering blue snow, an eye-watering beauty that barely registered with me.

The exclusive resort was expecting us, and expecting everything that went with an arrival by Crandle Pepperdine. But Pepper was grinning and gracious. The site, secluded and nested among the grandeur of the Simeon Alps, was tasteful in so subdued and elegant a fashion that it exuded the ambience of an ancient temple. The grounds were sublime, the service impeccable; the suite to which I personally guided Pepper might have been constructed specifically for him, it fit his every need so perfectly.

He hulked there in the vaulting room, his breath heavy, his teeth again displayed; but he was pleased, or at least done with his outbursts and spectacles for the moment.

"It's a good place," he pronounced.

"Yes," I said, voice calm and neutral.

"It's a good job you're doing, Welk."

Startled, I shot a glance up at him, but he was trotting away on all fours, deeper into the suite. He was done with me.

A thousand and more details impended, but after six years of governing the entourage I know precisely what to delegate, and have gradually recruited a staff capable of keeping the operation functioning smoothly from world to world. But it was long past local midnight when I padded across the pearly spongefloor of the deserted lounge, drawn to orange flames crackling in a fireplace of irregular scarlet stones. I felt stiffnesses and twinges my body hadn't had five years ago. I

don't blame the job; I'm just five years deeper into my middle years. Of course, I had a great-great-great-great-grandfather, who I remember through the wavery prism of a timid boy's eyes. A gaunt colorless shell of a man he'd been, a husk, croaking and rasping his embarrassing bigotry about aliens, so who was I to call these my "middle" years when I might live a long---

"Hello."

"Oh--hello." I halted sharply. "I didn't see anyone here."

"Were you going to sit? This isn't my private lounge, you know."

"Am I intruding?"

"Oh, by the stars, take a goddamn seat, would you?"

It was all very affable, very rife with the first sallies of engaging banter. I took one of the cavernous chairs by the fire, upholstered in whisper-soft deddimoni skins, so consumingly comfortable I could have slept the night in it. But suddenly I felt a vitality, an alertness. The person occupying the nearby chair was human, and despite my well-traveled background and modern mind-set, I always welcome the sight of another of my kind. Perhaps it's a tincture of my multi-great-grandfather's xenophobic attitudes, perhaps something more benign.

Orange light danced over the planes of his face, a strong but not prominent jaw, narrow nose, eyes widely spaced and becomingly crow's-footed; those eyes were a blue not unlike Larabee's snow, and his lush floppy hair was the color of starlight. He had a monstrous snifter of something wood-dark in his hand.

"I'm too tired to eat," he said, and there was the friendly droll tone again. He too, though, looked as if his weariness had abruptly ebbed.

"Yes. I'm famished as well." Naturally we could have any kind of meal we wanted at any hour, but opting for a less drastic local wine, I settled snugly in my chair as a little skimming mechanism delivered my glass. The wine's shade was a pale aquamarine, and it had been chilled nearly to freezing, as was proper.

We talked awhile, easily, launching purposely insipid topics just to wring them for cheap jokes we both chuckled over. We conversed as mutually stranded travelers, making the best of handy companionship. Yet I enjoyed myself immensely. We later ordered some light food, then another set of drinks, then I realized that we might do this until the sun broke over the Simeon Alps. I had to get some sleep. He stood when I stood, and I lingered over his trim and athletic physique, well-maintained for someone roughly my own age.

I flushed a little, realizing how long and intently I'd stared. I hoped the orange firelight hid it. I raised my hand in all-world standard farewell, then changed my mind and boldly thrust it out for a human handshake.

He smiled, a warm and engaging expression, and shook my hand. Human flesh, human heat, contact. I was comforted and stimulated.

"I forgot to ask your name," I said abruptly, with dumb surprise.

"Burlin Bachmeier."

"Travis Welk."

"I knew that three seconds after you sat down. I'm surprised it took me that long."

I was blinking, over and over, trying to think a clear way through the wine and my arousal. "How---" But the name caught up to me. Burlin Bachmeier---

"You work for Fonterbok Jass. The icedog."

"I work for an icedog. You work for the icedog. At least if your publicity is to be believed." He tried to shrug it casually away, but saw my expression and let his shoulders go slack.

I muttered some further goodnight and turned and strode off across the spongefloor, anticipating the fallout.

* * *

Some of the next day's thousand and more details were meteorological in nature, other geological. I had a phalanx of personnel watching the cold fronts, the boiling underground tides, the extreme peculiarities of climate here on Larabee's Earth. You go where the ice is. That might as well be inscribed with a white-hot brand on the flesh of every person even remotely involved in this sport.

But I named myself as the one to tell Pepper that Fonterbok Jass had booked into this same mountain retreat ahead of us.

"This early in the season!" Pepper, rearing on his hinds again, loomed above. Uncombed fur bristled; eyes the size of my fists blazed. "That lowdown belly-shower! That puppy! That---"

He broke things then, a Mobius sculpted from Dalfiaruni jade, an ancient ceramic something or other I didn't get a good look at before it was exploding against the vaulting ceiling; also some disposable equipment I'd intentionally snuck into the suite. I ducked when I needed to duck. I looked afraid when appropriate. It's not difficult to appear daunted by an enraged being of Pepperdine's mass and dimensions.

The thorn here was of course that Fonterbok Jass was the first pro icedog to arrive for the Larabee's season. Though that season's official start had come weeks ago, no one of any stature ever showed up before the ice started blooming at full intensity. When--and only when--Crandle Pepperdine arrived on the scene could the true season commence. So it had been for the nearly two decades of his storied career. So it must be. Heavy etiquettes were involved, steeping the event in complex issues of status and showmanship.

I almost didn't care anything about it. It was almost utter childishness to me, saved only by my esteem for the sport itself and an odd nagging sympathy for Pepper that should have been squelched years ago. But my feelings didn't figure in; I was paid to behave as if all matters were life or death.

While I was still in the room, my amber ear alerted me, and I was able to interrupt Pepper with good news. The tide was moving. To the ice!

Morning crackled across the expanses of blue snow. Here and there the ancient onyx crags of the Simeon Alps showed through their icy crusts, but we were racing away, across the face of this frozen jewel of a world. Larabee's Earth is one of a handful of planets suitable to the sport. Where there are professionals, there come as well amateurs and spectators. Commerce commences; sums change hands. Pepperdine gathers more wealth to himself. And, perhaps more importantly to him at this stage of his career, more prestige. The Greatest in the Game. No jest, that. He wished it for his epitaph.

The skimboats moved at maximum speed. I continued to coordinate and orchestrate. Not just personnel and accommodations to deal with now; I had a temperamental planet to consider. Conditions were right, but even optimal circumstances don't always yield worthwhile ice. I was operating steadily, effectively, but my heart was thumping excitedly.

Of course, Fonterbok Jass had just as good a chance of anticipating this potential icebloom, presuming he had a decent crew of handlers working for him.

Like Burlin Bachmeier...

No time to think of him, none at all. To the ice, to the ice!

The steaming tide was roaring beneath the snow-blanketed ground, seething through the world's rocky veins. The tide was making for a vent at a particular latitude and longitude. It would beat us there. Information washed over readouts all around me. My immediate staff flurried about inside the skimboat's hold. My ear bleated noisily. Our caravan hurried across the yawning snowfields.

"Yes! It's a bloom! A bloom!"

Celebratory voices hollered until I told everyone to shut up and stay on it. But I understood the excitement. My flesh was a-tingle; my teeth ground as I held in a ferocious grin. Our line of 'boats came shooting over a long shallow valley's brim, and there was the bloom. The intensifying morning light was upon it, dancing all over its facets, its curlicues, its vast soaring frozen majesty. A massive stem held it aloft, as wide across as the enormous craggy vent's maw. The fantastically dense pillar of ice rose and rose, as if it hoped to be an alp, a towering permanence of rock. At an elevation of some several hundred meters it abruptly plateaued, fanning out in all directions, spreading an incredible gorgeous field of ice high above the blue snow of the surface. It was this planet's own sculpture, created in a rush of frenzied geologic artistry. An upthrust of mad beautiful ice, opened like an umbrella over the frigid land.

"It's a decent bloom," someone commented, quite correctly.

The skimboats halted in its commanding shadow. Popping the hatches and stepping out was a breath-sucking, flesh-withering experience, despite the thermasuits we all wore. Personnel poured out everywhere, but all was efficiency and productivity. I wouldn't accept anything else.

I crunched across the frozen crystals of what on Larabee's Earth is called water.

Pepper was already wriggling into his gear, eager, I could see, but not hurrying rashly. Long-term survival in the sport doesn't favor carelessness. His breath made immense plumes around his head. We had unshipped a big black leaper for him. As he shook on the last of his equipment, fusing the catches and adjusting the fits, he looked up. The light off the bloom glimmered in his giant eyes.

I went up in the leaper with him, with a former Slaahassi military pilot, all gargantuan knuckles and back-spikes, putting us perfectly on the lip of the outer curl. Pepper radiated a readiness and potential energy that I've only ever felt from an icedog about to hit a bloom. There's a timbre to the anticipation, a breathless greed for the ice, for the first kiss of blades to all that frozen---

Leave the poetry to the publicity people.

Cradle Pepperdine, first up on the virgin icebloom, stepped from the leaper onto the mammoth irregular sparkling field. Blooms, when in their season they attain proper solidity and structure, look like gigantic tulips. An icedog alights on the brim, and travels on his blades in traditional clockwise fashion, around and around the huge dipping center which connects with the colossal stem. The racing field of a typical bloom will be rife with furrows and hollows and jags and juts and any other formation the whimsy of flash-frozen liquid might randomly effect. The sport is exactly as dangerous as it sounds, but never as perilous as it looks when played by the elite, the champions, who move like the wind over the madman's obstacle course, performing feats of prowess and athleticism and simple balls-out bravery that we who watch can only be helplessly awestruck by.

"Good luck," I said, but it was a whisper from the depths of my thermasuit.

Yet, had Pepper just cocked an eye at me as he straightened a rear legging? Had the eye said thank you? I was imagining it.

He launched. It was a perfect bunching and springing of body and muscle, so quickly effected I could barely register it. On four ingeniously customized blades he hit the curving ice. The field had a radius of roughly one kilometer; again, decent. I was already relaying the information down, even as two more leapers came up onto the bloom's rim, unloading personnel to measure and evaluate the ice. Icedogging is a sport where safety precautions are made after the game begins. The transitory nature of an icebloom demands it. And the hallowed traditions of the sport bolster it. I wouldn't have it any other way. Neither would Pepper. Nor any other icedog worth a damn.

He bladed away, swooping off to the left. He carved out his course, slicing over the erratic terrain, vaulting the most dangerous outcroppings. He was moving at a magnificent speed, limbs pumping. His crazy elongated shadow splashed the upcurving ice, keeping pace with his rapid graceful flight.

I grinned within my 'suit. My eyes were wide, stinging with cold. It was a glorious sight, and a thrill worked deep inside me. I had followed the sport as a boy, just on the cusp of my first frail inklings of myself as a physical being,

impatient to test my potentials, my hoped-for adult physicality. Of course, I never actually took up the sport, but the romanticism and rough grandeur of it never left me.

Pepper completed nearly a full circuit before the others appeared. The Slaahassi pilot, worrying her huge-knuckled hands, alerted me with a grunt. I looked reluctantly away from the deft, adroit, stunning figure that Pepperdine was cutting across the field.

Other leapers were alighting, and in the space of a heartbeat, it seemed, floateyes swarmed everywhere. The solitude was over. A moment later Pepper was no longer the only one on the ice.

First came the dilettantes, the dabblers in the sport, vacationers with the resources to effect any pose they liked. Today I'm an icedog! See? See! On two legs and seven and every other number they littered the field, attacking the bloom as though it were an enemy. Pepper tightened his track, blading nearer along the inner hollow, where others wouldn't venture. Had he been skating harder just a moment ago, before the spectators appeared? Perhaps. Beneath all the bravado necessary to his image did he truly appreciate the purity of the sport? I have always believed so.

Or maybe he was just waiting for the competition to show up.

After another five minutes a large red leaper put down on the far side of the brim and out came Fonterbok Jass, slicing onto the field. In his first strides I could see his impressive talent and professionalism. He was new; but he knew the fundamentals, and had as well that special flair which attracts a fan base and large endorsement deals.

Floateyes abounded, and even the amateurs making asses of themselves seemed to be paying attention as Jass bladed toward the bloom's central lip. Pepper continued a tight speedy intense circuit.

Icedogs are an invention, not indigenous to any world. But, products of an era of runaway experimentation or not, they are their own species now. And they have made this sport their own.

On the bloom the two icedogs were coming together. Breath rushed in my chilled lungs.

Pepper and Jass assumed virtual side by side positions. They were blading in tandem, great glorious driving creatures, moving at unbelievable speeds over treacherous terrain, with the vast cavity of the icebloom's center yawning alongside. It was a transcendent display of ability and courage. Cheers arose.

And yet my gaze strayed away, across the ice to the red leaper. I strained and discerned the human shape standing next to that vehicle. I detected a wisp of pale hair inside the thermasuit's cowl. My heart, which had been thumping enthusiastically all along, now seemed to slow in my chest. A soft tender quietude spread through me.

The two icedogs, both demonstrating their talents but neither, I thought, employing the full reach of their abilities, completed three entire rotations before the flares went up. Blossoms of orange opened in the sky. Whistles blew. Instructors and handlers helped the blunderers off the field, packing them back to their hotels, where they would boast of having bladed with Cradle Pepperdine--or perhaps they would make mention of Fonterbok Jass instead.

Pepper carved his way up from the bloom's center, gliding the last several dozen meters, and the pilot and I got him into the black leaper. I saw little expression on Pepper's features. But he had bladed well, and knew it.

As the hatches came down, I shot a look across the field. The red leaper had already departed.

The first vast audible cracking sounded as the caravan of our skimboats made ready to return to the Simeon Alps. It was a noise which seemed to foretell the sundering of the planet, a deep splintering sound surely signifying utter catastrophe. But, of course, it was merely the end of the transitory bloom. Already slivers were falling away from the rim, shavings the size and mass of gigantic logs, tumbling to the blue snowfield. Groups of tourists in ermine-trimmed thermasuits observed from a secure distance the natural destruction of the improbable formation as sunlight continued to pour down upon it.

With a sudden gathering roar of fracturing ice, the bloom came down on the great craggy vent that had birthed it as we skimmed away.

* * *

A week deeper into the local season, now properly inaugurated and attracting the usual variety of icedogs, I took a supper in one of the resort's dining areas, with a sensational view of a flange of black alp and the vast gorge opening beyond. Few others of the sport had taken rooms here; it was a question of money and stature. But by now dozens of professional skaters appeared with each bloom that Larabee's Earth spewed into the freezing sky. Many, many people were watching the competitions on the feeds. A great amount of capital was up for grabs. It is a monied sport. Pepper meant to take his usual king's ransom, just as he intended to retain his status as the sport's acknowledged champion.

I dined alone, heavily creamed soup and hot black bread, then took a glass of brandy, then another. I gazed out the broad curving window, barely aware of the spectacular view.

Somewhere behind me in the sparsely patronized dining area someone was telling the hoary joke about the explosives-using hunting party, and the man who threw the stick of dynamite, only to have his dog race to fetch it and bring it back to the camp in time for it to explode. Of course, it was no longer a "man," and the "dog" was some other creature. The laughters of various worlds ensued.

I felt as if I were looking out from a hollow within myself, at the huge physical hollow yawning below the resort. A sunset of sapphire and violet lit the world

beyond the window.

A hand touched my shoulder.

"You've given up on warm firesides, I can only conclude."

I looked up at eyes the blue of this planet's snow, at a curl of smile marking a strong face. He had stubble on his jaw now.

I felt something of that same breathlessness of waiting for blades to hit fresh ice. Only I wasn't a mere spectator; this involved me.

"You prefer your brandy to company?" The smile lost something, an incremental wavering.

"I don't. Or if I did--it wouldn't mean--I--that is---" I gestured bluntly. "Sit. Please."

We went from brandy to tea, piping hot and reeking of spice. I hadn't returned to the lounge with the scarlet-bricked fireplace where we had first met. Burlin wouldn't let me apologize for it. If I did, an explanation would follow, and things already obvious would necessarily be stated aloud; and it would do no good. We said nothing of Pepperdine or Jass throughout the hour.

Neither did the names of our respective employers surface as we retired to Burlin's room, discovering the springiness of his rug's nap, disheveling the glimmering green silk of his bed's sheets, splashing water over the sides of the red and black tiled bathtub, and eventually reposing on a deck of yellow waxtimber, beneath the canopy of a thermashield and the greater vault of the stars. I held his human heat to me, and the hollowness did not return.

* * *

Four days later I got us too late to a bloom. A number of factors figured in--a disagreement among the meteoro- and geological staff, for one--but I was the coordinator; I was supposed to cut through and make everything happen correctly.

It was another decent icebloom. The subterranean tides were conspicuously strong this season. Larabee's was shuddering like a kettle. Pepper went mad when we got there, seeing how many lesser competitors had reached the site ahead of him. I didn't even try to get him up onto the field. Pepper snarled and growled, and kicked his hinds, making snow flurries. He overturned one of our skimmers. He berated me mercilessly. And I deserved it. I had let him down with my carelessness.

Floateyes ate up every image--Pepper's binge of violent behavior, the members of other entourages watching from a safe distance, myself finally having to confront him several minutes after the flares had gone up. Pepper raged on, even as the first fragments of the disintegrating bloom started to fall. I felt the thudding ominous impacts through my thermasuit. I was frightened, but I kept at it, holding back one skimmer so to get Pepper into it and ferry him away from the increasingly hazardous area. The floateyes stayed with us, so to broadcast the drama. How far would Pepper take this? I have never ruled out the possibility of

meeting my death in his service. Just because I am not an icedog, does not mean the sport is harmless to me.

But with frost on his fur he finally relented, and I sped us out of there as the soaring edifice of ice crashed down behind us, pounding the snow-covered land with the hammering fist of a deranged god.

* * *

I wouldn't allow Burlin to apologize for Pepper's conduct toward me. Obviously the human had no claim to the icedog's behavior, but I repelled even his sympathies.

"It's a part of the job---"

"I saw what he said, Travis! Terrible things. Everyone watching today saw."

"Let them see," I spat. Our flesh was cooling as we lay side by side. Burlin had peeled back several layers of the thermashield over the waxtimber deck. The sky was grayed with cloud, with the climatic changes auguring the icebloom season's end. As I had figured from very early on, Pepper and Jass had emerged as the two elite contenders. Who would be deemed to have performed better on the ice this season was, for the first time in many years, uncertain.

It was this perilous fact that we were obliquely circling with this unwelcome conversation.

"It was unreasonable and unfair! It---"

"It's nothing for you to worry about."

"But, Travis, I---"

"Goddamnit, it's none of your concern!"

The awful wordlessness that followed at least smothered any possible mention of our peculiar dilemma. We two were, effectively, rivals; and our association was unethical; and we knew it.

By the start of what all the forecasting intelligence promised would be the season's final week, many of the lesser competitors had already shipped out. Spectators and tourists and amateurs continued to stream in, however. I was uneasy. I even had doubts about the accepted expert wisdom of the forecasters. None had predicted so intense a season.

I received the initial report just fifteen minutes after I woke. Our meteorologists and geologists were very excited. There was a tide on the move; it had a speed and strength that was virtually unprecedented, the result of many disparate factors working in unlikely accord. It was, as one commentator would say later on, as if the planet meant to create the bloom.

Pepper was doing laps in his suite's pool. The caravan was scrambling, a coordinated frenzy, everyone performing with utmost proficiency. Yet the excitement was palpable. I certainly felt it.

Our fleet of skimmers swept down out of the Simeon Alps, making for the Sykes' Mouth, the largest active vent on Larabee's Earth.

All was in harmony today, evidently. A great synchronicity. We reached the Mouth in time to see the bloom form.

We halted outside the hazard zone. The land rumbled. I felt it; I heard it. It touched something primitive in me, and my heart raced, my teeth bared. Below us, in the ground, the tide surged, the volume of water inconceivable, rushing, boiling, seeking release. And finding it. I gasped as it gushed upward from the massive vent. Up, and up and up and up, like a river determined to reach the stars, an incredible madness of liquid. But the stunningly frigid atmosphere was already seizing it, wrestling it, changing it.

The bloom shuddered and crackled, stretched higher, then slowed, slowed; and opened like a flower, and stayed that way. It groaned in its final settling, a vast aching sound that resounded across the plains of snow.

It was a colossus of a bloom, soaring, casting a deity's ominous shadow across the face of the world. Awesome in its scope and menacing transient beauty.

But it was, necessarily, just another field for us. We closed in, so to press the advantage of our timely arrival. Get Pepper up on the ice, let him have it to himself for a minute or two, so to scout its particular terrain ahead of the other skaters. I exited the skimboat, hurried across the frozen ground. Pepper was almost fully geared up when I reached him. The big black leaper was prepped.

"You won't be coming up with me," Pepper said.

My amber ear was buzzing with voices, but I had heard what he'd said. "I always go to the ice with you," I said. My heartbeats were slowing. The excitement was evaporating.

"Before"--Pepper, with deft movements, was adjusting his four blades--"I could trust you."

"Trust...?"

"You think I don't have you watched? You know how many spies and backstabbers there are in this sport, Welk."

"I'm not one."

"You've been trading secrets with Jass' handler?"

"If you've had me watched, you know we haven't traded anything except fluids." The air was numbing on my face. I felt that cold penetrating through the thermasuit, slowing my metabolism even further.

Pepper gave me a snarl, disappointed, dismissive. He was done with me. The Slaahassi pilot took him up in the leaper, at least twice as high as a typical jump. I shaded my eyes and squinted, and saw them disappear over the outer lip.

There I stood. And stood. Everyone else went about their tasks. After a time my amber ear spoke no more words to me.

Other convoys arrived; other competitors were leaped up onto the titanic bloom. Floateyes came like locust. Amateurs fumbled and bumbled. That field up there must have been astonishing, a veritable mini-continent of ice, with a gaping central funnel that could have swallowed whole our resort in the Simeon Alps.

But I never saw it. The broadcast images are meaningless. I don't watch the sport as a mere bystander, as someone amused by the athletic prowess or titillated by the danger. The sport is an expression of striving, of aspiration, of tenacity, of guts and greatness. It is a living tangible parable for humanity...despite that it is played best by creatures my kind once invented.

I stood there and saw nothing. Time didn't touch me. Eventually orange blossomed far overhead, but I couldn't hear the whistles, of course. Leapers came down, two or three, then a mass of them. I hadn't been aware of so many going up. I didn't try to pick out the red leaper from the others. On the ground skimboats were humming, withdrawing.

I stayed where I was, but now I was seeing the floateyes, just specks so far above, but so many that they had formed into a cyclone, going round and round, a clockwise rotation. More flares went up, splashing the sky with warning orange. The bloom's monstrous stem rose from the rocky brink of the Sykes' Mouth. It was supporting a ponderous impossible weight.

Cradle Pepperdine and Fonterbok Jass were blading side by side up there. They were probably on a tight course along the upper curvature of the giant inner hollow. Bodies pumping, lunging, limbs driving, competing with every iota, straining for each centimeter of advantage, giving all they had to the game.

Each demanding that the other relent first, each insisting beyond every shred of sanity...

I knew when the black leaper finally came down that Pepper wasn't on board. Something about the buoyant way it moved on the air. The red leaper, I learned later, descended from the opposite side of the bloom; I didn't see it. Far above, the floateyes continued to follow the action.

The first splinters followed the initial vast crack of cleaving ice. This time it seemed to indicate a fundamental fracturing of reality; an abyss would open all across creation, bottomless, seething with a despondent blackness that would consume everything. The falling fragments were huge, and they struck the snowy ground with tremendous gong-like reports. I was too near the bloom.

Yet I couldn't retreat. Gigantic fissures were appearing. The huge field, suspended high against the gray frosty sky, was visibly wavering, like a plate spun atop a pole that is losing its speed.

Hands with oversized knuckles seized me. I was dumped into a 'boat and bounced about inside as it was piloted at a desperate breakneck velocity. I didn't see the bloom come down, though I, like everyone else in the vicinity, felt its impact. I saw nothing. Hot tears had become ice on my face.

* * *

The disposition of assets and equipment and personnel and everything else was the prodigious responsibility of the estate. My name was never mentioned during any of the proceedings.

Seven months later, long after shipping out from Larabee's Earth, I was along on a junket to Cloxidol, working as a flack for a political heavy, a sponge-bodied bobble-limbed Optamhobilan--one who fancied herself an icedogging devotee. I do not complain: my name and her airs secured me the job. My workload was manageable. The local season, such as it was, was on. Cloxidol produces a kind of unremarkable mushroom-shaped bloom. Burlin, by arrangement, arrived on a day when I was free to buckle on blades for the first time since my adolescence. Together we skated the bloom, which was of a much more lasting variety than those on Larabee's. Round and round we went, in the traditional clockwise manner.

Slip Road by Tade Thompson

Dominic's pencil broke and he almost cried. Almost. He was down to the last nib, barely any wood clinging to the pencil lead, holding it between the tips of his index finger and thumb, scratching, really. This must be what it felt like to be a lonely cave man in prehistoric times smearing out disturbing thoughts in different colours of mud on cave walls. He was in mid-sentence.

The good great thing about Bola going to her sister's was how easy I could manufacture a guilt trip for weeks after, using the most mun

Mundane. He was going to write "mundane" but now he couldn't finish because a quarter of an inch of pencil lead was like no pencil lead at all. He got up, smoothed out the paper and left smears of grey in the wake of his fingers. He examined his digits. The low quality pencil had left them looking as if he had been fingerprinted. He wiped his hands on his jeans and left the table. The chair screeched against the floor when he bumped it. There was a time when the sound would have grated on him, but so many days had passed, so many bumps.

Outside the sun was out. Palm trees swayed like wise, thin old men. They were not staring at him this time like they had the week before. It was difficult to imagine being stared at without eyes but... well, you had to be there to understand.

There were people in the village again. This was confusing, and an inconvenience, but Dominic could work with it. He felt a slight dizziness, transient, comforting in its familiarity, always happened whenever he emerged from the bungalow. Felt like being tipsy, or anaesthesia, or excellent Thai Stick. The bungalow opened out to the main thoroughfare of the village and hunters wheeled by on their Longjohn bicycles toting locally-made one shot rifles, gunpowder gourds swaying like scrota with the pump of their thighs. He could

hear children playing and they were nowhere in sight, but that wasn't unusual. Children didn't always register on his senses. Women swept the front of their red-earth huts or carried livestock to murder for their husbands' pots.

He headed for the school, which was a lean-to with a few corrugated tin roofing sheets for effect. It housed fourteen. Most of the time they took their books and writing implements home with them but a careless child left a stray book or pencil behind every day. It was unlocked. Dominic wondered how he would know if there were children in there since he might not see them.

There was a blue pen on the floor beneath one of the wooden desks. Under the desk someone had stuck a glob of chewing gum which Dominic peeled off and put in his mouth. It still had some sweetness left but it was hard and nigh impossible to masticate. He had once tried to eat elephant grass. Bad idea. He tried the pen on his arm and drew a caduceus.

Mundane also meant earthy, the opposite of heavenly. Anti-celestial. That was life in the village. Mundane.

#

'There was a turning,' said Bola.

'Where?' I asked, looking around and in the rear mirror.

'Back there. Had some buildings too.'

'All right.'

I downshifted, did a U-turn and started back considerably slower. The prospect of any kind of civilisation made me more aware of the ache in my muscles and the staleness in my mouth. I'd been driving for four hours over roads that barely fit the definition, with minimal surfacing and an abundance of potholes. For the last hour it had been just road and bush. The occasional animal leapt across, a grass cutter, an antelope.

I no longer knew where we were. When we left Lagos we headed north. My wife had not wanted anything to do with the trip.

'You've never been there before. Do you even know the way?' said Bola.

'I'll find it.'

When Bola worried there was a curl to her lips and a line that appeared on her forehead that I absolutely adored. Maybe that distracted me from what she was saying.

'There's no cell phone coverage in that area, Dowry Man.'

'We'll be fine in the car. It's solid.'

'It'll take hours.'

'We're going.'

'Why? You're not even that close to Benjamin.'

'Bola. We are going.' I glared at her then, and she stopped her protests, thinking I was angry, even though in actuality I wasn't and loved her more than ever. I found it difficult to refuse Bola anything and pretending to be angry was my best tack.

I drove. She talked, fell quiet, read a novel, talked, fed me bananas. Still the journey did not end. By the time the sun started going down, we decided to find a hotel but there were no more slip roads with sign posts and we had to keep hoping for a miracle. Until now.

I saw what Bola had seen. More dirt track than actual road. Two bare lines of red earth with clumps of elephant grass between them. Single lane. If any other car happened along one of us would have to reverse out.

It was short and we soon came to the hamlet. I slowed down to five mph.

'I think we may have been going too fast and traveled back in time,' I said.

'Don't mock.' Bola stroked my neck with the back of her hand. 'It's just quaint. In a charming way. Let's just find a hotel; my bladder is bursting.'

#

He was hungry. Even though the village was full of food of all kinds, experience had taught him that none of it was edible. He had tried rice, eba, iyan, mangoes, papayas, yams, bananas, everything. He could put the food in his mouth and chew, but it was as if his mouth had forgotten how to taste, because everything was bland. He ate two dozen small red chilli peppers and felt no heat or zing in his mouth. His saliva did not come at all. He tried to dry swallow, especially eba with okra soup which should by rights just slide down his throat whether he made spit or not, but his throat was not working right either. No wave formed at the root of his throat to push the bolus down. If he tried to drink water he choked. So all he did was chew and spit, chew and spit, not feeding but the memory of feeding. Like Phantom Limb.

Even so, Dominic went to the cooking pot of Mama Wale, a corpulent dowager who ran a bukka for the few workers in the village, and opened it after looking furtively left and right. He reached in and selected a piece of goat meat. He bit the meat off the bone carefully, and then threw the bone into the bushes. He licked his fingers clean and spat the peppery tomato sauce out. He chewed and walked back to the bungalow. Inside the bedroom he reached under the bed and picked out the loose sheets of paper he had scavenged and began to write. He barely registered the temperature change when it started raining outside.

A sheep cried pathetically, broken off from its herd.

#

Bola had an older sister called Deji. As Yoruba names go it's not the most feminine, but the one time I brought it up to my wife we had a row which

ended in a three-hour silence. Deji was married to Benjamin, an obnoxious prick to be sure, older than me, patronizing and insufferable. Think of the kind of man who would insist on being called Benjamin, never Ben. Bola told me that when she was seventeen Benjamin had tried to slip his hand under her skirt during her father's coronation as baale of their village. True story. To be fair, I do not fully blame the guy. I know what Bola looks like now, and she is intolerably beautiful. At seventeen she must have been intoxicating, and it would have been maddening to be in her proximity. Except at the time, he was a known supplicant for her sister's hand in marriage.

Like most beautiful women, Bola was used to unwanted attention from boys and men. It bored her, but was her cross, if you can call it that. When it came to me and her she approached me; no way would I have had the liver to chat her up. It was nothing glamorous. I was shopping for my mother in the market. I hate shopping, but my mother lights up whenever I do it myself instead of sending the house boy. So I was in the market having my panla sawed when I sensed a presence behind me. A woman waiting in line, no doubt.

'She's cutting the pieces too small,' a female voice said. 'If you cook this the fish will disintegrate in the soup pot.'

I turned and saw the magical light brown skin, the thick luscious lips, the big brown eyes with lashes that looked artificial but were not, the dimples, the short hair.

This was is something that still strikes me about her today each time I see her.

When I can see her.

#

Darkness fell and Dominic could hear her voice. He put the blue pen down and listened, a careful, hungry desperation in him. It was there like a faded photograph and he stood up, cocked his head, squeezed his eyes shut. Bola was talking, but it was too low to make out the individual words. She was probably on the phone. The chorus of crickets outside the window drowned Bola out every few seconds and Dominic was tempted to rush out and set fire to the entire bush. He did not move.

'That's both tricky and meaningless,' said Bola, clear as spring water and without warning.

Dominic opened his eyes and she was sitting on the bed in her bra and panties, taking off her earrings. It was a distinct image without wavy spots or fade-outs. There was a solitary pimple on her left cheek, red as if recently pressed, no blackhead. Bola would be horrified-she hated blemishes.

He went to the bed, but before his hand could touch her she stood up and walked

to the middle of the room. He followed, but each time, just as he was about to make contact she would shift.

'Bola!' he said. She nodded her head to an unheard respondent at the other end of the phone. She was looking right at him, through him. 'Bola, baby, I'm right here! Talk to me.'

It was no use. She faded. Although that night she appeared four more times, each time she was a shimmery, transparent manifestation, a misty apparition that he could well have imagined in his distress.

Later, Dominic slept. He did not dream.

#

It was not a motel hotel. The village had no hotel to speak of and travelers usually lodged at the houses of relatives. The weathered old man we spoke to looked us over head-to-toe and directed us to what he called the Municipal Building. He spoke in measured English, which was good because we did not speak Fulani or Hausa or any of the Northern Nigerian languages. The government had tried in the late 1960s to modernise the village by building a house of concrete with electricity and water, underestimating the tenacity with which the villagers held to their traditional mud dwellings. Nobody had ever lived there, but the local government still maintained it, occasionally sprucing it up for visiting dignitaries. Bola glowed while the man spoke; she loved local history and even though naturally aloof, she was always bright and attentive to older people. To look at her you could not tell that she had an urgent need to urinate.

I carried both of the suitcases from the trunk of the car while Bola held her handbag and the tattered novel. The novel was called The Borrowed Alibi by someone called Lesley Egan and it was all Bola had saved from her home when it was destroyed by a flood in Lagos in 1978. She went everywhere with that book. I had read it. The last few pages were lost, so I don't know how it ended. She loved the book and became unreasonably irate one day when I suggested I could find her a new copy from an out-of-print bookshop.

'Are you hungry, Dowry Man?' she asked.

I shook my head. 'In this place I would probably have to pick up a shotgun and catch whatever we're going to eat.'

'Hmm. My hunter-gatherer,' she said. When she spoke like that, in that tone, it meant there was lovemaking in my immediate future.

Bola opened the door and we stumbled into the Municipal House. I found the electricity meter and switched it on. There were six flats, but we didn't go for a tour. We chose the nearest. It was a single lounge with two bedrooms, a bathroom and a kitchen. I went into one of the rooms and

flipped the double-mattress. Bola went to use the loo, and then she helped me put the room in order. It was clean, but a little dusty. We argued over nothing, a recent habit.

No sex for me that night.

#

Dominic left the bungalow in the morning. It was a bad day: the village looked deserted even though he knew this would be the busiest time for them. He had a headache and could not feel the wind. There was a breeze because leaves and scraps of paper moved along the dusty thoroughfare. The car was still parked in front of the Municipal building and Dominic walked towards it. Today it was fire engine red or at least it seemed that way to Dominic. He no longer felt sure about the nature of colours or his ability to identify them. Was the car really red? Had it been red when he bought it? What was red anyway? Was it meant to be that intense? Or was it normally more than this? Why did the intensity not hurt?

He touched the grille. Had his car always been red? Had it always been a jeep? He vaguely remembered that Bola did not like the car, that he had selfishly picked what he wanted at the dealership twelve months before.

Today, his mission was to try and drive the car out of the village. He had tried walking once before and the results had been disturbing. The path was homogenous with repeating patterns of trees, clouds and road, a nauseating sameness. He had kept it up for an hour and reached nowhere. When he turned around he walked back for an hour and there was the village again, unchanged but teasing him. If he could drive, the results might be different.

Dominic looked in the window of the red jeep and did not see the keys in the ignition. He would have to go into the Municipal Building. He glanced up at it. The building appeared to be respiring. He took the long way around the automobile and stood at the door. The rain from the day before had left a pool of water at the door stoop where the concrete was uneven. He tried to open the door, but it was locked. It was the only door in the village that was locked to him. He was able to enter all other buildings and observe the evidence of the villagers' existence, their alimentations and fornications.

He spent half an hour hammering at the door, shouldering it, kicking it, all without success.

#

I was so angry that night. I could not sleep in that state and I even resented Bola's gentle snore beside me and the rise and fall of her chest. I tried to remember our fight and the reasons but they eluded me. I tried to practice what I would say once she woke up. I toyed with the idea of waking her up for round two of our fight. I had thought of new retorts, biting sarcastic shit. This is what I was doing when...

I think there were intruders. I think.

I think that's what they were.

It is difficult to remember. There were noises from outside that I went to investigate. Bola turned over and looked at me briefly when I left the bed. She winked at me and went back to sleep.

I stepped outside the Municipal building and then... nothing.

The next thing I remember is standing under a baobab tree, hearing the villagers but not seeing them.

#

Dominic left the bungalow again.

He experienced a hunger that yammered and frolicked at the centre of him. He approached the Municipal Building from the rear this time, beating his way through bush to get there. The living thing in his belly gnawed and twisted. He rubbed his tummy and snatched some leaves to chew as he pushed through. It calmed.

All the windows from the back of the building were shattered, but it looked like vandalism rather than systematic destruction. He walked around the back treading on broken glass. The individual shards were dirty and held watermarks. They had been there a while. When he hooked around the side of the building he saw that the car was no longer there.

His mind pulled back from the empty space, from the absence. He ran back to the bungalow as fast as he could. Under the bed he found the paper on which he had written his—their story. He read to remind himself of his... jeep. It was a jeep. A red jeep.

Sometimes.

Other times it was a sports car or a space wagon or a high-end motorcycle.

But there was always a vehicle there. There was a device with wheels and an internal combustion engine and safety glass and... and engine oil.

He paced the room, then rushed through each page again, looking for anything about Bola. He read every word, until the letters swam before his eyes and he felt a supreme headache. He dropped the pages and rubbed his eyes.

'Fuck,' he said when the pain lanced through his forehead.

'Dominic?'

He whirled and there was Bola, clear strong image, looking straight at him.

'B-Bola?'

'Dowry man,' she said, and smiled sadly. 'I'm dreaming, am I not?'

'You're not dreaming,' said Dominic. 'I'm here. I've been looking for you for days.

Now we can—'

He tried to touch her, but she backed away.

'Days?' she said. 'Is that how long it's been for you?'

Dominic said nothing. 'What are you—'

'It's been five years, my love.'

'Whu... what? Five...'

'You went missing, Dominic. I had you declared dead after the second year.'

'What are you saying?'

'I think you know,' said Bola. 'I came here to say goodbye, Dominic. I... my therapist thinks I need closure. My pastor thinks I need to exorcise you.'

'What happened? What happened that night?'

'You heard a noise. You got up. I winked at you to let you know the quarrel we had was over. I went back to sleep. A few minutes later I woke up again because I heard the noise of a scuffle. I got up to see, but the front door was open and you were gone. I have only seen you fleetingly in dreams since. The police worked for three months at the insistence of my father, but they could not find you.' She held up her left hand, showing me the back. A diamond shone there, on the finger where our wedding band used to be. 'It's been a while, Dowry Man. I'm engaged.'

'—No—'

Her hand came down. She placed a shimmering hand on Dominic's cheek, but he felt nothing. She began to walk away and fade at the same time.

'Go away, Dominic. Your time here is up. Good luck on the next level, wherever that may be.'

When she disappeared he heard footsteps that came to a stop behind him. He knew, before looking, what was there. Even expected it. A man, a dark man, with a machete, coming at him. He swung the machete almost faster than Dominic could duck. He heard the slipstream of the slice pass his ear. The dark man was a blur. Dominic could not see his face, which was shrouded in shadow. All he could do was linked to that cruel machete. Dominic swung a punch at him. It was clumsy and missed, but served to bring him within range. He knew the man would cut him with the next attempt. Dominic closed his eyes, stopped moving, and waited.

Nothing happened.

When he opened his eyes he was holding the weapon and a man was running away, deep into the night. Dominic was standing in the doorway of the Municipal Building, breathing heavily. It was dark and he felt slight dizziness, but nothing more. Fogginess in his thoughts. He closed the door, locked it with a latch and walked up to the room.

He imagined something other; he told himself a lie.

In his lie Bola was asleep. He rushed to the window and looked out. The car was there. It was a Toyota Camry hatchback, blue in colour, fairly new. This was his car. He touched the figure on the bed. She murmured in her sleep. This was his wife.

He cried. He shook her awake and hugged her. In his lie.

They got into the car and drove off.

'It's the middle of the night,' said Bola. 'This is dangerous. Armed robbers will just love us as targets. I'll probably be raped and murdered. Would you like that?' 'We'll be fine,' Dominic said, negotiating the horrendous road and watching headlights pierce the darkness ahead. He didn't know that they would be fine, but whatever that town was about he wanted no part of. 'We'll be with your sister and brother-in-law soon. You'll be glad to see her. Just sleep for now.'

'She's not going to be glad to see us at this time of the night. She loves her sleep.' She snorted and adjusted her position. 'I guess it'll be good to see Benjamin again. He's funny isn't he?'

Dominic looked at her, heart up somewhere behind his tongue. 'Yes. Hilarious.'

In truth, there was an empty room in the Municipal building. There was the painful memory of his Bola dreaming of him or maybe dreaming him. There was Dominic trying to slip back into a reality he had slipped out of. He left, returned to the bungalow, sat on the bed and began to write. The pages he had written before in pencil and blue or black ink lay on the floor where he left them.

#

What now? Do I make noises, disturb the villagers, curdle their milk, become an ~~urban legend~~ a rural legend? A story for the moonlight tales, a creature with which to scare children to sleep. A nightmare. The ghost of tourists past.

When I was a child we lived at the edge of the forest and on the other side of it was a leper colony which the British started when they held colonial power. My mother wove magical tales of escaped lepers and pure kings and princes and the witch doctors who cleansed them. Except I always identified with the lepers. I feel like one now.

I can live it again. I ~~will~~ can live again. I can read my notes, the very notes I'm writing right now, and I can remember Bola and her sister and pervert brother-in-law and the red jeep and make the whole thing happen over on my terms.

I can find a ~~slip road~~ way out.

Alienation and Love in the Hebrew Alphabet by Lavie Tidhar

Aleph

An apple tree. A little girl standing beside it.

The apples are small and bitter, like old men; they are wizened and sour.

Somewhere, a chime sounds, a wind blows leaves on the ground.

Somewhere, the hiss of escaping air.

Bet

‘Where have you been?’ Mother says. Anger makes her brow damp and she fights the dark hair that sticks to her skin. ‘I told you not to go off on your own. You could have met anyone. Anyone! Sometimes I don’t know what to do with you.’

The little girl smiles, but it is a private smile, an inward smile, one that Mother cannot, will not, see.

‘Well?’

The little girl mumbles something. Mother snorts and moves her hair to behind her ears.

‘Spacemen and spaceships! Honest, I don’t know what to do with you. Go and watch television. I have to go.’

The girl goes upstairs. A few minutes later she hears the front door bang. Mother going out. She will be back late.

There is a window in her room. Beyond the window lie fields, hills, forests; in the horizon lights begin to appear from distant towns.

In the darkening skies more lights begin to appear.

Gimel

There are less apples on the tree. Around the trunk the cores of eaten apples lie like unmoving ants.

There are footsteps in the wet earth, large and asymmetrical. They lead away, down to the valley, to the brook, and disappear beyond it.

The girl examines the marks in the ground. She is becoming used to marks in the ground – the W-shape of birds’ feet, the branded footsteps of children, the wide, linear marks of vehicles – and these are new.

Experimentally, she picks an apple from the tree and bites it, but it tastes disgusting, unripe and bitter, and she lets it drop to the ground uneaten.

Then Mother calls for her from the house, and she has to go back.

Daled

She watches the lights play in the sky.

In her new language, the word for star is *kochav*, the middle sound throaty like a smoker's cough. At least, that's what Mother says, and she cries when she says it, and says they should never have come here, to this place called a kibbutz and to a man called Nathan, who works in the factory now. When Mother met him in Canada Nathan was on holiday, away from the kibbutz for a year, and he had painted such a lovely picture of the place that when he asked Mother to come there with him she agreed almost at once.

'Look at this place!' she says to her daughter. 'What was I thinking?' she had cut her hair short - 'because of the heat,' she said - and her ears stick out, making the girl smile. 'Do you know what they want me to do now? Work in the dining room! Wash dishes!' her voice turns ugly as she mimics the voice of the man responsible for allocating jobs on the kibbutz, a short, dark man with too-tight shorts and a belly that hangs over them, covered in a chequered shirt like many of the men on the kibbutz. 'There are no bad jobs. All jobs are equal. All jobs are important. And after all, what skills do you have? Singing won't feed the sheep. Singing won't make the wheat grow. I'm sorry, but if you want to stay here you must work.'

The girl nods, but she isn't listening. She is thinking about the apple tree, and the marks in the ground.

Later, Nathan arrives, a quiet man carrying himself well, carrying also a bunch of flowers for Mother.

'From my garden,' he said.

'They're lovely,' she says.

They go out arm in arm, leaving the girl alone to her thoughts.

Heh

The brook is shallow and smells of soap; she has been warned not to drink the water, that the kibbutz's shampoo factory needs to dump waste into it, otherwise where will it go?

The footsteps lead to the water's edge and disappear.

Crossing the brook isn't easy. There are stones left in equal lengths, stepping stones, but her legs are too short and she slips and falls into the water, briefly, and then gives up and just strides across, shoes filling up with water.

On the other side the footsteps disappear. She sees a long, curving mark in the ground, and thinks it must have been made by a snake. Somewhere in the bushes, a frogs harrumphs.

She doesn't like frogs.

She walks farther, past the squat building that holds the water drill; the walls are graffitied with army marks.

She picks blackberries from the thick bushes growing by the brook, picking the

red ones, the ones that haven't ripened yet. Those are sour, not sweet, and taste delicious.

She knows she shouldn't be walking here by herself, but she has no one to go with. Mother is away, gone to the nearest city with Nathan, and the other children avoid her. She can't speak the language yet and when she does try they laugh.

She rounds a bend and reaches the beginning of a forest. The pine trees are all equally spaced, and there is a sharp scent in the air, of the amber liquid that comes out when a tree is cut.

She wades into the trees and starts climbing the hill.

Vav

'I. Don't. Believe. It!' Mother pronounces each word like a slap to the face, and the girl starts to cry, helpless in the face of such injustice. She is cold, and wet, and covered in mud and bruises, and all she wants right now is a bath and a soup and her bed.

'Don't cry. Don't.' Mother holds her tight, squatting down so their faces are close. 'Don't. I'm sorry.'

They hold each other for a long moment in silence.

'I'm sorry.'

Zain

She saw nothing that first time.

But now, when she goes to the apple tree, she feels invisible eyes on her, as if someone, something in the wilds about her has noted her presence and is showing discreet interest.

And the next day, there are new marks around the tree, and fewer apples.

And this time, the footsteps extend beyond the brook, like signposts, just for her.

But she doesn't follow them. Not yet.

Chet

Nathan is downstairs, helping Mother with dinner. He's a nice man, really, and he wants them to be there, with him.

Both of them. But he doesn't understand.

'What have you been up to then?' he says in that way adults have, who are not used to talking to children. 'Were you playing a nice game?'

She tries to tell him about the apple tree, about the footmarks, about the lights in the skies, and Nathan nods, and smiles, and winks at her. 'She has such a fertile imagination!' he says to Mother as they sit down to eat, kibbutz-dinner, fried eggs and salad cut into tiny pieces and bread, 'such wonderful imagination!'

Mother serves him a fried egg, sunny side up, and scrambled eggs with cheese for her daughter.

'Sometimes I worry about her,' she says quietly to Nathan, later, when they are both curled up together in front of the television, alone. 'She doesn't have friends here. I think it was a mistake to come here.'

Nathan holds her to him. 'Give her time,' he says. 'Give yourself time.'

'Yes.'

They watch an American movie in silence.

Tet

'Hey, stupid!' the big kid, Oran, holds her down in the mud and slaps her. 'You can't even talk, can you! Stuuuu-pid!'

Her knee rises, a reflex, connects with something soft.

Oran lets go of her and falls in the mud himself, crying. His hands try desperately to hold something between his legs.

The girl stands and looks at him until he stops twitching and rolling in the mud and then she walks off, towards the apple tree.

Yud

Down to the stream. Cross, shoes again filling up with water. Pass the water tower, pass the blackberry bushes.

The forest, the damp, the scent of pine.

She follows the marks in the ground, the way the other children play Arrow, when one group runs ahead, chalking the way on the pavements.

Someone, something, is chalking the marks.

And she follows.

Kaf

The silver disc lies half-buried in the ground.

She walks around the circumference, looking at it.

It's large, she can't tell how large because of the parts hidden in the earth, but it is big; darkened windows are carved into it, evenly spaced.

The forest is silent.

Somewhere nearby there is the hiss of escaping air.

Lamed

She sits on the ground, cross-legged under shifting pine-needles and damp earth.

She sits opposite the grey man.

His skin is the colour of the sky when it rains. Two large, narrow eyes are cut

into the face. A small nose, a smooth skin, a small mouth. large head. Small ears.
No hair.

He is dressed in a silver suit that looks strange but feels (when she reaches a hand and touches it) like cloth, silky and fine and warm.

They don't talk.

Just sit there, for a long time, until it begins to get dark.

Then she gets up, turns and makes her way back through the foliage, back home.

When she turns her head to look again, he has disappeared.

But from her window, overlooking the hills, she can catch the sudden flash of silver, moonlight on metal, and she knows he is still there.

Mem

Mother is crying in the kitchen. 'Look at my hands,' she says, 'look at my fingers!'

Her hands are red, splotchy, the nails worn, the skin coarsened. 'I can't do this anymore!'

The girl comes up to her and puts her arms around her. She tries to tell Mother about the man in the forest, about the silver disc and the quiet that surrounds it.

'Will you never stop? You and your dreaming...' Mother sighs, wipes her hands on a kitchen cloth. 'I know it's hard for you, honey,' she says. She puts the girl on her lap, curls her hair with a finger. 'We'll manage. Nathan is a good man. Everyone says it's a good place to raise children.'

The girl doesn't say anything.

'I wish we could go,' her mother whispers, close to the girl's ear. 'I wish there was a spaceman in the woods, and he could take us away in his silver ship, away into the stars...'

'He can't,' the girl says. 'His spaceship is broken.'

Mother smiles. 'Go and watch television,' she says.

The girl goes up to her room. She knows Mother is waiting for Nathan.

She waits to hear his steps coming up to the front of the house.

She waits to hear his knock on the door, Mother's voice, the rustle of flowers, the door banging as they go out.

But there is no noise, no sound, only the cries of the hyenas in the hills, and she falls asleep, still waiting for a sound that doesn't come.

Nun

The spaceman is waiting for her by the apple tree.

Here, in broad daylight, she can see his feet, the curious imprint they make in

the ground.

He is eating the apples, quickly, biting all around until only the core remains. Then he drops the core on the ground and starts on the next.

'Why can't you leave?' she asks.

The smooth, alien face doesn't move. The narrow eyes blink, once.

Something unexplainable passes from him, to her. Not words, exactly, not thoughts, exactly; a mixture of emotions, a whole palate of them. The girl has never realised how many there were, before, how many shades of each.

The spaceman uses them like speech.

'You need...' she searches for the words.

He nods.

His eyes blink.

She senses desperation, sadness, loneliness.

He drops the last apple core on the ground and walks away, towards the brook.

Samech

Mother has a new job: taking care of the children in the *peuton*, the pre-kindergarten class.

She finishes early, then comes home and sits outside, looking at the hills and the forest with a kind of longing in her eyes, almost like a farmer looks, hoping for rain.

Praying for change.

She drinks in moderation, she says.

The sun sets beyond the hills. In its place comes darkness, one more profound, deeper than the ones they have ever experienced in the city. Stars unveil in the sky, more and more of them, until they cover the darkness like pearls viewed through water.

The girl watches the skies with her mother; sitting out on the veranda, they search the stars together.

Nathan doesn't come anymore. Mother says he 'needed to find himself. Thought that maybe the kibbutz wasn't for him, that he needed his freedom. He was still searching for his real self.' She said it like it was a fact, just a fact and nothing more.

But the girl knew that it wasn't. And she thought of what the spaceman in the forest had passed to her, the things he needed for his spacecraft to fly.

But she wasn't sure it would be enough.

Ain

There is a circle of children around her, chanting. Pointing fingers. Laughing.

They push her in the puddle and kick water and mud on her clothes and face.

They have bright, colourful boots, with trousers tucked inside into thick socks. She can see them from where she lies, and her feelings are a complex, angry maze through which she runs.

Peh

Down to the stream. Cross, shoes again filling up with water. Pass the water tower, pass the blackberry bushes.

The forest, the damp, the scent of pine.

The ship.

'How come no one sees it?' she says. 'Sees you?'

Something like fear from the grey man. Something like care. And something like pride.

'You make them not see it?'

An emotion signifying assent.

'What do you do all the time?' she kicks the ground, a little too hard. 'How do you cope with it?'

Sadness again. A shade of anger. The scent of hope.

'Will you meet me by the apple tree?' she says. 'Tomorrow?'

Again, assent.

She turns away and runs through the forest, her heart beating hard with a mixture of emotions.

Tzadik

Night. They sit on the veranda.

The stars above are like a fractured mirror, slivers of shining glass scattered across the heavens.

Beyond the hills the hyenas laugh.

Kuf

'Can you see him?' the girl demands.

Mother makes a show of looking around. 'It's time you made some real friends.'

'He's here!' the girl protests, pointing at the grey man. He stands by the tree, blinking his eyes rapidly.

'Stop!'

He does.

He envelopes them in a rainbow of emotions. Strongest amongst them is hope, like a wide ray of light obscuring all others.

'Please,' he says. His voice is uncertain and reedy, like a feather on the wind.
And, 'yes,' they say, in unison, mother and daughter, linking hands.

Resh

Alienation and love. Like a mother and daughter, like two refugees in a crowd.
The spaceman walked away from the tree, towards the brook. Cross. Pass the
water tower, pass the blackberry bushes.
The forest, the damp, the scent of pine.
The great silver disc, motionless in the ground.
Mother and daughter wait, holding hands.

Shin

There was a deep thrum, a vibration that shook the pine-needles. A flash of silver
in the sunlight.
A swathe of emotions seen through a prism, where two burn brightest of all, and
conquer the spectrum. The quiet hurts, the silent tenderness, the invisible loves
and the visible pains.
They channel their being into the silver disc in the woods and the skies dim and
night steals on the kibbutz and the stars come out, one by one, until they fill the
sky like a map.
Alienation and love; the things that move worlds.

Tav

An apple tree. A little girl standing besides it, holding her mother's hand.
Somewhere, a chime sounds, a wind blows leaves on the ground.
Somewhere, the hiss of escaping air.
Then silence.

Reservations by Christopher Green

I park the Saab behind Dan's pickup to find that winter has taken advantage of
his absence. It has thrown itself in steep banks against the windward side of his
vehicle; frosted his windows and layered the tailgate with ice. Snow hides all but
a few of the bumper stickers he's plastered across the back of the vehicle.
"Custer was Sioux'd" and "Indians discovered Columbus" and "Caught you
whitehanded". A tangle of feathers hangs from the rearview mirror.

I press the door open against the swirl of the snow, then pull my jacket around
me and crunch up the drive. I trail my fingers along the cold metal of his truck

with one hand and hold Dan's dog tags in the other. They are somehow also cold, and far too thin to hold him.

Something snorts in the distance, a deep and mighty rumble of great lungs clearing. I stop and scan the purple hills that backdrop farmhouse, the fallow fields and the empty stables. The sky is so low I could reach up and touch it.

Dad's front door is open. His eyes glitter at me from behind the mesh. I take my time, and when I reach the porch, the doorway is empty.

I enter the frigid house and close the door behind me.

He is in the kitchen. I can hear him, and the smell of the thick coffee he brews on the stovetop is everywhere. I have never known my father without that smell. It clings to him, mixes with the cloy of rubbing alcohol.

"Dad?"

He is a big man made narrow by time. His back is to me. His hunting jacket hanging from his bony shoulder blades like a limp banner. The bonehandled knife at his belt was made for the man he used to be. It makes a caricature of him. My father has let what remains of his hair grow long, and the tight, gray braid hangs to the middle of his back.

"Dad."

He grunts and ladles coffee into a metal thermos on the counter. "Is Dan here?"

"No. Dan's not coming this year, Dad. That's why I'm here."

He reaches for another thermos, this one with a name that isn't mine etched across its surface. He turns the letters from me and I thrust my hands into my pockets. The dog tags roll against each other obscenely, like loose change. More etched letters. He pauses, ears still sharp after so much else has faded from him, and then fills the second thermos.

"How do you like your coffee?"

He is already screwing the caps on, and so I shrug. "Just like that's fine, thanks."

"Did you bring your rifle?"

"No. I haven't owned a gun for ten years, Dad."

He turns and hands me Dan's thermos. "You can borrow one of mine."

"I'm not here for that. We need to talk."

"We can talk outside. Today's the day. Been a long time coming, but today's the day."

"For what?"

"He waits, with the snow. Wants me to bring you to him."

"Who does?"

He frowns. The lines of his face grow deep. "The Buffalo."

"We can't go out in this storm, Dad. There's a blizzard on the way. We'd freeze to death out there."

He taps the lid of his thermos, as if it alone is cure enough for the storm front rolling toward the Reservation. "We will trust to the Buffalo to provide. Let me get you a rifle."

"This is nonsense."

"No. Driving a shiny Saab away from the red road, as far and as fast as you can, that's nonsense."

I shake my head and smile. "When did you start believing in any of that?"

"When you stopped."

"Dan believed enough for both of us. It never did him any good."

He turns and squared his shoulders to me, and for a moment he looms large enough to fill the space I have of him in my memories. "*Wasichu*," he says. "That's what they used to call me. White man. A White man with borrowed red sons. You sound like I used to. Like a damn fool. When your mother died, I kept us here. So you and your brother could stay with your people. For what? So you could scrape us from your boots like something you'd stepped in, cut your hair, and forget us."

"It isn't like that."

"Then come with me. Let's turn our faces to the wind, out there, and see if Buffalo has brought us what we need."

I nod. God help me, I nod. Maybe for Dan, maybe for me, but I nod all the same, and it's what my Dad's been waiting for.

He leaves the kitchen and I watch him go slowly up the staircase. Stairs that Dan and I once took three at a time. I am alone in the kitchen, surrounded by linoleum and unstuck corners. The colors have grown familiar with each other, whites gone yellow and yellows gone cream. I turn off the burner beneath the coffee.

Eventually he comes back down, a rifle case held gingerly in his grasp.

"Dad, did Dan ever tell you he'd changed his army info? Next of kin, things like that?"

He ignores me and I clear my throat. "Well, he did. Change his info, I mean."

Dad smiles and sets the rifle bag on the table. "Here." He pulls the weapon free.

The rifle is a seductive thing. The oiled barrel gleams, the wooden stock glossy and brown, like the skin of baked apples. "Dad, I wouldn't dare use this. It's an heirloom; more than a hundred years old."

He grinned and rubbed his hands together, and I have visions of all my Christmas mornings. "You boys used to beg me to let you shoot this. Do you know why I wouldn't let you?"

"Because it's a priceless antique? Seriously, this is scaring me now, and-"

"You weren't ready." He sets the rifle in my hands, heavy as sin. "Maybe you are now. It is my wish, and may it be the Buffalo's as well. We'll see."

I swallow hard and check the breech. He'd already loaded it. The smokeless cartridge gleams.

My father is watching me. "Ready?"

I nod.

The wind howls around the walls outside and that snort comes again, much closer this time. Something huge runs its bulk along the far side of the house. I hear horns drag furrows through old wood.

He stands and clips his thermos to his belt. Dan's thermos is in my hand and the rifle is in the other. They are both warm to the touch.

We're almost to the back door when I stop. Neither of us is dressed for the storm, and my father is empty-handed.

"Dad, you forgot your rifle."

He shakes his head. "This is not my hunt, son."

The storm throws the back door open and I recoil, but there is no buffalo there, no great beast with wet eyes and broad muzzle. Only the pale light and the storm encroach. Banks of snow shift and roll as I lean into the wind and step outside. My father follows. He does not close the door.

There are deep tracks at the side of the house that lead east. The snow crunches under our feet as I crouch and put my fingers into one of the hoof prints. It is sharp-edged and warm. Dan and I once dug holes like this, two boys who'd been taught to make hollows in the earth and fill them with whispers so the land could hold our secrets.

Dad presses close so that I can hear his voice over the gale. The wind has torn the smell of coffee smell from him. "You and your brother used to hunt together. Do you remember that?"

I nod before I realize he isn't looking at me. His eyes never leave the tracks. Snowflakes are going to ice on his face. "I do remember."

"You and he were close, once."

"We're still..." I can't finish the sentence and let the wind tear the rest of it from me.

He moves away from me to follow the tracks, and I stand and hurry to catch up. The white wind blows through us as the snow unravels our warmth like loose threads. We walk for a long time in a silence only he can break. When he does his voice is ragged. "I miss him. I miss you both."

"I miss him too, Dad."

"Charlie?"

I stop. I cannot meet his eyes.

"Charlie, is Dan still in Iraq? Will they send him back to us?"

"He's dead."

"That's not what I asked you."

"He'll stay over there, Dad. There was nothing left to send."

He nods and I see his Adam's apple dip as he swallows hard. When he points off to the east, we both press into the wind again. The chill has become a weight that pulls at us. It makes our movements less than we mean them to be. I look over my shoulder at a house I cannot see for the snow.

My face and hands go numb. The tracks arrow, unswerving, through deep snow banks, and every so often I look down at my hands to be certain I still hold the rifle.

The hoof prints are no longer sharp and defined. Falling snow has filled them in.

"We should go back, Dad."

"There's no going back, Charlie." He puts a pale hand on my arm. His fingernails are going blue. "Dan and I will stay out here. You don't have to."

"I shouldn't have been gone so long."

He shrugs. "You're a good man. This place made you into that. Maybe I did too, a little."

Something moves behind us, dark against the blizzard. It has circled around to flank us, and it crashes up our tracks, curved horns gracefully framing a wide head, bent low. Muscles ripple beneath the snow-matted hide. Huge clods of earth and ice shatter beneath its hooves.

I drop the rifle, the thermos. The buffalo plows toward us, stride upon stride. He charges between us, splits us, knocks us to the ground. The sharp bite of his sweat fills my nostrils. He charges on beyond us.

I get up and plunge my hand into my pocket and yank the dogtags free. They are dead, in the light, and refuse to reflect it.

The Buffalo slows, turns side on, and watches me. He shakes the snow from his back. When the snow is gone it snorts and tosses aside its pelt. Hide and horn falls away, leaving my brother where the Buffalo had been.

My father is shaking me; has been for some time. His tears remind me of my own, and they rush down my face. He has picked up the rifle and he presses it into my hands.

"Dad -"

"Your brother needs you. I'm an old man, Charlie. Wasicu. This is not my hunt."

Dan looks at me, waiting patiently. He is as I have come to remember him, smiling softly, his weight on the balls of his feet, thumbs tucked into his belt. I line up the shot.

Dan had a thing he said, way back when, on our hunts together. I speak the words and in the distance see his lips moving in synch.

What is life?

It is the flash of a firefly in the night.

It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime.

It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

My brother smiles at me, taps his chest, and tucks his hands back into his belt.

My bullet takes him high in the chest, centerline and true. He falls.

I throw the gun from me and run to him. His body lies in a hollow in the snow that is much larger than his body. I kneel beside Dan until my father is beside us.

I take the bonehandled knife from his belt. The storm dies away as I dig a hole, as Dan and I used to. I whisper words into the hole, to keep him company.

When I have finished, the corpse is Buffalo once again. It lies, without breath, on its side. I bury him in the old way, the Wounded Knee way, and cut his heart free. I plant his heart like corn. It fills the hole. Dad takes Dan's dogtags from me and sets them beside my whispers, and I bury them all in the snow.

Sinking Palaces by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

The ground swallowed the car. One minute it was there, the next, plop. Gone. It caused a commotion. An ambulance, cops and a bunch of onlookers gathered to mutter near the accident site. Leonardo banged his palm against his horn.

It was the Roma for Christ's sake. No reason to wander around like tourists snapping pictures at the gap on the street. Mexico City and its 35 million people had been sinking at a rate of fifteen centimetres every year for the past decade, causing all kinds of cracks, holes and collapsing buildings. The old houses fell like dominoes, whether pushed by chance or destroyed to give way to high-rises. Leonardo accepted it. He liked high-rises. When the big one came only those in tall steel tower buildings would be spared a crushing death.

He had told this to great-grandmother Natalia, spelling the wonders of an apartment building with a hydraulic system.

The old lady did not care. Soil is soil and home is home she said; she refused to sell the house.

The windshield wipers squeaked. Rain. Always the damn rain. It was like fucking

Tlaloc had it in for them. Leonardo had lost his umbrella again and he refused to buy a new one. In response the sky, cruel and spiteful, decided it should rain every day from dawn until dusk.

By the time Leonardo parked his car in front of the two-storey house hail was falling from the sky, pummeling him. He didn't understand the whole climate thing. The Arctic was melting but some parts of Mexico City were flooded all the time? What was the logic behind that?

Leonardo ran to the door and rang the bell five times before great-grandmother Natalia shuffled her slipper-clad feet and let him in. She was wearing her pink chequered apron and her white hair was pulled back in a bun. She gave him a yellowed smile.

"Hello grandma," he said and headed towards the kitchen. He set the groceries on the counter.

"You're all wet, Leonardo. You need to change your clothes," great-grandmother Natalia said.

"It's fine."

"You're going to catch a cold."

"You can't catch a cold from the rain."

"Leonardo."

"Fine."

She still thought he was a child, ordering him to wash his hands, speak properly and stand up straight. Leonardo pulled a cord and the bathroom light flickered into existence. It was a horrid bathroom with many broken tiles. The blue paint was peeling due to the humidity. Plus, he thought the crack on the wall he had noticed last time had grown bigger. Leonardo leaned closer, squinting. Yes, it looked more prominent. Yet another reason to sell the place.

Leonardo took off his jacket and towelled his hair, then strolled back into the kitchen. Great-grandmother Natalia was putting away the tortillas.

"Did you bring milk?"

Leonardo shoved a container of orange juice into the refrigerator and looked up.

"You didn't mention milk."

"I told you so last time."

"Grandma, you have to write it down. If you don't write it down I'm not going to remember."

"I'll just have tea. I shouldn't have too much milk anyway. It makes me feel sick if I have milk at nights."

"You could have phoned me," Leonardo said, tossing a package with chicken cutlets onto a white plastic shelf.

"Is that fresh chicken? It's no good if it's not from the butcher."

"And where am I going to get the money for fresh chicken from the butcher, hu? Where am I going to get the money for real chicken for that matter?" he asked and slammed the refrigerator door shut. "I can't even afford the cleaning lady you've got. If you sold this place you could have a nice little apartment with a meal delivery service."

"I'm going to make you some dinner," great-grandmother Natalia said.

"I'm not hungry."

"What do you mean you're not hungry?"

"I ate before coming over."

"How about some cookies?"

Leonardo rolled his eyes, reached for a glass and poured himself some soda.

"I brought the brochures," he said, sitting down and tossing folded, glossy pieces of paper onto the tiny kitchen table. "There's some really reasonable places. Look at this one: The Danube. Very classy."

"I think I'll make tea."

There was the clanging of pans and metal as great-grandmother Natalia looked for the teapot and put it on the stove. Leonardo stared at the white tablecloth with pink flowers. It was a crude and ugly creation spawned by the old woman's spidery fingers. Her whole world revolved around the confection of hideous tablecloths. That and the house.

The house was old and unattractive, but the amount of money they could get for it was enormous. Currently Leonardo rented a studio apartment in a nasty, corroded building that looked like it would dissolve at the slightest tremor. He couldn't afford any better. The shiny, blue-glass buildings clustered together around Polanco were like a distant dream. A dream he could only access via the large video billboards that showed a beautiful blonde model dancing around in a sexy satin slip. A dream that made him hungry and furious and demand immediate satisfaction.

And great-grandmother had a way to fix this situation. If she would only sell the house Leonardo would have his apartment in Polanco. Or perhaps, in the chic new developments in Santa Julia, once a dingy hellhole of cardboard and poverty now transformed into an assortment of faux-art deco exteriors.

"Look, it just needs too many repairs and I don't have the money for them," he said.

"It doesn't need any repairs. Come on, let's have our tea in the living room."

Leonardo sighed and carried the tray and the teapot into the dark living room. The teapot, like almost everything else in the house, was broken. The porcelain lid had cracked but his great-grandmother had stuck it back together again with sturdy silver tape.

They sat in the uncomfortable couches under the black and white gaze of several family members. He loathed those photographs. What was the logic behind putting up so many images of dead people, like some kind of sad necropolis? Boring, bland, depressing old house.

"What if you get sick? You can't be going up and down the stairs if you get sick," Leonardo said reaching for a cookie. "Who would pay for the nurse? I can't take care of you."

"I'm not sick."

"You're 93," he said. "You're bound to get sick some day."

"I don't want to sell the house. I can't."

"Why not?"

"My father would just die if I did."

"Great-grandmother, he's already dead."

"Well, he'd die all over again. I grew up here and this is where I raised my daughter, and your mother and you. It's a good house."

"It's dangerous," he said. "The soil is not right in this area. Do you know what I saw before coming over? I saw a car fall into a hole not five blocks from here."

Great-grandmother Natalia shook her head dismissively.

"Look, just look at the apartments," he said. "Look at the interiors. Those are beautiful countertops and those rooms are so much more comfortable with some good heating and air-conditioning. This house is moldy."

"It is not moldy."

"It's going to collapse."

"It has not collapsed in almost a hundred years."

"But it's different now."

"How is it different?"

Leonardo sighed. Paseo de la Reforma was no longer a straight line, instead curving and bending slightly, parts of several subway lines had fallen onto unsuspecting commuters in the last six months and one wing of Palacio Nacional was drifting away like a rogue iceberg. But of course, in the nonagenarian's universe all of this did not matter.

"Leonardo, honey, this is my home. I can't make a home in those buildings. All my memories, all my people are here. What would I do with my things? What would I do with your aunt Carolina's piano and all the pictures? You can't fit all that in a tiny apartment."

Leonardo had not met aunt Carolina and cared very little about the deceased lady's out of tune piano. Great-grandmother's museum of a house with the old radio and the silverware and the people in the portraits leaning down to inspect

Leonardo did not inspire any warm feelings in him.

Leonardo's concern was the present and the present dictated that anyone with a bit of sense and a bit of money would choose to take residence in one of the earthquake-safe, modern buildings with their balancing hydraulics, shatter-proof glass and elevators that greeted you by name and recommended trendy places to go have lunch. Places so far Leonardo was not able to afford in his battered bochito. Yet these places might open to him if only she'd sell. They would build a tower fifty stories high instead of the house and Leonardo could invite beautiful blonde women in stain slips to visit him in his trendy bachelor's pad.

"You could sell that stuff."

"Those are not things you sell," she said, lifting her cup with trembling fingers and taking a sip. It rattled as she placed it back on the tiny white plate. "Leonardo, my father drew this house on a piece of paper when he came from Veracruz and he didn't have a peso in his pocket. He drew a house and he said: I'd like to live there some day. And one day when he had enough money and Carolina and Ana Maria were very little and I was only a baby he bought a plot of land and built the house he'd dreamt of.

"Aunt Carolina took her piano lessons in the little salon and Ana Maria played in the nursery. My brother Tulio died here. So did my mother and when my father died he said: 'Natalia, Natita. Promise you'll never sell the house.'

"So I promised on my heart. On my soul."

Leonardo stared at his great-grandmother and was about to break into a long, furious rant about the many economical benefits the sale would bring and how they could not afford the house anymore. They were not rich. The family fortune had been squandered before Leonardo could learn how to read and write.

The lights dimmed, then glowed strong again.

"Did you see that?!" Leonardo said, finally exploding and jumping to his feet. Electricity and water came and went in the area. Blackouts were common. But the tall buildings shone like beacons in the night, never dimming their lights.

Great-grandmother Natalia looked up at the light-bulbs with her tired eyes.

"Oh, it's nothing. If the power fails I have candles."

"Grandma, you can't live like this. I can't live like this. This street is horrible and the house is going to collapse right over our heads!"

Great-grandmother smiled and leaned forward, brushing his hands with her paper mache fingers.

"No. This house will not fall as long as I live."

Useless. The conversation was a merry-go-round. Leonardo left an hour later with the glossy brochures tucked back into his jacket.

That night he dreamt about blue and silver needles piercing the sky, buildings sixty miles long wedged into the earth escaping the smog, the specks of garbage,

the dirt, the ordinariness and grey chaos simmering below.

Eternal. Sturdy. Unmovable.

He looked through the blue-frosted windows and saw the clouds.

That same night the house shivered. At first it was only the slightest tremor but then the movement intensified. Great fissures spread through the walls, plaster rained onto the piano. The keys let out a dissonant tune. The branches of the old candelabrum tinkled together. Plaster and bricks groaned.

The large oak wardrobe tipped over and crushed Natalia's skull. She died peacefully, dreaming about a memory of her childhood. She was rushing through the hallways of her house and out into the courtyard where the sun shone golden and her father picked her up and spun her in his arms.

With one great roaring cry the old house crumbled into powder and into nothing leaving only a gaping hole and silence behind.

In the morning Leonardo arrived to find the house gone and a bunch of police officers and emergency workers standing around. The neighbours peeked from behind their curtains and the transients stopped to stare.

He answered questions all day and did not return to his little apartment until it was dark. The elevator had a piece of paper stuck to the window that said "out of order" with big, block letters. It had been broken for the past month.

Leonardo went up the stairs and noticed there was one more plastic bucket on the steps. One more leak going drip, drip, drip while it thundered outside. They might have ducks swimming in the lobby any day if things continued this way.

Leonardo fished for his keys. He had to jiggle the lock a little. Once inside he sat on his bed and stared at the wallpaper.

He pulled out the album with some scattered photographs he kept tucked in a drawer and never looked at. Leonardo flipped the pages until he found a picture which showed great-grandmother Natalia, her hair pulled back, helping his mother take a tentative baby step.

He seldom thought about his mother anymore. He imagined they had looked alike but he could not remember this clearly. He searched through the pictures for her eyes, wanting to verify if they were the same or if they had changed. If he had changed.

The apartment seemed to have grown smaller as he looked at the photographs. It threatened to suffocate him. Leonardo ventured outside to stare at the tall spires dotting the skyline. This view had always comforted him.

But he could find no comfort as he looked at the billboard with the pretty woman dancing in her underwear, nor could he smile at the thought that he could finally sell his great-grandmother's plot of land.

Instead of considering the nice suits and car he would buy, he thought about the city: about a time when the city was younger and gentlemen strolled down the Alameda in their hats and silk lined vests; years earlier when it had been a Venice-like wonder upon a lake with pyramids and emperors; and even earlier when it was nothing but marshy grass and water. The old buildings and sinking palaces muttered of canals and calzadas and horses to each other.

He thought one day these steel towers would be covered with grass and grey herons would nest in their windows. They would return to the earth and water. To the final movement of the fifth sun.

The blonde girl danced in the billboard. She extolled the virtues of real estate, walls with integrated TVs, voice activated kitchen displays, sliding glass doors that change colours.

Leonardo was cold. The rain had not stopped.

Issue Ten Contributor Biographies

Eric Del Carlo

Eric Del Carlo is the coauthor, with Robert Asprin, of the Wartorn fantasy novels, published by Ace Books. His solo short fiction has appeared in various Circlet Press anthologies (most recently in Like Clockwork), Sybil's Garage, Electric Spec, Talebones, Brain Harvest and a number of other publications over the years. He has an eclectic array of erotic genre fiction available for download at Loose Id. Look for a final collaborative novel with the late Robert Asprin, DarkStar Books' NO Quarter, a murder mystery set in a New Orleans French Quarter that no tourist guidebook can take you to. Check out Eric's author website at ericdelcarlo.com or find him on [Facebook](#).

Tade Thompson

He lives and works in the United Kingdom, however he grew up in Nigeria where he received most of his education. He is Yoruba and tends to bring this sensibility to his fiction. His speculative fiction has been published in [Ideomancer](#) and [Twilight Times](#), among others.

Lavie Tidhar

Lavie Tidhar is the author of linked-story collection [HebrewPunk](#) (2007), novellas [An Occupation of Angels](#) (2005), and forthcoming Cloud Permutations (2009) and Gorel & The Pot-Bellied God (2010) and, with Nir Yaniv, short novel The Tel Aviv

Dossier (2009). He's lived on three continents and one island-nation, and currently lives in South East Asia.

Lavie's web site is at <http://www.lavietidhar.co.uk>

Christopher Green

Christopher Green has Cherokee blood from both parents. The Native American part of his heritage has led him to return to tribal lands and reservations to seek out stories and histories that would otherwise have remained silent to him. He is a graduate of Clarion South 2007 and his work has appeared in *Dreaming Again*, [Nossa Morte](#) and will appear in upcoming issues of [Beneath Ceaseless Skies](#) and [Abyss and Apex](#). He was also a finalist for a 2008 Australian Shadows Award.

Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Silvia Moreno-Garcia is a Mexican native who now lives in Canada with her family and two cats. When she's not writing, you can find her working on [Innsmouth Free Press](#). She [blogs](#) and [Tweets](#) from time to time.