

the
HOMELESS MOON



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<http://www.homelessmoon.com>

The Homeless Moon

A Chapbook



“Over the town roamed the homeless moon. I went along with her, warming up in my heart impracticable dreams and discordant songs.”

- I. Babel



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Contents

Construction-Paper Moon

Michael J. DeLuca..... 5

Impracticable Dreams

Jason S. Ridler..... 15

Colonized

Scott H. Andrews..... 23

The Recurrence of Orpheus

Erin Hoffman 28

Welcome to Foreign Lands

Justin Howe..... 33



About the Contributors..... 42

Construction-Paper Moon

Michael J. DeLuca

James squatted at the top of the folding ladder that led down from the attic, his ears wrapped in a pair of stereo headphones, the soundtrack to a star's implosion crashing through his head. Sifting through the ancient shoebox cradled in his lap, he found the remote, pressed it, and the paper stars inside began to glow. He wondered if she'd understand, or if he was just wasting his time.



Petra sat hunched over her desk, studying for the academy entrance exam, her reader lying open to an animated, fill-in-the-blanks map of the inner solar system. The asteroids were killing her. She entered the word “VESTA” into a blank next to the largest of them, then deleted it, wrote “CERES”. She knew the names. She *knew* them—she just couldn't pull them up out of the murk. Her brain was fried as only six hours of cramming could fry it.

“Fifteen minutes to lights-out,” said her dad.

Petra ground her teeth and gazed beseechingly at the framed poster of her favorite astronaut, Ofelia Matamoros, that hung above her desk. She couldn't concentrate.

For two hours, Dad had been puttering around her bedroom with an old shoebox tucked under one arm, gluing LEP-paper stars

to the ceiling and walls, referring to a cracked and tattered star chart unrolled across her bed. Worse, he kept *bumming*.

“You’re doing it again, Dad,” she growled.

He stopped—for maybe half a minute. He didn’t seem conscious of it. She knew the tune, “Dark Star”, from his antique psychedelic rock collection. She ought to—he played it to death. The words kept popping up in her head in place of the ones she was looking for. They were all about change, love in transition, stars like diamonds. It didn’t even make sense. Constellations didn’t change—just your position among them.

Petra stared blearily at her dad’s reflection in the glass of Ofe-
lia’s portrait, which was now surrounded by the off-kilter stars of the constellation Ophiucus. Dad looked even thinner than usual. Paler. This whole idea, a handmade star chart, only reminded her how old and out of touch he was compared to the dads of all other the girls applying to the academy. He *could* have gotten her the holo globe she’d shown him, the one that cataloged every celestial event for ten thousand years into the past or future. It would have cost money; she could forgive him that. But there was also the nostalgia factor. Granddad had used these same stars when Dad was a kid. She supposed it would be cute, if it wasn’t so embarrassingly inaccurate.

Fifteen minutes later, when his internal dad-clock went off and he announced, “Bedtime!”, she hadn’t done a single thing to the map except replace the word “CERES” with “VESTA” again.

Petra bit back her usual remarks about the meaningless tyranny of “bedtime”. The exam was tomorrow. She was tired of arguing. Instead, she closed the reader silently and took her pajamas into the bathroom to change. She could tell by his shocked face as she passed him that he’d been expecting a fight.

She stood in the hallway brushing her teeth while he doused the room lights and fiddled with the dated hand-remote that kindled the stars.

“What’s that big one supposed to be?” she asked around a mouthful of toothpaste.

One star stood out glaringly from the rest: ten times the size of anything else, a vast, pale orb hovering between the constellation Cetus and a watercolor of the Mars ERV engine Petra had painted when she was six. Washed in its eerie luminescence, the familiar shapes of her bedroom suddenly resembled the bottom of the sea.

Her dad was an indistinct outline in the dimness as he rolled up

the crinkled star chart and slid it into its case. "That's the moon."

"Which moon? Phobos? Deimos? Io? Ganymede? Callisto? Europa? Amalthea? Themisto?" Petra smiled fiercely as the words rolled off her foam-covered tongue, and she knew she could have gone on listing moons forever. She was *ready*.

"It's our moon," her dad cut in. "Earth's moon."

She went back to the bathroom and spat. "Earth doesn't have a moon, Dad," she told the mirror, mortified. "Luna's classified as an erratic dwarf planet. I thought this was supposed to help me study. If I put that on the test, they'd send me back to primary school."

He was waiting by the bed for a hug when she returned. She grabbed the reader off the desk in a vain attempt to ward off the gravitational pull of his arms. He wrapped them around her from behind, looking over her shoulder. His beard tickled her neck. Squirming, she called up a different portion of the solar system map. "See?"

Luna rocketed lopsidedly through the void, surrounded by a haze of post-impact debris congealing into a pale ring. The speck of an unnamed Kuiper belt object winked from two million kilometers' distance, the only thing anywhere nearby.

"Nothing wrong with learning a little historical astronomy," Dad said quietly. "Your particular night sky just happens to be that of August 5, 2012, at ten PM." He let her go.

She put the reader to sleep on the nightstand and climbed into bed. He kissed her goodnight.

Petra lay there, exhausted. It was the kind of exhaustion that left you jittery and shaking—too tired to sleep. Her head buzzed with equations of Keplerian orbital mechanics and major features of extra-terrestrial geography. Not good. Once you studied too much, things got worse, not better.

Think of something else.

The scrub pine outside tapped its limbs against the window. She stared up at the fake stars and the fake moon. They were too bright. She was too old for night-lights. She covered her eyes with her arm.

The moon made the night too bright to sleep.

And yet she knew people had endured it for thousands of years. Of course, it wasn't there all the time. She understood about occlusion and orbital cycles. The moon waxed and waned. Like a relationship between people. You could think you understood a person, but even knowing them all your life, you might only see a part of them,

just a sliver. Someday, when you met them head-on, you might discover they weren't who you thought. And you'd have to come to terms with it. Because by then, you'd know they were never going away. Even though you'd only seen their light side.

What must it have been like, to see Luna hanging in the night? To be able to walk outside, look up with nothing but the naked eye and actually see it! A whole other world. The thought made her tingle with excitement, yet there was an uncanniness to it, a twinge of fear. She had always wanted to be an astronaut. But there were nightmares she remembered from her childhood, of herself as the earth, falling endlessly through the black void. Infinity.

Go to sleep. Test tomorrow.

It was no use. Petra kicked off the covers. She opened her eyes and stared up gloomily. Even standing on the chair, she knew she wouldn't be tall enough to pull down the moon.

She got up, sat at the desk and opened the shoebox the fake stars had come from. Inside were more stars and several thick sheets made from the same rough paper: bluish-white, green-white, and pale, pale red. The sheets had holes in them, cut out with scissors in all sorts of shapes. Here was a crescent moon, another waxing gibbous. This one was obviously Saturn, though woefully disproportionate in size. No sign of the remote. Her dad must have taken it. She could hear him still moving around outside the door.

Petra flopped down on the bed. She waited quietly, counting her breaths, going over the names of the stars and constellations she recognized from their demented approximations. She'd be able to rest, just as soon as that moon went away.

At last the yellow glow faded from the crack under the door, and the muffled sounds of her father's movements ceased, leaving only the old bungalow's familiar creaks and rattles in the night breeze off the Atlantic.

Petra crept out into the darkened hallway. Her dad liked to listen to music in bed. Lamplight spilling from his open bedroom door lit imperfectly the frames of plaques and photos on the opposite wall: her dad's medals, his diplomas, pictures of Petra as a baby, as a little girl, in a blue dress at her seventh grade commencement. She stepped past them silently, dodging the light.

The remote wasn't among the jumble of beard trimmers, toothpaste, barrettes and combs in the basket by the bathroom sink. It wasn't on the shelf by the front door under the rusty harpoon, where

her dad kept his keys and ID badge from Otis Air Base. Nor was it one of the miscellaneous handhelds surrounding the empty storm lantern on the kitchen table. Which meant it must be in his room.

Petra leaned against the wall by his open bedroom door and looked up at the photos of herself, wishing, not for the first time, that the collection of the memories her dad reminded himself of every morning could include just one face that wasn't hers.

This is ridiculous, she thought.

She peeked around the doorjamb. He sat on the edge of the bed, facing away from her, his posture rod-straight. A faint trickle of electric guitar emanated from the black headphones engulfing his ears. He held an object in his hands she couldn't see.

Something felt weird. Wrong. This wasn't how her dad listened to music. He danced, like his bones had turned to jelly. She'd explained how utterly traumatized she'd be if she ever caught him doing that in public, but the effort had no effect whatsoever. Even when he listened sitting down, or lying in bed, some part of him was always wriggling along. Now, he was still.

She inched further into the light. The object in his hands was a newspaper—an actual, physical newspaper, practically flaking apart. He was holding it with gloves on. *The Barnstable Patriot*. The headline read, “Cape Wind Timeline Unaffected”. Petra realized he wasn't even looking at it. He was staring out the window towards the sea, though she couldn't see anything in the glass but the room's reflection and the black branches of the scrub pine outside rocking in the wind. She took a half-step into the room, craning her neck to make out the date on the paper: August 7, 2012.

There were red circles under his eyes. His beard was wet.

Her first thought, which she hated but couldn't take back, was *why now?* When she had her own troubles to deal with.

She went back to her room.

She sat on the edge of her bed, staring up into the false moon's eerie glow. Her fingertips found the reader on her nightstand, and she pulled it into her lap. August 7. What had happened that day? Not the collision. The date that Luna broke Earth orbit, July 19, 2012, was branded forever in the head of every school-age kid, especially Petra. July, not August.



A door slammed, penetrating his isolation. James pulled off the headphones to the creaking silence of the house and knew in his stomach that Petra was gone.

The curtains of her bedroom window swelled and shifted, ghostlike, in the bluish light cast by the construction-paper moon. The window was open, the breeze rushing through it damp and salty. The door must have blown shut. Petra's bed was empty.

He searched the bungalow to satisfy the hope he might be wrong. It was a small place, just a single floor, five rooms he'd shared with her so long that he knew she wasn't there without even needing to turn on a light.

James flung a windbreaker across his shoulders and stepped out the front door. Fog rolled over the small yard in billows, mottling the stars. Bare footprints led from Petra's window across the dewy lawn, then faded into sand at the head of the path through the dunes.

He went down the dune path, razor grass licking his shins. At the top of the sandy cliff, the fog pulled back. The Atlantic spread away like glass beneath a moonless sky made emptier by the sheer number of the stars. He looked over the edge of the drop at the beach below. Had she come down this way? It was the way she always went, when he wasn't there to tell her no.

James stepped off the cliff into the mist, the hook from Dark Star still running through his head.

His heels hit the sand at a steep angle, and he slid ten or twelve feet at an uncontrollable speed before the beach leveled off, halting his descent abruptly. He pitched forward hard onto his knees, out of practice from too many years spent trying to set an example. Cool sand bit into his palms.

Petra appeared out of fog, seated at the edge of the water, arms wrapped around her legs, the ocean lapping at her toes.

As always, for an instant he was frightened for her, instincts still warning of the surf's pounding ferocity, the danger of the undertow. The reflex was primal, and irrational—without the moon to pull the tides, the Atlantic was eternally calm, placid as a lake. These terrors resulted from something psychologists called the "Actaeon effect"—a generational affliction. Petra would never suffer from it.

She was angry. He could see it in her posture, the hunch of her shoulders, despite the foggy, moonless night.

"What are you doing down here?" he asked, the safest question he could muster, and even that felt like walking on glass.

“I couldn’t sleep.” She bit off the words.

He sat beside her in the sand, made himself hold still as the water spilled between his toes. “What’s the matter?”

“Your moon was too bright.”

James followed her gaze towards the stars and thought of the moon as he had seen it that night, and then again for endless nights afterward, repeated on the news and everywhere else anyone looked: horned, immense, and alien. He remembered the feeling of impact, like a tidal wave slamming into his chest. This was the feeling that in twelve years as a single father he’d failed to convey.

His wife, Gina, had been first mate on the trawler *Petra Cabria*, out of Woods Hole. On the night of July 19, 2012, the night of the collision, she went missing. The storms that followed destroyed ships all along the world’s coasts. With no way to get news, nothing else to do but work, James threw himself into double shifts at Otis, sleeping at his desk, trying to anticipate the aftereffects of the massive comet collision that had destabilized the moon’s orbit and driven everyone half-insane. He forgot about Petra. Left her with a nursing service and forgot her utterly. Afterwards, they gave him medals.

Nineteen days later, the wreck of the *Petra Cabria* washed ashore. Gina had taken her ship and set sail. The ocean killed her. The scientists who stood up to be honored with James speculated that she couldn’t help it—a woman and a sailor, a life so dependent on the moon and its cycle. They told him not to think of it as suicide.

He remembered the image from Petra’s reader, the moon rocketing alone through the void, not Earth’s anymore or anyone else’s, its impact wounds already being healed by gravity. It was that image which had made him retreat into his room, pull the paper in its plastic from under the mattress, and bury himself in the music of the Dead. That, and the thought that Luna didn’t need us anymore.

Petra jumped up and splashed away from his silence into the shallows. “Dad! Would you come out of your little world for one minute? My entrance exams are tomorrow. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

He reached into his memory, seeking some similar monumental change, some loss he might have endured without a thought while his parents bowed under its weight and finally cracked like trees in a hurricane. He’d been an unfathomable young man once, drowning out his parents with the Dead, doing drugs, staying up all night reading Camus. But that had been later. When he was Petra’s age, he. . . .

He had never been Petra.

“I looked up that night in the atlas,” she said, her tone accusing. “August seventh. The moon wasn’t even in that spot at ten PM—it was down on the horizon! You screwed it up.”

James closed his mouth into a firm line. His reflex was to snap at her. “I put the moon right where I wanted it,” he said. Where it should have been, if that night had never happened.

“I don’t believe this.” Petra wrapped her arms around herself, shivering, up to her calves in the sea. “First you wouldn’t let me study. Now I find out you’re trying to trick me. Do you *want* me to fail?”

“Come out of the water,” he said. “You’ll catch cold.” He’d had to broach the subject somehow.

“I could board at the academy, you know. If I get a scholarship, they’d pay for me to live there. You ever think of that? I’m not some genius prodigy, but I could do it. I work hard enough. No thanks to you.”

“I know,” said James. She’d grow up and fulfill all her dreams. Be an astronaut. Go away somewhere up there and never return. “What did you think this was about?”

“So you tried to make me fail the test. You tried to sabotage me, just to keep me here?”

“No. Of course not. I’m your father. I want you to succeed.”

Petra gave an exasperated shriek. She kicked at the ripples, splattering salt spray across his clothes. “Then what the hell is going on? I saw you crying, Dad. I saw you. What happened that night? August seventh, 2012—what happened?”

The warning red lights of the offshore wind farm gleamed briefly on the southeast horizon, then were swallowed. The black Atlantic rippled under the fog and the stars. Would anything change if he told her? Would the truth devastate her? Transform her? Destroy her ambitions? Would it do anything at all to prevent her from becoming her mother?

No.

He stood up, hands in the pockets of his windbreaker, toes curling in the sand. The strangest thing to him about the absent moon—at least insofar as the dictates of his instincts, his residual memory of what the ocean had been like when life first crawled from it at the dawn of time—had always been the sound. There was no more crashing, epic, thunderous, cataclysmic surf: just the lonely breeze across the calm ocean, and serenity.

In its place, a piercing, revelatory, long-dead guitar line rocked in his head, and James tried again to steel himself to lose his daughter the same way he had lost his wife. And he realized again that he'd never be ready.

He never thought she'd really be an astronaut. He thought it was just one of those dreams kids had. Petra had made it happen all on her own.

He had been trying to hold her back. Consciously or not, he had done it.

He didn't want to be that kind of father.

James swallowed the lump in his throat. "It doesn't matter," he mustered at last. "I've been meaning to tell you about that night, about me and your mom, for what seems like forever. But you're right: I was selfish. You made it this far without knowing. There's no reason I should spring it on you now. I just thought, if you knew...it might keep you here. But it doesn't have to happen tonight."

He stepped into the cold water. His heels sank into the slippery sand. The placid ocean lapped at his ankles, soaking the cuffs of his pajamas. He unzipped the windbreaker, pulled it off and held it out. "I'm sorry," he said.



Petra studied her dad in the darkness.

She hadn't thought about Mom in a long time, though once, as a little girl, she wouldn't have let a day go by without bringing it up. But Dad wasn't ready then, and after awhile, it didn't seem to matter anymore.

It obviously mattered to him now. He looked so forlorn, standing there so gray and thin, without a coat. Like the wind could tip him over.

She stepped forward, put one arm through the sleeve of the windbreaker, then the other. He let it go.

"I don't have to move away, Dad. The academy's only in Truro. I could commute. You could practically drop me off there on your way to work."

Dad shook his head, held up his open hands. "Plenty of time to worry about that later. We can talk about it tomorrow."

The Homeless Moon

“Dad? I do kind of want to know. About Mom. Maybe not now, but...”

“Whenever you’re ready.”

As they headed up the beach, he was humming again. Quietly, she sang some of the words.



Impracticable Dreams

Jason S. Ridler

Rusty leaned into the darkness beyond the rickety stage, top hat in his outstretched hand, and released the punch line into the crowd. “If that’s your stomach, buddy, where’s the black hole?”

Roars of laughter followed. He bowed, stage smile hiding the pain of the fat-suit clawing into his shoulders and the sourness bite in his gut. He didn’t care. Not in that golden moment. Out in the dark were beautiful people, stuffed to the gills from his set of masochistic hooks, barbs and gags that never would have worked without the fat suit, or the hat.

Silvery coins filled the air, aiming for his hat’s maw. He pulled it back and they cheered for such a seemingly selfless act. The stage soon glittered with silvery stars at his feet. As the house band started up a brassy rendition of “Pomp and Circumstance”, Rusty made his escape backstage. He’d snatch the coins later if the band’s grubby hands didn’t pinch them first.

Old Sparks and the Flamingo girls hung out by the catering bucket. Sparks threw phoney praise at Rusty while stuffing himself with a cup-full of spam, and the girls smoked Slavic tobacco through wicked lips. Rusty bowed, giving them the finger with his mind, then pushed open the door with the duct-taped star, his name in jagged letters.

At the far end of the coffin-sized room stood Magnus, tuxedo t-shirt stretched against his Scandinavian chest, six-gun holsters full of cards. He clapped hard once. “Nice set. But don’t you think those marks might get tired of fat jokes?”

Rusty swallowed bile. “Fans, Mags, we call them fans.”

“Fans keep you cool in summer, bud—marks keep you wealthy all year round.”

Rusty took off his hat, fat suit dragging him down, gut on fire. “Har. I’ll steal that bit. Can I do anything for you? Kinda need some privacy.”

“Why, bud? That shitter ain’t worked since Buddy Glam was headlining.” Before Rusty’s comeback could birth from his lips, Magnus raised a frosty eyebrow. “That lard-outfit may fool the marks, but not me. Lost a lot of weight, bud. Almost . . . unnatural.”

A sickness slosed against Rusty’s teeth, but he smiled big and puffy and swallowed the black juice. “Thanks for the concern, but I’m peachy, Mags. Fuzzy and sweet. And I know you don’t give a tinker’s damn about me, so please get to the point of your point.”

Magnus cracked a knuckle. “I want my old hat back.”

Rusty dusted the brim. “Now why is that?”

He sized up Rusty like a slab of rotting meat. “Fine. There’s a reason you ain’t catching coin in it, and it ain’t your charitable nature. It’s magicked. You’re getting material from purging into that damn thing. Paying for it with guts. Judging by your eyes, you look damn near spent.” He gave the hat a sad look. “You can’t retrieve what you lose, bud. It’s bottomless.”

Rusty waved away Magnus’s words. “I know. Fine parting gift for your protégé. Good thing I’m funny or I’d have lost another dozen pigeons to it. And a rabbit.” Gas bubbles burst in his gut and he swallowed the fumes.

Magnus poked Rusty’s chest, leaving a bruise. “Give it.”

Rusty shoved the finger, burping. “Screw you. I’m not losing headliner status just because I found a use for this joke hat.”

Magnus folded his arms. “Don’t make me take it.”

His stomach twitched. “Fine, partner. One returned present, coming right up.” Rusty presented the hat and vomited fast, loud and rotten. Magnus jumped back as thin orange and black juice splattered past Rusty’s weak teeth and into the hole, staining the brim a burnt Halloween orange. Rusty wiped the hot juice from his mouth, raised the soiled hat to Magnus. “Ta da, Judas. Hope it fits.”

“Chubs!” Mr. Jenkins said, banging on the door. “You there? We gotta hash out some particulars.”

Red wetness dripped from Rusty’s lip. “Going to thrash me for it, Mags? Use me as a punch-line target again?”

Magnus snorted. “Was a lot easier when you were a fat fuck,

bud. When you've spewed your heart, I'll nab that hat off your carcass."

Magnus rushed by Jenkins, who held a skeleton key in his tiny hands. Jenkins slammed the door on Magnus' ass. "Chubs, great set, and you won't believe who was in the audience. Kidder Price!" He lit a smoke and held it between his giant, yellow chompers. "God, it's like she never sleeps, she loves you so much. Been here all week, loving your frump, your tar and smarm voice, the self-deprecation, everything! Total package, she said. Total."

Rusty dropped the steaming hat on his child-sized writing desk and unpeeled the three-hundred-pound fat suit Jenkins had got him a sweet deal on. He exhaled long and weak. "Total, huh?"

Jenkins spoke with smoky words. "This means TV, Chubs. Movies." He winked. "The whole shee-bang."

Arms trembling, Rusty ran his thin fingers through greasy hair. "Great. After next week's shows—"

Jenkins' face bunched in disgust. "Chubs, the iron will be ice cold then. Audition is tomorrow. And she wants new material. Fresh as a baby's first scream."

Rusty wrapped himself in his old flannel shirt. Damn thing hung off him like a tarp. "God, Jenkins, I'm spent." He dropped into an old director's chair that swung low thanks to the weight of his once-mountainous ass, and was at eye level with Jenkins. "Can't you buy me some time? Let me make some more dough for you first? I'm raking in class from outside the junket, folks who own more than one pair of beer-stained jeans." Some real beautiful people.

Jenkins folded big hands into small, sweat-stained armpits, leaned against the door and crossed his tiny legs. "You're going Big Time, Chubs. Now."

"What?"

He smiled. "You're almost dry. I can tell. Not much left to puke out for great crowds. Two months and you're almost bone and bile." He breathed smoke. "This place is older than God's balls. The trap door is rust shut, one of the Flamingos was bit by a rat, and if you and Sparks didn't eat every scrap in the catering bucket we'd have a roach problem. I need you to go."

"But—"

"Go Big Time tomorrow, I get a great cut for releasing you from your contract, and I'll fix up this dump. You get some crazy bills before you call it quits. Everyone wins. You don't, I give Magnus the

headline.”

Rusty was glad the mirror in front of him had long ago been destroyed. His reflection was a concrete wall with old phrases and bad jokes and one-liners in black and red. He felt the acidic emptiness in his gut. “There’s nothing left, Jenkins. I need some time.” Desperate light flamed in his eyes. “Maybe I could write some new material, you know? Topical? People love topical humour. Not just the—”

Jenkins laid a heavy hand on Rusty’s shoulder. “You got until tomorrow, Chubs. And if you think of changing your set, I’ll break your bones and eat the marrow. Just feed those sharks what they want and we all go home well fed. Big Time.”



Two a.m. and the Enchanted Marquee was closing shop. Rusty could hear Sparks whistling, the weak sound of juggling flames dissipating in the air. The Flamingo girls and house band jingled with the coins stolen from Rusty’s set and jangled into the night, the bastards. Magnus argued with Jenkins about next week’s show, his post-Rusty return to headliner status. Then Jenkins tugged on every door and locked up. Every door but Rusty’s.

The Enchanted Marquee’s natural soundtrack of cricks and cracks and sighs filled Rusty’s head as he scribbled on a yellow pad. Above him, a single bulb shot a cone of lemon light like a UFO tractor beam unable to carry his old fat ass up for a solid probing. He chuckled, wrote that image down, and the humour flew out of it. He sighed.

Hours and hundreds of scrunched up failures later, Rusty glared at the scratchy grey wall. The old, weird comments returned his gaze—“Fortune Cookie Wonderland!” “2+2=Fuck You, Jezzy!” “Dave the Magnificent doesn’t Steal”—inspiring nothing but fears of being as forgotten and undecipherable as the phrase “Flanger Was Never Here.”

Four a.m.

Like a machine gun, he flicked his scrunched failures at the grey wall, and they all ricocheted into the stained hat, vanishing like his guts. The quotes on the wall became fuzzy. Rusty rubbed his eyes. “Time for a change of scenery.”

He grabbed the hat and strolled through the dark to the stage,

flicked on the sizzling stage lights and walked under the mock-alabaster arch. The stage was empty of silver.

“No coins, please. Har.”

Hat at the edge of the stage, he stared into the void. Darkness enveloped the seats, so he rubbed his eyes to see stars, imaginary laughter floating in his head from the beautiful people in luxurious finery, pearly whites glaring at him with hungry intent. C’mon, fat boy, those teeth said, cut yourself in tiny pieces so we can all have a taste.

“So,” he said, “ever notice how . . .” Darkness swallowed the stars.

He coughed, stomach deflating inwards. “Are you like me? Do you hate it when. . .” Nada.

“The funny thing about . . .” Nothing.

He huffed steam and punched his head while the beautiful people hid with their laughter, his last purge too weak, and his last meal . . .

His mouth dropped. “That’s it! The catering bucket!”

Hat in hand, his weak legs hustled. He’d stopped eating so long ago he forgot it might be a source of material. Binge and purge, baby, right to the Big Time! He gripped the slick plastic lid. “Sparks, you’d better have left me something.” He yanked the lid off.

A rat with a football-sized gut panted for breath at the bottom of the empty bucket, fur slick with spam. Above it was a crude poster. “WANTED: Apprentice for Magnus the Magus, Headliner Supreme.” The smiling Viking pointed at Rusty with a Joker card between his fingers.

Seething, Rusty took off his hat and bowed. “Well played, asshole.” He gripped the immobile rat’s fat neck, spam falling from its stuffed teeth. “Now for my next trick, watch Rusty’s career—disappear!” He dropped the rat in the hat, and it vanished like guts and jokes.

He skulked back to the empty stage. Dawn was starting to break through the gloom of twilight, but the beautiful people still hid.

Rusty popped a sugarless mint in his mouth and laid the hat, top up, on the edge of the stage. He sucked back the aspartame bite. “Should have eaten the rat.” Flop-sweat tears welled in his eyes as he growled at the hat. “You bottomless sack of shit. Eating me raw and leaving me empty. Can’t retrieve anything from it, huh, Mags? Well, we’ll see about that, you Scandinavian fucktard.”

Arms wide, Rusty shouted, “Ladies and gentleman, boys and

girls, nobodies of all ages, this trick is one of a kind. For the first time in history, I will show you what's at the bottom of a bottomless pit!" He stamped the hat down like a velvet accordion, but his boot sank a foot beneath the stage.

"Shit!"

He yanked out his foot and hit the stage with his back. The hole began to breathe where the hat had been. A scrap of yellow swirled out, followed by another, and soon the air filled with a jaundiced cyclone of paper. Rusty gripped the handle of the trapdoor as the cyclone solidified and rancid smells with a hint of mint gagged him.

From the cyclone's eye stepped a heap of flesh the colour of donkey-chewed grapefruit. The yellow scraps stuck to its skin until his bulbous flesh was covered. A jagged mouth lay beneath the paper, eyes white and vacant. Corpses of a few dozen birds and one rabbit protruded from its belly.

"Hey, Chief," said the heap with a burnt timbre. "Nice digs. Kinda like a bowling alley. Gutter to gutter?"

Awestruck, Rusty muttered. "That . . . that was . . ."

"That was almost a sentence. Must be choking on a dictionary."

He released the handle of the trap door. "Jokes. My old, shitty jokes?"

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger, said the heap. "You called us back, remember?"

Rusty stood, hands drifting at his hips. "What?"

"You stomped the hat in reverse. Guess you wanted to see us again. The dead weight you tore out." It approached, white eyes wide. "Your new material is mighty thin."

Rusty grabbed his mouth. "No."

The heap slicked back its non-existent hair. "Let us back in, Chief. We can mix old and new, make a fresh set." A rat-sized mound circled its heart. "Like old times."

Rusty swallowed bile.

The heap tapped its belly. "Face it, skinny, you need us. We're your punch-line to the Big Time."

Rusty gripped his head. "No way. I won't go back to being a fat fuck like you!"

The heap winced, then clutched its rat-shaped heart. "Careful, chief, you might say something you'll regret."

But it had winced, before the lame comeback. The way Rusty

did when Magnus fired one-liners at him throughout the set. Rusty's voice cooled. "I got no regrets chucking out some man-turd with a fat-filled whoopee cushion for a heart, pumping greasy shit into its veins."

The heap's orange lip quivered, then the creature crossed its arms. "Good one . . . now tell us how you really feel?"

Rusty smelled fear. The tremble of nerves. Like blood to a shark, he moved forward. "Laugh it up, Ass-zilla."

The heap stumbled back, arms raised. "Hey, you're the one who called—"

"You got the wrong number, man-tits."

The heap slithered toward the hole. "You're running on empty. You'll be firing blanks soon."

Black hunger pierced Rusty's heart. "I'm not drawing my meals from the same bucket." He flicked the wet chest, and yellow scattered in the air. "Everyone loves a fat fuck getting stabbed, and no one can stab them like one of their own." The heap retreated as Rusty marched to the hole's edge. "Right, lardy?"

"C'mon, Chief. We were partners!"

"Like hell!"

He shoved the slick orange chest toward the hat and gravity took the heap down the hole. But its middle stuck. "Please! Chief. We made you what you are!"

"No," Rusty said. "You made me a self-inflicted wound. And I'm tired of it!" He stomped the heap's face. "Tired, tired, tired!"

The heap slid down the hole with a wet crunch as a fat rat, red as a bleeding pumpkin, burst from its chest. Rusty screamed, stumbled and slipped, ankle snapping like year-old breadsticks. The rat clawed its way up his thick flannel shirt, smelling worse than a busted toilet.

Teeth tore a hole above his heart. Rusty slapped the rat away and gasped. The bloated vermin jogged into the darkness. "Fat assed shit! I can hear your thighs rubbing to bloody shreds from here!"

"Ha!"

Blood stained through the flannel onto his hand. "Who the hell is there?"

Dawn's soft light revealed a single smile. A woman in the last row, all dressed up, looking like she just stepped in from the—

"Big Time," Rusty whispered.

"Love the act," said Kidder Price, walking to the stage, coffee mug in one hand and briefcase in the other, bags under her eyes dark as her lipstick. "Fresher than fresh. Lean and mean and nasty. Going thin

with a fat sidekick, I never saw it coming. Bravo.” She clapped once.

“Please,” Rusty said, gripping his chest. “I’m hurt.”

She tapped the stage. “Lucky for you, a medical plan comes with the contract. Sign here, then we’ll get you right as rain. Better get your buddy to sign, too. Can’t imagine you doing this act solo now.” She slapped the contract down and Rusty signed with his bloody digit.

Rusty gasped as she called paramedics on her cell. Blood seeped through the paper she’d left. The seats were empty, but from the hat he heard a mock-version of his stage voice. “If that’s your heart, where’s the black hole?”

Rusty bit his lip to stifle the bitter tears. “Shut the hell up and sign.”



Colonized

Scott H. Andrews

“Good Evening, and welcome to News Four at Five, the top choice for news in the San Potomac metro area. I’m Zhihai He.”

“And I’m Sharise Qin. In tonight’s First News, reaction continues to pour in from yesterday’s shocking tragedy on the West Coast. Thirty-four people dead tonight, and over two dozen recovering in local hospitals. We take you live to Ling Rodriguez, reporting from the campus of New Hunan University.”

“A college in shock here, Zhihai and Sharise. Students and faculty stunned that such a senseless massacre could happen at one of the nation’s oldest provincial universities. Flower baskets and other offerings already piling up at this makeshift memorial outside Seng Hall.

“New details tonight about the gunman who went on this shocking rampage. Philip Barrington, shown here, was a senior at New Hunan. His family immigrated to this country from England when he was six. His father, according to local records, worked two and even three jobs at a time, including washing dishes at a pub.

“Philip apparently was a loner here on campus. Earlier today, I spoke with one of his suitemates, Antonio Kim.”

“He hardly ever said anything, I mean, to anybody. It was sort of weird, around midterms, when he quit going to class and just stayed in his room. He didn’t even seem to care about making his parents proud. But we never saw any clue, that he was planning anything like

this.”

“One of Barrington’s suitemates, speaking with me earlier. Zhihai and Sharise, back to you.”

“Ling Rodriguez, live from New Hunan University. We’ll have more from Ling later on News Four at Six. Zhihai?”

“Thanks, Sharise. Amid the continuing fallout from this terrible tragedy, renewed calls today for firearm prohibition, even from provinces in the West. Chao Hong joins us now, a spokesman for the Association of Firearms History and Ownership, along with National Council-Member Liu Nan, who represents a prefecture here in the San Potomac area.

“Council-Member Nan, you support reenacting a national prohibition on firearms?”

“That’s right, Zhihai. The urban prefectures that have already ratified local prohibitions have seen a double-digit drop in violent crimes. Several Eastern provinces have prohibition measures on the ballot this spring. It’s our parental duty as a government to protect our citizens from—”

“Hold on a minute, there.”

“Mr. Hong?”

“Ms. Nan must’ve forgotten the last time our country banned guns. A major reason it failed is the historical and symbolical role they have for lots of our citizens. Our ancestors invented gunpowder. They brought it with them when they landed on the West Coast six hundred years ago, and they developed firearms to tame this new land. You can’t just strip honorable citizens of that link to our identity as a people, as a nation, because of the awful actions of one disturbed young man.”

“Well then, Mr. Hong, how do you suggest we prevent these tragedies?”

“It has to come from respect. That’s why the AFHO offers training sessions for gun owners, free of charge. If we can get back to the respect our society used to have for guns, people wouldn’t even think of using them in these awful ways.”

“Chao Hong and Council-Member Nan, I appreciate you joining us. Sharise?”

“Thank you, Zhihai. The shock of this tragedy continued to reverberate today, across the nation and around the world. At the Temple of the Nation, the Lama left offerings for the victims and their families. The Emperor of China also announced he would visit with survivors, when he arrives next month to commemorate the five-hun-

dred-fiftieth anniversary of the Zhengtong settlement in New Hunan. And the commissioner of the National Cuju League said in a statement today that all NCL guilds will wear New Hunan University's logo on their jerseys, starting with this weekend's matches. Zhihai?"

"As the students and faculty at New Hunan try to put their lives back together, Sharise, we're left to wonder what drove a student from a hardworking British immigrant family to commit such a shocking crime. I'm joined now by Sarah Wu, a local author who taught at New Hunan University for six years, and Professor Bin Yuan, Chair of the Sociology Department at San Potomac Provincial.

"Ms. Wu, based on your time at New Hunan, what might have made this young man do such a horrible thing?"

"This is the West Coast we're talking about—the oldest, most traditional area of the country. Zaocheng is a tiny, self-contained town, with an overwhelming yellow-Chinese-Buddhist majority. New Hunan's faculty by and large mirrors the town's population. I've traveled the world—I've taught in Europe and Scandinavia. In Zaocheng, I had the right color eyes and a yellow name. But as a Christian from the Northeast, I felt more estranged there than in any of those other places.

"Philip Barrington—by all accounts—was grossly alienated from the New Hunan community. Having experienced that same alienation first-hand, I can't help wondering if the homogenized community didn't intensify his feelings of isolation."

"Just a moment, Ms. Wu. Are you actually saying that the social environment at New Hunan drove this young man to kill?"

"Look at the faculty members among his victims—none of them match the Y-C-B mainstream. I suspect Philip checked the New Hunan class schedule that morning for professors who didn't fit the norm."

"Excuse me, Zhihai, but Ms. Wu's theory doesn't hold up."

"Go ahead, Professor Yuan."

"First, New Hunan is a large provincial university, with students from all around the world. The faculty might not be as diverse as Ms. Wu would prefer, but there are sizeable minority populations on the campus. Second, there's absolutely no evidence that Barrington sought out any of his victims based on race. The only thing we know for sure is that he isolated himself."

"Thank you, Professor. Ms. Wu, if this young man did feel racially isolated as you suggest, why would he target victims who were also outsiders?"

“The psychologist Frantz Fanon had a theory called ‘the colonized mind.’ I think Philip identified with the yellow male power structure he saw in the New Hunan community. I think he internalized it so deeply that, in his mind, he viewed himself as one of them. He felt he had to kill the ‘outsiders’—people who were actually more like himself—in order to become less alienated.”

“Professor Yuan, your thoughts?”

“It’s a mistake to rush to racial conclusions, Zhihai, especially when they’re based on our own personal experiences. Each of us is a member of some ethnic group. That’s always going to color our perceptions, even when we’re trying to stay objective. If evidence comes out that Barrington did feel alienated by the racial environment at New Hunan, then we can speculate about why. But without such evidence, pinning this on race is irresponsible.”

“Twenty seconds, Professor Yuan. Do you think some blame lies with New Hunan University?”

“Yes, Zhihai. But only as much as it also lies with every one of us.”

“Interesting. Why is that?”

“A young person must honor their parents, of course, but it’s also a parent’s duty to notice when children drift astray. That duty should extend into our society. Aren’t professors the parents of a classroom? And universities, the parents of our education system?”

“As a society, we failed this young man. His native culture may not stress this type of familial duty, but ours does. Those anonymous reports said that several faculty saw warning signs and tried to help him. They’re the true heroes, for acting like parents when no one else did.”

“We also failed his family. They came here to make a better life, in the most enlightened country in the world. It was our duty to provide a proper example, as our ancestors did for us. But instead we allowed all those past shootings that certainly inspired this one. We failed this young man’s family, and him, and everyone else at that university.”

“What, Professor Yuan, do you see as the remedy?”

“There’s an ancient proverb that I think is a good starting point. To put our nation in order, we must first put our own community in order. To put our community in order, we must first put our family in order. That’s been the cornerstone of our culture for over two thousand years. It all starts there.”

“Indeed, it does. Thank you, Ms. Wu and Professor Yuan.”

Sharise?”

“Coming up next, hundreds killed in mudslides near the capital of France. Plus Xiao-Li with tomorrow’s Doppler-Four Forecast, and Edward from the Score Zone with highlights from all last night’s games.

“More after this.”



The Recurrence of Orpheus

Erin Hoffman

Alexander has had the moon in the undercaves for six weeks now. He rolled it down there a week past solstice, and he won't come out again.

"Poor moon, poor moon," his croon echoes up to us through crevasses and dormant geysers, "so unloved for so many centuries, but no more. I love you, moon, I will keep you safe."

The tides have stopped. The moon does not like being in the caves; it is meant to move, and it rolls within its confines, crushing stone, sending shivers up through the world-crust, popping volcanoes like frosting from a baker's tube. We are beginning to receive complaints.

The Four Makers of our node gather in the paved square, under the night. There would be a hole in the sky if the sky itself was not a hole, emptiness that stretches above our perception.

"The moon belongs to everyone," we agree, "and we are willing to pay the price for its freedom." The journey will be long and dark; before he left, Alexander destroyed all of our keys. But what must be done is our duty, as it was for our forebears.

And so we go down.



There is no time in the undercaves, only the dark, and yet we know that days pass—days plagued by minor irritants, monsters that

once threatened us, but that we outgrew so long ago that they are but grey shadows now—before we come upon the first true obstacle: an undulating wall of blue flame rising from the stone, heatless. Cleodora, the Watcher wolf beside her, jogs along its edge, but shakes her head. The Watcher scents the moon, but cannot pass.

Iolaus clutches his staff, but Merope—tall, dark-haired, wisdom in her countenance—touches his arm. “You know what this means,” Iolaus’ face is ghastly, his eyes consumed with reflections of lurid blue. “To step beyond the gate, to where the world ends. It is an age since last the firewall was broken.”

This is coming close to breaking dialect; Merope’s silence tells him perhaps too close. But she decides to be merciful, and replies simply: “It is more dangerous to have him there.” She approaches the torrent of fire, shielding her eyes, and pounds on the rock wall with a delicate white fist. The flames shudder, and just beyond, the web that controls them begins to illuminate. At its center rests a glowing, palm-sized spider. Merope speaks to it, and it responds, voice hardly a whisper, but eager.

Merope pulls a silver compact from her skirt pocket and carefully opens it. A host of dragonflies emerge, purple, crimson, beetle-back blue, a scintillation of buzzing wings; they hover in the air, but every few moments blink sideways, a flickering cloud of insects that seem more numerous than they are.

They begin to whisper to the spider. Their words are short, and when the spider responds, the dragonfly that spoke is not where it was. Soon the cave is filled with their papery voices. The spider grows agitated, its thousand eyes darting from one empty space to the next, its responses falling on empty space, themselves never returned. Furiously it whispers, until it is doing nothing but casting futile words upon the disappearing dragonflies. The blue flames falter, descending to waist height, then knee, then ankle.

We step across them. The spider is beginning to tremble. Merope takes pity on it and calls her dragonflies back into their compact, then snaps it shut with a click of silver; the four filigreed letters on its surface glitter: *DDOS*. The spider’s sigh whispers across the flames that rise again behind us.



In another cave we find an array of plate-sized domes shimmering like soap bubbles. Underneath each transparent film lies a replica of a place, alive and moving—a conifer forest dotted with thumbnail-sized crows, a Tudor city where miniature women buy bread and goat's milk, a shining chrome acropolis poised over ancient catacombs. Our eyes want to plumb those domes tinted with shadow, filled with mist, to harvest their secrets, the fallen legacies of Makers past. But we resist.

This time, before he moves, Iolaus looks at Merope for permission, though the look is one that says he is full of hate for doing so. She nods, and he pulls a mouse with sparkling violet eyes from his pocket. Its fur is a flocked grey, the highest quality. Iolaus releases it onto the stone floor and it immediately darts for the far wall, tiny feet ticking against the rock, *tracert, tracert, tracert*. When it reaches the wall it pivots as if ricocheting, darts around the full circumference of the chamber.

At even intervals around the circular chamber, the mouse's trail lights up doorways that were not there before. There are so many—more, it seems, than the chamber should rightly be able to hold. Some are stacked upon one another, shadow within shadow.

Iolaus' mouse has completed its circuit and leaps back into his hands. He feeds it a piece of fortified corn and it returns to his pocket to devour its reward.

Cleodora is our scout, and she does not look to her sister for permission, but looses the Watcher, who forages ahead into one of the passageways with a howl. A few moments later he is there again, standing beside Cleodora, and whisks fleetly down yet another passageway. There are many passageways, and so we settle down to wait.

“We could make a new one,” Iolaus says. He has grown more agitated since we entered the dome chamber. Whenever his gaze catches on movement from within one of the little worlds he forces his eyes away, resolute. “It wouldn't take that long. I'm only saying.” It has been ages since last his dialect slipped. He checks all of his gear, one item at a time. It seems to soothe him.

There is a small noise, but the flicker beside Cleodora this time is not the Watcher. A soft glowing circle pulses beside her feet, sent by the wolf. Cleodora nods to us, leaps onto the circle, disappears.

We follow.



He is quiet, unresponsive, cradling the moon. Chiron the centaur is standing nearby, looking confused and worried; but well he might. Chiron is not real, and perhaps somewhere in his highly trained mind he realizes he should not be here, never was with Alexander, belonged in a temple kneeling, playing the wise mentor to sculptured heroes, not companion to orphans having sudden and inconvenient realizations about their true natures, about the world beyond the gate.

In the Control Room, the meeting place for so many orphans in the past, Alexander had built a shrine to Apollo. The light, if there were really light, would have been blinding. It is filled with golden icons, mirrors, sculptures of infinite beauty and exquisite detail. He must have been working on them for months.

“I’ve brought you all here to say goodbye,” Alexander says, his hands still on the moon’s chalky surface. He touches a crater, and a panel slides open, revealing the monitoring mechanisms that show the Made World still thriving, still turning. “Even when you had the moon, you did not heed the players, and yet you want her back.”

“IC,” Merope murmurs, and the word pulls a small gasp from us as one. The chamber shudders ever so slightly. “We are the gods of this place. A little decorum, Alexander.”

He has clearly painstakingly crafted his expression of pity as well; such sophistication of animation is beyond our ability, and his expertise trembles us. He humors us with dialect, which somehow makes it worse. “A place so small, Merope. So far from what the First Makers described.”

“It was not always so small for you.” And it wasn’t. Alexander had brought Merope here. There had been a romance. It passed, but its shadow remains, even here where there are no shadows. It was the shadow that reached beyond her dialect. “Once you thought you’d never leave.”

“It’s my time,” he says. “A time for all things.” The passphrase opens his defenses.

She nods.

Alexander lifts his hands from the moon, and we are upon him.

Swords fly from scabbards: spathas, enamel-hilted scimitars from the Orient; lacquered bows are drawn with strings that cry like goddess-gulls. We are the gods of this place. Merope calls forth a

swarm of deadly ruby-winged wasps that engulf him, stinging; Cleodora chants a sonorous verse that cracks the stone beneath his feet, welling up hot lava that burns the flesh from him and chars the slick oiled bone beneath. Greedily we are after his finery; what is marked with the sun god we destroy, but the silk sashes, the gilded laurels, the embossed rings and extensively ornamented torques and amulets, we have them all. Iolaus is the one to seize upon his fabled summoning-stick, a wand encrusted with tourmalines that can call forth light from the oceans.

When we are through, there is only enough of Alexander left to gather into a small pile that slides and shakes. At length it explodes in a small puff, and a tiny star shoots away from the dust, away from the ruins, away from us all.

Merope bends and takes up the lyre that Alexander left among the Apollo treasures. We are vibrant with the war-fever, and with triumph, for the walls have ceased to tremble, the moon has grown quiescent. Most importantly, we can return to the Making.



We ascend.

We know that the moon floats behind us, obedient, but we do not look back. We never look back. Merope raises the Orpheus Lyre from her perch atop Chiron's back, exhorting us to rise up and sing the dream.

And we do. We sing for the Making, and for the Devouring, which we have done and are reminded will one day come upon us. We sing for Alexander's transition, for his loss and his unknowing. We sing with letters and with numbers, and glorious things come into being where we pass. We surround ourselves with beauty, so that we may forget; we breathe deep the dialect, and push the world beyond the undercaves into distant memory.

We do not look back. To look back is to lose her forever.



Welcome to Foreign Lands

Justin Howe

It was a mistake I arrived in Protocosmo at all. My initial ticket was for Olbia Costa Smeralda, but a mishap in Atlanta had me stuck in Reykjavik. There I befriended a Belarussian captain named Daniel. The rest approaches the burlesque. Let it suffice to say Protocosmo has always attracted the lost, the lonely, and the wayward.

Protocosmo's atmosphere has a welcome if unpleasant spice, and bitter things turn sweet. The "sun", as the Earth's core is termed, never sets but simply smolders down to a cinder once every twenty-four hours. Travel between cities is carried out by bicycle helicopter or express mine-cart so as to avoid the Infeci, the terrible worms that rule the valleys of Protocosmo. Life is so linked to the Infeci that years are termed Resurrections, each month a Metamorphosis, and the days named Worm, Bull, Dust, and Egg in commemoration of their life-cycle.

As is common with all recently arrived visitors, I spent my first days in bed with fever. Natives can name these illnesses as if each were a fondly remembered melody. The Wilting Shivers, for instance, is the scent of oranges accompanied by the sensation of the world sliding suddenly to the left. My first fever was called Conquistador, a type reminiscent of a failed jungle expedition in a full suit of plate armor.

Outside my windows at counterpoint to my illness, a festive atmosphere prevailed. It was a kite-flying holiday, and the children cavorted about free from their lyceum-cages. The air beneath the smoldering sun fluttered and glittered with kites of fishbone and multi-colored streamers. Every now and then a spark would set a kite aflame,

a sight welcomed by an eager cheer. The trick was to pilot the burning craft through the pockets of noxious vapor about the core and set the chemicals alight so that they burned with brief multicolored radiance. I could hardly summon the enthusiasm necessary to enjoy the spectacle, despite the attentiveness my landlady showed in administering to my health.

A native born Protocosmotic, she wore on this occasion a brown blazer atop a gray hooded djeleba with a blue hand-knit scarf about her head. She had a penchant for Ms. Marple mysteries and a tic about her eyes that made her irises vibrate, as if the act of focusing held the entire reservoir of her concentration. She brought me a lemon ice and listened to the recitation of my symptoms.

“It’s time you tried Infeci,” she said.

My landlady motioned me to follow, and we went to her chambers. She bade me sit in the kitchen while she prepared her tincture. The rattle of the spoon played ten-pins upon my occipital lobes, and I swore I heard the drums of cannibals in the distance. Finally, she returned from the cupboard with the glass.

“Drink it down,” she said. “While it’s hot.”

Sick and weary, I did as commanded. The libation proved temperate, flavored with lemon juice and coffee. I expected to retch, but the opposite occurred. My thirst slackened while my fever slipped away. When the glass stood empty upon the table, I could hardly keep myself from staring at it.

The taste no longer solely resided upon my tongue but suffused my body, pungent yet clarifying. The very air about me had been stripped of all impurities.

“That’s Infeci?” I said in disbelief. My landlady, that radiant angel in tattered djeleba, smiled and shook her head.

“That was only Infeci powder. When you get well you should find yourself the real thing.”

Just then another shout came from outside. The two of us went to the window to see a kite trailing green and yellow sparks across the sky. Capering slightly, I ushered my savior out of the apartment. We followed the sound of music uphill, my fever forgotten and my landlady’s hand benignly pressed upon mine. Beneath the cinder of the smoldering sun, we must have danced ninety-nine times.



Upon recovering my health, I decided to explore more of Protocosmo and hired a bicycle helicopter. My pedaler, a lean man covered with wiry yellow hair scorched down in places to pink freckled flesh, focused on the beacons ahead of us. Our journey was at night, lest the canopy of the craft catch fire by the proximity of the sun. Yet I might have reached out and lit my cigarillo off the smoldering cinder. “What do you know of the Infeci?” I asked him.

“Had a touch of fever, did you?” he said, his face aglow with the light of our lamps. “Was it Clora’s Drift or The Dewy Ague? Did it have spiders, snakes, and creepy-crawlies?” He clucked his tongue and shook his head. “I can tell you about the Infeci. I was a tileman myself, saw them up close, worked the hook, and pushed them into the glass pits.”

We descended into a valley. The mesas in the distance sat upon the curved horizon like tilted pyramids. Patches of shadow covered the floor, dense in spots amid the ashen gloom. He eased back on the pedal, and our craft tilted. The maneuver afforded me a view of a pit. Our lights barely penetrated into the darkness. I saw nothing.

“Those are simple fissures—cracks in the Earth’s crust. All the rot from the surface collects in them. Infeci eat the stuff and grow. Might take a metamorphosis or two. Pretty soon there’s no room in the pits, only Infeci, full of poison and going mad. They tear each other apart, but that doesn’t kill them. One Infeci split in two becomes two Infeci.”

“But there must be some way to kill them,” I said. “If they grow that way, they would take over all of Protocosmo.”

“You have to starve them. Lure them to a hole lined with fused sand. The big ones kill the small ones. They get crowded in so tight that the split halves get trampled into slime. It’s tough work, but we all take a turn doing it.

“These are still dormant,” my driver said. “Cleaned out. Won’t be a swarm out of these holes for some time. Most recent stampedes have been in the cities where you’re headed. Take a cart down to the floor and you should find some tile-work.”

“I would like that,” I said. Our conversation drifted to other matters. My pilot had a passion for old cartoons. He wanted to hear what had become of Betty Boop. I told him the sad state of her copyright, and in true Protocosmotic fashion he turned the news on its head.

“She’ll live forever in bootleg immortality.”



I bought my lunches from leaking refrigerated carts in the city square. I believe I might have been under the Alps. Somewhere behind the sun was my home. I wrote postcards explaining my disappearance (only slightly more difficult than explaining my decision to pursue, say, a prestigious associate's degree from an unaccredited university in a backwater country) and read pamphlets on Infeci put out by the Office of Tourism.

“The adult Infeci is a large segmented worm as tall as a golden retriever and nearly twice as long. The carapace consists of twenty to thirty interlocking plates behind a dome-shaped head faceted with a half dozen or so penny-sized eyes. The creature has ten legs, five on either side of the front fore-section, the rest of its bulk being dragged through the dirt, leaving a furrow behind it. There are neither male nor female Infeci, simply a single androgynous gender that reproduces through violence. The Infeci diet consists wholly of poison—filth that seeps down to Protocosmo from the surface world—and in this way the Infeci serves a beneficial function in our planet’s ecosystem.”

Just then a voice called my name. It was my pilot, eating his lunch at a café tent. I joined him.

“I bumped into an old friend,” he said. “A fellow I knew back when I was a tileman. He stuck with it. Told me they’ll be driving the Infeci past. Get down to the floor and volunteer. Always can use spare legs for tile work, and you’d get a chance to see the Infeci up close.”

He pointed at the pamphlet and formed a skeptical expression with his singed-pink features. “Words can’t describe it.”

Well, I would see, I said, and asked about this friend.

“Esteban’s a strange fellow, writes operas in his off moments. Heartbreak case, he gave up life on the surface and came down here. Said he wanted to retire. Strange way to retire: going toe-to-toe with Infeci.”

By the following Metamorphosis, the cafes were all a-chatter with news about the approaching stampede. Men and women lined up to volunteer, most of them only a Resurrection or two out of the

lyceum, bodies still hardened by their daily regimen of calisthenics. I joined a line and was told by a civil servant to appear the next morning at the mine-car station.

The morning was clear with light flakes of ash falling from the sky. Carts were running down to the valley floor in stages. I waited my turn while the winch of the track squealed rhythmically. The people around me conversed with one another, and I heard talk of “edges”, “hooks”, and “shields”.

Soon we were on our way down the mesa, our train zig-zagging back and forth until the broad plain of the valley came into view. Far in the distance, a white and red river stretched from mesa to mesa: the Infeci swarm. And facing this river, the Tiles.

One need only view the paintings of Paulo Ucello or read about the tactics of the Roman *testudo* to gain some concept of the Tile. Armored men and women form square formations often thirty persons thick. Each carries a tower-shield that might become ceiling or wall, depending on the direction of the attack. Hooks and spears are used to prod the Infeci towards the waiting pits. The professional Tileman, or Tileteer, since both genders take up the occupation, maintains the “edge”, while the bulk of volunteers staff the middle and use their muscle as a brace against the brunt of the attack. At the center of each, a captain peers through a crooked periscope above the shoulders of the Tile and shouts out directions. From a distance, the maneuver displays a stark, formal quality like the squares of a chessboard come to life and attacking the pieces.

Our cart came to a stop at the foot of the mesa, and I asked the attendant where I could find the pilot’s former companion.

“Esteban?” she said. “He’s still in his tent, but his Tile is preparing their formation. Follow this group here.”

I fell in line again and marched where I was bidden. There was a cloud of dust forming on the horizon. Already some Tiles had stepped into action. We stopped at a supply cart and a thin quartermaster handed out spears and suits of cushioned armor. Maneuverability was key. Our job was to push and support the weight of the shields along the armored “edges”.

Tileteers marched among us as we dressed, straightening our posture and adjusting our grip upon our spears.

“Nothing to worry about. Nothing at all,” one said, pushing my shoulders back. “Step closer to your left. Your shoulders should almost be touching.”

I bumped against the young woman at my side. She was slim as an arrow and muscled like a deer, with a shaven head and a merry spark in her eyes. She showed a marked skill with the spear that made my own efforts seem as proficient as the fumbblings of a newborn.

A tileteer barked us to attention. We marched through maneuvers, repositioning ourselves as commanded. I caught onto the intricacies of the movements. Finally Esteban emerged from his tent.

A wide man with a deep, melodious voice and long hair, in one hand Esteban cradled a daschund, a dour yet noble companion I soon learned answered to the appellation of Laika. He passed her on to a waiting attendant, and without a word he donned his captain's gear, armor similar to our own except for a contrivance hooked to his chest: the casement of the periscope. Our Tile parted solemnly to afford him passage to the center, and we marched as a square, spears balanced horizontally upon each other's shoulders.

Tiles covered the valley floor. They bristled hooks and spears and made walls of themselves. The Infeci barreled into them. A multitude of tiny feet thundered in the air.

We were positioned near the edge of a pit, a sinkhole of fused sand. Our task would be to push the stream into the hole. Esteban ordered the shields mounted. Our spears formed a support that held up this ceiling. All was darkness. Chinks of light illuminated profiles and tufts of hair as the dank smell of human sweat filled the enclosed space.

"Forward," Esteban shouted, and down we marched, the weight of our numbers providing us with momentum.

"Easy, now. Steady."

I had no concept of where I was going and bumped against my fellows. It was insufferably warm, and quite like a fever of a kind. I thought of Conquistador. The scent of so many confined bodies and stale breath closed upon me. I trusted to inertia and the experience of others.

All of a sudden we came to a crashing halt, the recoil of which brought me into the back of the fellow before me. "Push!" Esteban commanded.

Groans and cries came from the edges. I leaned forward, each step taken against a weight that bore down with all the strength of irrevocable gravity.

"Push!"

We strained. A cry escaped my lips. The woman beside me

grunted. Chitinous feet echoed in the darkness like we were being pelted by sand or gravel. A multitude of flickering shadows cut the light.

“Step right,” Esteban ordered. He must have been close by me, because I heard his chanted whisper of: “Position. Position.”

The press of our opponents was constant, and for an eternity that may have been hours or only minutes we strained. Each muscle stretched taut only to remain frozen as a steady rain of impacts and blows beat against the shields. Voices groaned in the dark. My teeth clenched, and my face formed a mask of exertion. The ground shook.

“Hooks!” Esteban shouted.

From within our square, barbs sprouted: the hooks and spears. Vibrations coursed down the length of each. Once or twice a snap and cry pierced the gloom. My grip held firmly to the cross braces. Clouds of dust roiled in the shafts of flickering light. The torrent of scratching and gravel abated.

“Forward.”

We pushed. The balls of my feet dug into the earth seeking purchase. One foot hung frozen in the air, and then the weight against it lessened. The foot fell. We took another step forward. With a shout, Esteban ordered the spears set to construct a shield-wall. A cheer rose up over the din of the Infeci. Our task was done, the flood detained, and the tide averted.



A festive mood reigned in the camp. I found myself milling from group to group, a stranger embraced by our shared ordeal.

A hand grasped my shoulder. I turned and found myself face to face with Esteban. Once more his faithful Laika was with him. He asked if I was a Russian, and I told him no. He sighed and gave a toss of his head so that his curls danced lightly upon his shoulders.

“Care to eat Infeci?” he asked. His hand patted the dog’s chin, and the creature gazed lovingly up at him.

He motioned me to follow and led me back to an open-air kitchen. Fires crackled about great cauldrons of water set to boil. Smaller Infeci had been corralled to one side, guarded by hook-wielding

handlers. One at a time the beasts were taken and hefted into the pots. The air beneath their contracting carapaces escaped in a screaming hiss.

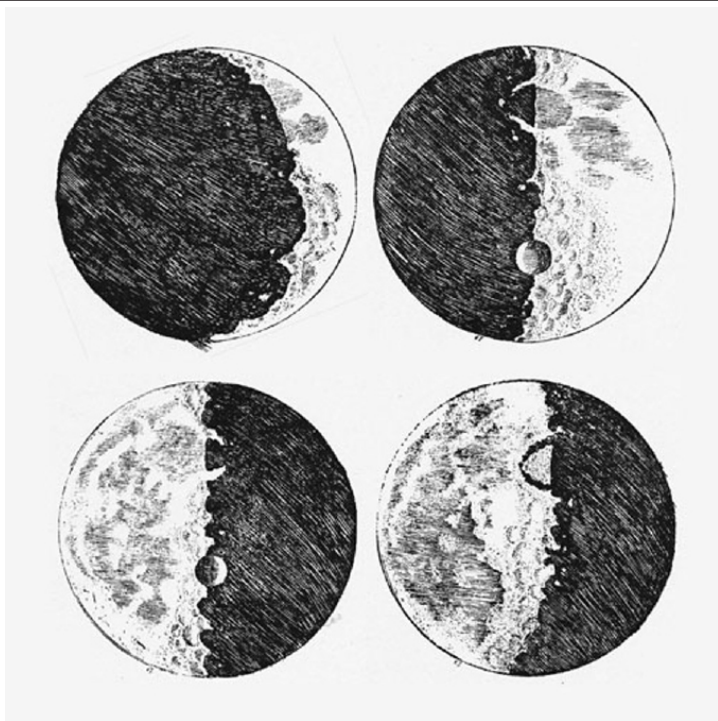
Their flesh was succulent, a shade similar to lobster but also unquantifiable. An aspect of the taste lay just beyond recognition, like a word dangling on the tip of one's tongue. It recalled an unformed idea, and with each swallow I believed I came closer to its source.

"It's the poison that gives them their healing power," Esteban said. "We gain strength and a deeper appreciation of goodness by ingesting it."

He paused and let out a thunderous sigh before walking away. His stare matched his dog's: downtrodden but free of despair. Laughter burst from the mouths of my milling companions. Nearby I saw the woman who had stood shoulder to shoulder with me in the Tile. The spark of her eye was evident as she peered in my direction over the rim of her drinking glass.

I drew in another morsel of flesh. The ashen sun cooled. Behind it lay my passage home. I doubted I would ever think of it again.





About the Contributors

Michael J. DeLuca brews beer, bakes bread, grows tomatoes, designs graphics, hugs trees, and prophesies doom, all from the comfort of his sun-drenched adirondack chair in the backyard. His writing has appeared, among other places, in *Interfictions*, *Weird Tales*, and *Clockwork Phoenix*. Read his blog at michaeljdeluca.com.



Jason S. Ridler has been a cemetery grounds-keeper, punk rock guitarist and bookstore clerk. His fiction and essays have been published in *Clarkesworld*, *Dark Recesses*, *Tales of Moreauvia*, *The Internet Review of Science Fiction*, *Fearzone.com*, and *War, Literature and the Arts*. His poem “Tourist” is forthcoming from *Chiaroscuro*. He is a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop and a Ph.D. candidate in War Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada.

Scott H. Andrews is a chemistry lecturer and a writer. His literary fiction won a \$1000 prize from the *Briar Cliff Review*, and his genre fiction won Finalist status in the Writers of the Future contest and has appeared in *Weird Tales*. He was co-Fiction Editor of *The William and Mary Review* for two years and is Editor-in-Chief of the new online fantasy magazine *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. Scott lives in Virginia with his wife, two cats, nine guitars, a dozen overflowing bookcases, and hundreds of beer bottles from all over the world.



Erin Hoffman is a freelance writer and video game designer living the life nomadic. She is a columnist for *The Escapist* and a nonfiction contributor for an assortment of magazines including *Strange Horizons* and *Gamasutra*. Her poetry has appeared in *Not One of Us*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Antimuse*, and elsewhere. Her fantasy and science fiction can be found in *Deep Magic*, *Lone Star Stories*, the *Enchanted Realms* collections, and most recently in *Clockwork Phoenix*. For more details and her recent publication credits, visit philomathgames.com.



Justin Howe's work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Spacesuits & Sixguns*. His story "Skillet and Saber" will appear in the anthology *Fast Ships, Black Sails* available from Nightshade Books in October 2008. He works for an architectural preservation company in New York City.

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