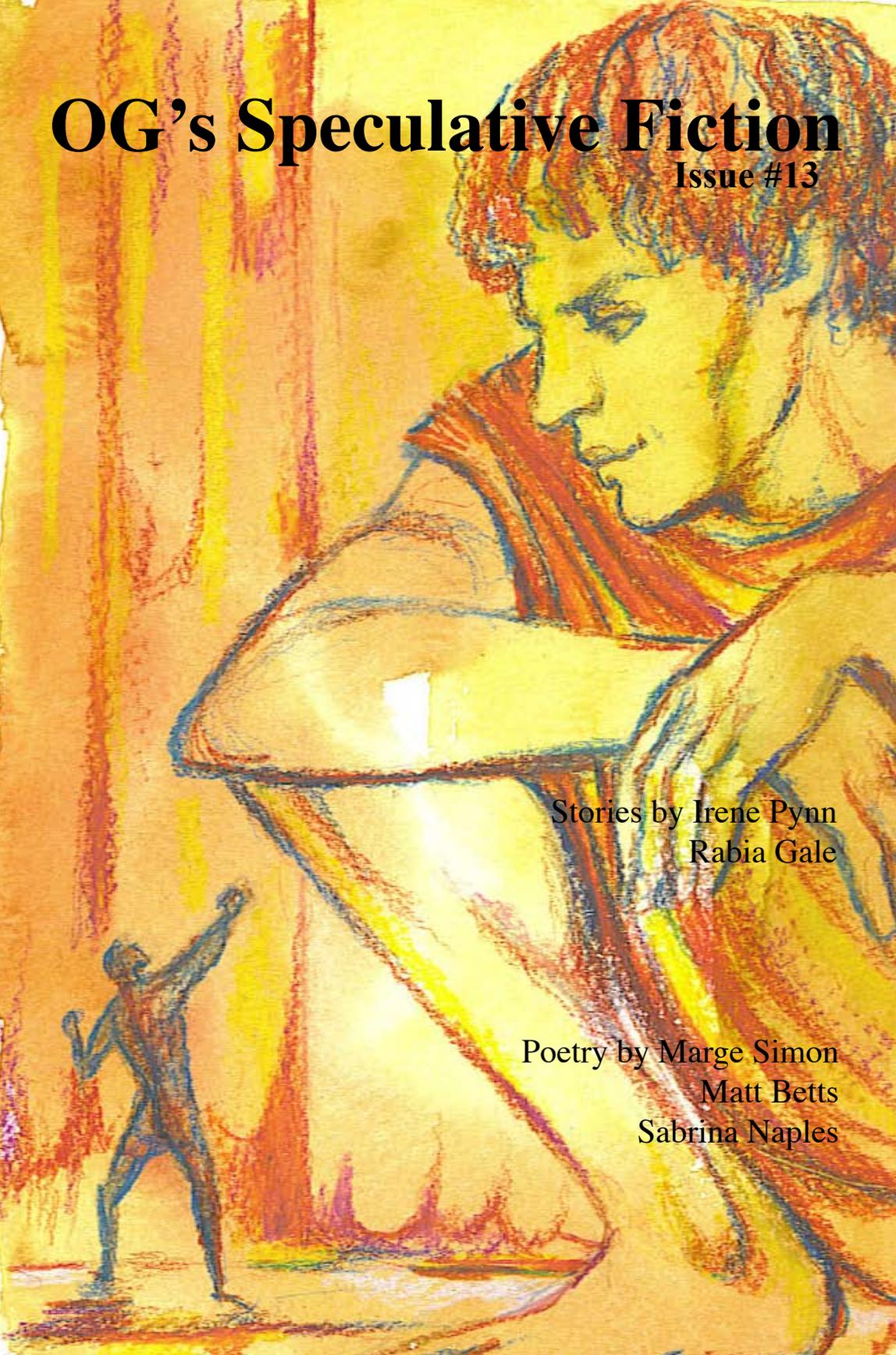


OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #13

Stories by Irene Pynn
Rabia Gale

Poetry by Marge Simon
Matt Betts
Sabrina Naples



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Issue #13

July

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Cover Art: *A Man Said to the Universe* by Marge Simon

Marge Ballif Simon free lances as a writer-poet-illustrator for genre and mainstream publications such as *From the Asylum*, *Chizine*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Aeon*, and more. She had three collections come out in 2007: *Vectors: A Week in the Death of a Planet*, *Like Birds in the Rain*, and *Night Smoke*. Nominated for a Bram Stoker award in 2004, Marge is a former president of the Science Fiction Poetry Association and now serves as editor of *Star*Line*.

This is her third cover for our magazine.

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Editor's Letter

This is the summer of the super hero.

First came Iron Man. Then came the Hulk. Will Smith came out with a different kind of super hero in Hancock. Hellboy II reddened screens. And Batman, the last role for a rising star, Heath Ledger, comes out shortly. It is indeed a summer of heroes.

I think we have all wanted be super heroes at some point in our lives, and I do not think it was because of the tights. Maybe some of us wanted the fame and adoration. But I think most of us wanted to have super powers.

I went through a range of super heroes. I started with the Flash. I wanted to run like the wind. I wanted to be able to do something so fast that no one could see me. But I quickly got bored of that super power. It was too simple. Spiderman's powers were much better. To shoot spider webs and swing from impossibly tall towers that actually looked fatter at the top than their spindly bases? That was the power I wanted.

And so it went, one super power after another, as one grew dull and others grew awesome, because as we all know, a super power can grow old.

Even now I think about it sometimes. It would be great to be able to fly. It would be great to be able to lift cars. It would be great to be super in something.

Well, I am sure that someday, I will wake up and be able to move things with my mind. Until then, I will try not to miss my opportunities to do something super human.

They are rare moments, that often pass so quickly, that they are gone before you have time to think about what you should do. I suppose it comes down to a simple choice in those moments. The choice to be a villain or hero.

Enjoy this special poetry edition.

–SC

Where Have All the Readers Gone?

by Marge Simon

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Where Have All the Readers Gone?

When he was a child,
my father had a set of books
given to him by his father,
by his father before him.

An Encyclopedia Gallactica.
printed in fifteen hundred tongues,
available on seven billion planets
excluding earth, where libraries
provide shelter for the homeless.

Books no longer fuel the fires.
We have no use for a printed word,
other than to serve as labels
for the boxes we attend.

Ideas are foreign
to the captive mind.
We play our games
with little toys refreshed
by solar batteries, in the light
from a dimming sun.

God Corp.

by Irene Pynn

Irene L. Pynn has taught everything from Creative Writing to English Literature at both the high school and college levels. She has published in Cup of Comfort for Mothers and Daughters and is forthcoming in Golden Visions magazine. Irene's interactive plays for children can be found in print at Heuer Publishing. When she is not writing or teaching, Irene loves to spend time with her family, her incredible fiancé, and Othello, Sprocket, and Weasley (cat, dog, and goldfish, respectively). More than anything, Irene likes to believe in magic. In this story, a girl comes face to face with Shakespeare and God.

Lucy peeked into the kitchen with the letter clutched to her chest. “I’m—going to meet Shakespeare,” she whispered.

Her family looked up from their breakfast, confused.

Granddaddy swallowed another morning vitamin and smiled. “What’s that you’re holding?”

“Oh, this?” Lucy strained to keep her voice from shaking. *Can it really be true? Please. Oh, please.*

The smell of burnt toast and glasses of orange juice filled the kitchen as Lucy stood completely still, locked in her most exciting moment. She could barely breathe.

Grandmom stepped forward from the sink. “Lucy, honey, what is it?”

Her cousin looked confused. Darting his glance from grandparent to grandparent, Dave said, “I can’t take the dramatics! What’re you talking about?”

Lucy opened her mouth, but her tongue felt dry. An enormous smile stretched her face so much that it hurt. “Shakespeare,” she repeated. “I—I choose Shakespeare.”

At that, Dave placed his napkin on the table and strode over to Lucy with his hand outstretched. “Give it to me, then,” he said.

She obeyed and closed her eyes. *Let someone else read it, and let it be true. If it's real, thank you, God. Please, let it be true.*

“Is this—” Dave’s voice quavered, and Lucy opened her eyes again. “Is this what I think it is?” He looked at Lucy with his jaw opened slightly, his brown eyes very round.

“Let me see, let me see,” squealed Grandmom, rushing forward to snatch

the letter from Dave.

“Oh! Honey! Lucy! Honey, did you see this? Look, look!” She nearly dropped the letter as she gave it to Granddaddy.

Finally, it was in his hands. He took his time to pull reading glasses from his robe pocket, straighten out the letter, and peruse it with overwhelming calm.

In the quiet, Lucy was sure her nervous breathing sounded asthmatic. *Let it be true. Let Granddaddy look at me with that smile. Let it be real.*

He looked up again and met Lucy’s eyes with a grin. “Well, it looks as though we have the Winner in our own kitchen.”

Celebration.

“We do! We do!”

“The Winner!”

“Lucy’s the Winner!”

“Congratulations,” said Granddaddy, beaming. “Shakespeare, you say? Have you already told them that’s who you’ll choose?”

“Not yet,” she answered. “I think the letter says I have to wait a week.”

“Yeah,” said Dave. “I heard about it on Channel Four-Two-Six-Oh. It’s so you can think it through.”

“As if I needed to think it through.”

Dave shook his head. “Shakespeare. He’s not just from the past, he’s from the *past*. Didn’t you get enough of him in Ancient Civilizations?”

“No. There isn’t enough of him.”

“Yeah, but why don’t you choose someone who actually influenced the world? Steinman? Heriteau? Or that chick who invented the under-water car?”

“Shakespeare did influence the world,” Lucy said, sticking her tongue out at her cousin.

“Why doesn’t it play video like normal letters?” Grandmom was examining the paper.

Dave scooped it up and held it over his head, where Grandmom couldn’t reach. “It’s supposed to be old-fashioned. I’m gonna read it out loud. Hold on.”

At once, everyone fell into a reverent silence. Dave cleared his throat to read the words of Lucy’s Holy Document.

Dear Lucy Granger:

Congratulations. We at the God Corporation are pleased to announce that the Divine Power has chosen you from a raffle of over sixty-trillion entrants as the single winner of the first-ever Travel-Back-in-Time-For-Your-

Hero contest.

Please note that your “Hero” may not be of any blood relation to you, as the interview you conduct should have inter-planetary relevance.

In one week’s time, you will be transported to Heaven, God Corporation Headquarters, to announce your final decision. There, preparations will be made for your visit to the past. You will be permitted to interview your designated “Hero” only, and may not interfere with history.

Once you return, you will spend the following three Earth months on tour, giving workshops and lectures to help today’s people better understand the wisdom of the past.

Please spend this week thinking carefully about your decision.

Thank you, and congratulations again on being God Corporation’s first Winner.

Sincerely,
Ethan Swope, President

* * *

Monday, Lucy felt like a true celebrity. Reporters from all over had come to question Lucy at school. They waited on campus for her transport bus to arrive, and when she climbed down to the parking lot, at least twenty-five different people with live cameras and microphones rushed toward her.

“How did you feel when you found out?”

“What?” Lucy backed up, surprised. “Um, excited.”

“Do you think you were chosen because of a strong moral or religious background?”

“I don’t know. The letter didn’t say —”

“What do you think about being the first living civilian to visit Heaven?”

“Um, it’s great, I—”

“Whom will you interview?”

“William Shakespeare.” Lucy answered this question with confidence.

“Excuse me! Excuse me! Lucy needs to get to her classes. Thank you. Move on. Thank you.” Mrs. Arpi, the principal, had pushed her way through the crowd and was tugging on Lucy’s arm.

“Sorry, Mrs. Arpi. They came at me as soon as I got off the transporter bus.”

“It’s not your fault, Lucy. Come on, now. You’ll be late to class.”

Even the school news that played across the ceiling during Homeroom

displayed Lucy's sophomore class picture with a single word beneath it: WINNER.

Lucy lay back in her Homeroom recliner for "Ceiling Stuff," the morning's announcements (or "Sleepy Stuff," as many of the students called it; the recliners were comfortable enough to doze in), and stared at her own face, wondering if she looked that bad all the time and wishing she had curled her hair that day.

She glanced around the room and saw that nobody had fallen asleep this morning. Everyone was whispering and turning to face her. Some had already heard and congratulated her before class. Others were clearly finding out for the first time.

"Lucy?"

"She's in our class."

"You didn't know?"

"The Winner?"

"The Winner."

It felt amazing to be so popular overnight. Dave's friends even asked her to sit with them during lunch.

Jason, Dave's best friend, asked the most questions. "Have you decided what person you'll go back to interview?"

"Yeah. Shakespeare."

"Shakespeare? Hmm," he said. "Why'd you pick him?"

"Lucy's a Shakespeare nut," Dave said with a grin. "A super nut. She loves Shakespeare more than anything else."

Jason nodded and took a bite of his salad. "That's cool," he said after a moment. "But..."

"But what?" Lucy didn't want to hear another speech about how Shakespeare was too ancient to have anything relevant to say. Dave had been the first to suggest it, but the rest of her friends had brought up the same thing many times since.

"Well, remember in Ancient Civilizations when we read some of the Histories, and Mr. Langton said Shakespeare maybe didn't write any of it at all?"

"So what?" Lucy did not see what Mr. Langton's speculations had to do with her interview.

Jason frowned. "I mean, what if you get there and you ask him about his plays and he's like, 'What plays?'"

Something burned in the pit of her stomach. Lucy could feel herself giving Jason an odd expression, but she could not help it. *What plays?* That was insane. Still, it made her a little sick. Either that or the soy had dis-

agreed with her today.

Mr. Burkert's class would take her mind off of things.

Lucy pulled out her handheld ClassComp and rushed to room 203 after lunch. It was almost impossible to get anywhere on time with students stopping her in the hallways to ask if she really was the Winner.

"Sorry I'm late, Mr. Burkert," she said between breaths as she slid into her seat.

"I don't make exceptions even for celebrities, Lucy," he said without looking up.

The rest of the students were working already. The board at the front of the classroom read:

- 1 Sit quietly.
- 2 Log on to the System.
- 3 Check your email for the list of sites you will be using.
- 4 Begin work on your essay: Two-Hundred Years of International and Interplanetary Peace: How the Impossible Became Possible
- 5 Work until the bell.

With a few clicks on her ClassComp, Lucy had opened her email box, but something was wrong. She must have made a mistake. Her class account, which usually displayed five or six messages a day from teachers, now held 3,002 emails.

Sitting still for a moment, she stared at the handheld screen in disbelief. How could she possibly have 3,002 messages?

She double-clicked on the most recent one.

The background was an Easter-yellow, with several pictures of fluffy bunnies bouncing all over it. An instrumental version of "Amazing Grace" blared from her speakers.

Heads turned her way again from around the classroom. She started clicking buttons and turning dials as fast as she could, trying desperately to silence the music.

"Give it to me," said Mr. Burkert, who had come to her desk. He snatched the ClassComp from her hands and pushed a button on the side. The noise ceased.

"Sorry," she muttered. "We don't use the sound very often."

He looked at her screen. "What are these messages?"

"I don't know," she said. Her cheeks burned. "They were just here when I turned it on."

Mr. Burkert thrust the ClassComp back at Lucy. Why was he angry with her? "Read it."

“What?”

“Read that one out loud.”

The fluffy bunnies bounced silently across the screen. Trying to ignore the stares from her classmates, she read the flowery, cursive font:

Dearest Lucy Granger,

The news that you are going to communicate with a writer as meaningful as William Shakespeare gives me hope. You will bring us great news from the Bard, and you will take us back to an age long-forgotten, of books on paper and live actors on stage. You are about to make the world a better place. Congratulations, and thanks, from the bottom of my heart.

Please tell Mr. Shakespeare how much I have always admired his beautiful work, especially Twelfth Night and Romeo and Juliet, which I have done my best to quote at least ten times a day ever since my hypnotist discovered that I was an actor with the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in another life. Apparently the Bard and I were very, very close, and reading his works helps me to remember all the good times we had. William was such a wonderful man.

*With Deepest Respect,
Olivia Capulet*

* * *

The rest of the week was also stressful.

News crews waited every day at her transporter bus stop, and she dodged them by hiding behind Dave.

Her email box reached capacity several times—10,000 messages—and she deleted all of them before her teachers could see.

Ceiling Stuff in Homeroom instructed all students to avoid the news crew and leave Lucy alone, which only made her feel like she had a brighter spotlight on her face. She tried to remind herself that it was just the price of being a celebrity.

I’m the Winner. God chose me for a reason. I’ve got to have faith in myself. Please help me have faith in myself.

* * *

Another letter arrived on Friday afternoon.

Dear Lucy Granger:

This is to inform you that you must report to Heaven at noon this Sunday for a medical examination and informational session.

At this session, you will be asked to name your “Hero,” so please have a final decision made.

Also, because you will be meeting God at God Corporation headquarters this Sunday, please dress appropriately.

People will undoubtedly request that you bring comments or questions to God on your visit. Remind them that you are forbidden by Holy Law to discuss Heaven with anyone outside of the compound, so there is no need for you to acquiesce to their requests.

We look forward to seeing you this Sunday at noon.

Sincerely,

Ethan Swope, President

“Wow,” Dave said after she had read the letter to him. “Wow.”

“What?”

“You’re going to Heaven. And you’ll be coming back.”

“Of course. I’m the Winner.”

“Yeah, but I’m just really thinking about it for the first time.”

Lucy did not consider this to be the most important part of being the Winner. Shakespeare had been the only thing on her mind since she entered the contest. “Why are you so shocked?”

“Well,” he said, still shaking his head as if he could not believe it. “You’ll know.”

“Know what?”

He laughed. “Where’s your brain? You’ll know! No one knows what Heaven is like, what God is like. But you will. That’s unbelievable.”

People never got a chance to meet God before they died. When you passed away, relatives shipped your body in an air-hearse to Heaven. Living people—other than staff, who obeyed strict security—had never been inside the compound.

It made Lucy a little queasy when she thought of it this way.

“Yeah,” she said. “But I can’t tell anyone, so what difference will it make?”

Dave just laughed again. Lucy knew what he meant. It would make a huge difference to her. She would know the secrets of the universe. In two days.

* * *

By Saturday, her family could not hide their excitement. Grandmom bought her seven new outfits and an automatic makeup kit, Granddaddy bought her luggage with fingerprint locks, and Dave loaned her his DigiPi voice recorder for the interview.

“Guys,” she said. “I’m only going for one day. I’ll be back Sunday night.”

“Yes, but you need to be prepared! And we don’t know how soon you’ll be meeting Shakespeare!”

“Don’t make me nervous,” Lucy said, though it was already too late. Mail had come that morning, bringing four-hundred and seventy-eight letters from Shakespeare fans and religious fanatics alike.

Although Lucy had wanted to throw them away, Grandmom had insisted they plug them in and watch each one.

Face after face appeared on their screen, wishing Lucy luck, giving her advice, and begging her to ask specific questions of either God or Shakespeare. Some warned her not to be too disappointed if Shakespeare did not meet her expectations, as if that was possible.

“People are people,” one man with a beaded forehead said in an airy voice. “Shakespeare was a person, like any one of us. He may turn out to be much less than you have imagined him to be.”

“Dave,” she said later on from her chair, watching him direct the Perfectionist-Packer.

“What? You don’t think you’ll need this feathered hat? What if you have a fancy meal?”

“No, the hat’s fine. It’s just, why do people keep telling me that I should be prepared?”

“Prepared?”

“For Shakespeare to be a dud or something.”

“Well, because what if he is? Won’t that be a disappointment?”

“Not really. What would happen if God is a dud? I mean, it’s still God, right? So what difference does it make?”

Dave looked at Lucy and laughed. “God? A dud? That’s ridiculous.”

“Well, that’s how I feel about Shakespeare. It’s ridiculous.”

* * *

Lucy did not have any stomach for breakfast Sunday morning, but her grandparents had made a feast.

“Today’s your special day,” Grandmom cooed.

“Go gettum,” Dave said, beaming.

“You’re going to do so well,” Granddaddy said in his most confident voice. “You won’t even believe it.”

Warmth rushed over her body, forcing the goose bumps down. She ate a few bites of organic oatmeal and stood up with a jerk when the doorbell rang.

“Oh, my,” Grandmom said.

“They’re here!” Dave ran over to Lucy and hugged her. “Good luck, cus’.”

Lucy looked at Granddaddy, who smiled soothingly. Her heart had started banging against her chest, and her mouth was dry. She could not speak.

They walked together to the front door and pressed the button to slide it open. There on the porch stood another man in a three-piece suit. Parked on the street behind him was a long, black car.

“A hearse?” Dave stepped in between Lucy and the man at the door. “What kind of joke is this?”

“Good morning.” The man bent slightly at the waist and stood up straight again. “I am Michael. Lucy Granger? Please come with me.”

Dave stood still until Lucy’s grandmother pushed him aside. “Come on now, Dave. This is a representative from Heaven. Be respectful.”

“Bye,” Lucy said in a tiny voice. “I’ll see you guys tonight.”

Michael picked up her luggage and carried it to the car. She followed him, sat in the passenger seat, and took a deep breath. Outside the window, her family waved goodbye.

* * *

It took three hours for the car to reach the compound, but Michael did not speak to Lucy the entire time. He sat, still as a robot, staring at the lanes ahead of them. She had just started to wish she had let Dave pack her Pocket Movie Downloader when the car began its descent.

Heaven stretched out over many acres, the building covering the majority, and fields taking up the rest. They parked in the center, where a tall garage rose like a tower out of the compound.

Lucy did not know what she had expected the inside of Heaven to look like, but it surprised her. Metallic walls, thousands of beeping machines, slowly moving people all dressed in the same three-piece suits filled the compound where one might have imagined gardens, peaceful music, and disciples in flowing robes.

No one greeted her. They watched her walk by, but never approached. She gaped, taking in sights that no living civilian had seen, as Michael led her forward without speaking.

Every room looked identical to the last. Lucy could not figure out how people found their way around, or knew which rooms they worked in. After passing through fifteen or sixteen of the beeping rooms, they came to a large, gray door.

“Press the button,” Michael said, and Lucy jumped to hear his voice again.

She reached to the left and pressed the switch. The door slid open, revealing a dark office with an enormous desk.

“Go inside.”

“Thanks, Michael,” she said, and ducked in the room, unsure of what was going on.

The door slid shut behind her, and Lucy was enveloped in darkness.

She stood still for a minute, listening to her own breath and the strange echo of the beeping from beyond the door.

“I’m sorry,” said a voice to her right. “I didn’t mean to leave you in the dark so long.”

The room lit up and showed Lucy an elderly man in a white sports coat. He smiled at her and walked to the desk.

“Please have a seat.”

Lucy sat.

“How do you like Heaven?”

“It’s different than I thought it would be,” she said, and then added, “I like it, though.”

The old man looked at her with sad, sagging eyes. “There’s no need to be polite, Miss Granger. I’m sure this is all a great shock to you. I protested when the Winner turned out to be a child, but there was nothing I could do. The letter had already gone out.”

Lucy listened, reminding herself to sit up straight and act interested.

“This must be a terrible experience for you. I heard on the news that you’re such a smart young woman.”

“Uh, thank you,” Lucy said, a little confused. She thought the people in Heaven would know whether she was smart without listening to the news.

“You probably have a number of questions, and I’m glad to answer them as long as you understand that you will not be permitted to repeat anything outside of Heaven. That is considered a crime which warrants capital punishment not only for you, but for anyone who hears our secrets.”

Lucy gulped and thought carefully. “If you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to ask

about my trip first, before I get to more.. universal questions.” That sounded intelligent.

“Makes all the sense in the world. Shoot.”

“When will I have my medical examination?”

“You already have, on your way to my office. The machines evaluated your vitals and have determined that you are in excellent health.”

“Oh,” she said, a little relieved that she would not have to visit a physician. “When will I meet Shakespeare?”

“You’ve really decided, then? Well, you’ll sign a document after our meeting stating whom you want to meet, and the time travel will take place almost instantaneously.”

Her body ran cold. She would be meeting Shakespeare tonight.

“But,” she said, “the letter didn’t tell me to prepare any questions. I didn’t know I’d be going today.”

“I’ll talk over some questions with you, and we’ll draw up an appropriate interview here.”

“Uh—”

“It will be fine. We wanted it done this way so that we could direct the interview, in a sense.”

Lucy stared at the man. They were going to tell her what she should ask him?

“Anything else?”

“When will I talk with God?”

The old man grew very still all at once and lost his smile altogether. “Then you—” he said, but stopped. He stood up and looked around, as though someone would come in to explain.

“What?”

“No. When you came through, you didn’t—”

“Didn’t what?”

“You saw, though. You saw Heaven.”

“Yes. What about it?”

“No one told you?”

“No one talked to me at all,” she said, glad to have the opportunity to mention that.

The old man sat down behind his desk again, thought for a moment, then dragged his chair around to sit next to Lucy. She shifted in her seat when he touched her arm with his cold, wrinkled hand.

“Miss Granger. Lucy,” he said in a tone one might use for a dying person. “You won’t be meeting God here.”

“I won’t?”

“No. Do you know who I am?”

She lowered her eyes, ashamed to admit it when this man had to be someone important. “No, sir. I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“My name is Ethan Swope. You probably received letters from me, generated by our computer. Now do you know who I am?”

“You’re the President of Heaven,” Lucy said.

“Exactly. I’m the President, Lucy,” he said with a frown. “I’m all there is.”

The words did not make any sense. Why could she not meet God?

“Do you understand me?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t.”

He lowered his head and sank back into his chair, letting go of Lucy’s arm.

“Hundreds of years ago, there was pain and suffering all over the universe. Nations from the different planets fought against one another for total supremacy. Millions of religions clashed.”

Lucy stared hard at Mr. Swope. Surely he knew she had studied all of this in school.

“At the same time, technology was advancing rapidly. We were learning more and more about nature and how to manipulate it.”

“Mr. Swope,” Lucy interrupted. “I learned this in History. I already know about the Warring Times.”

“Of course you do, Lucy,” he said, but he did not stop. “Eventually, scientists from Earth found a way to see the face of God.”

“Yes, sir,” Lucy said. “And then they found God and asked Him to bring peace. So He came to live in the compound on Earth, and ever since then the universe has accepted the same religion.”

“Not exactly,” he said, still frowning. “The scientists didn’t see what the universe believes they saw.”

Lucy gaped at Mr. Swope. What he had just said was considered a terrible blasphemy. She did not know how to react.

“My dear, you’ll know before you leave. Maybe it’ll be better coming from me.”

“What do you mean?”

He took a deep breath. “The scientists looked at the face of God and saw nothing. There was no face of God because there was no God.”

Lucy trembled.

“The scientists decided that, instead of throwing the universe into total chaos over the nonexistence of God, they would fake His existence. They built this compound and hired staff to live here and carry on His illusion.”

A freezing cold crawled up her stomach.

“But it isn’t all bad, you see,” he said, turning to her with a sad dullness in his eyes. “It’s been a blessing, so to speak. We control all devices that relate to religion here at the compound. There has been interplanetary peace for two-hundred years. People feel safe and secure.”

“I have to use the restroom.” Lucy stood up. “Where is it?”

Mr. Swope did not lift his head to face her. “Lucy, I’m so sorry to tell you this—”

“I need the restroom now, please.”

“Yes, of course.” He reached over and pressed a button on his desk. A door Lucy had not noticed opened to her left, and she went inside.

She splashed water on her face and examined her makeup-stained eyes in the mirror. *There has been enough progress to kill God, but not enough to perfect mascara.*

They killed God.

That is what it amounted to. For trillions of civilians in thousands of galaxies, God existed as a lie. For Lucy, God did not even exist. He had been slaughtered right in front of her in Ethan Swope’s chilly office.

Don’t let it be true. Let this be a joke.

But there was no one to hear her prayer. Scientists had looked for God and seen nothing. They had found emptiness like the emptiness she felt in her heart.

How could she go home again? She would be returning to a world filled with people who regarded her as a prophet, when the one truth she knew would crush their worlds forever.

Damn you, Ethan Swope.

Lucy pressed the exit button and stepped back into Mr. Swope’s office, her face clean, her mind jangled.

“Miss Granger,” he said softly.

“Why do this at all?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why choose a Winner in the first place?”

“We had to. The Universal Peace Treaty calls for us to make academic use of the Time-Traveler once every 500 years. It’s a promise we made to all nations when we invented the machine.”

“Why me?”

“You were randomly selected by a computer.”

She swallowed. “And so every 500 years you’ll send a civilian back in time to do academic research?”

“Yes.”

“And every 500 years one civilian will learn the truth about Heaven, and not be able to tell anyone?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” Lucy sat down. “Give me my interview questions for Shakespeare, please.”

* * *

Lucy had not participated much in compiling the questions. She watched as Mr. Swope switched on a list of questions and pointed to the ones he thought were the most appropriate.

“Yes,” she’d said over and over. “That’s fine.”

“Alright, Lucy,” he said after fifteen minutes, extending his hand to her. “Thank you for being such an understanding first Winner.”

She took his clammy, wrinkled hand and shook it.

“Please go back outside and meet Michael. He’ll take you to the Time Traveler.”

How all occasions do inform against me And spur my dull revenge!

“Hi, Michael,” she said as the man in the suit led her away without speaking.

What is a man, If his chief good and market of his time Be but to sleep and feed?

They walked through the identical rooms, each with the same beeping and humming machines, each lined with God Corp. staff watching her in silence.

A beast, no more.

After several minutes of walking, they came to a room that looked different. It was quiet and had only one machine. The spiky, circular contraption did not beep or hum. It looked like an enormous battle mace from medieval warfare.

Wide windows on the walls of the room showed an adjacent area where men in suits stood watching.

Sure He that made us with such large discourse, Looking before and after, gave us not That capability and godlike reason To fust in us unused.

“This is the Time Traveler,” Michael said, startling Lucy again with the sound of his voice. “It won’t hurt. The men on the other side of that window will be controlling its movement. There are only two buttons for you to press: Start, to go back in time, and Stop, to return to the present. Here is a manual—please read it before the journey begins.”

Lucy took the palm screen from Michael and read.

Many things about William Shakespeare are common knowledge, but the following are ten previously unknown items that you must learn about your hero before meeting him:

1 – William Shakespeare was not

She clicked it off.

“Have you finished reading?”

“Yes. Thank you. Can we begin?”

“Step inside.”

Lucy climbed into the Time Traveler and sat down. Inside, the seat was well cushioned and very comfortable.

A voice spoke to her from an intercom inside the machine. “Please press Start when you are ready. When you are through, press Stop to come back.”

Lucy pressed Start.

I have cause, and will, and strength, and means To do’.

In an instant, she found herself looking out at the River Thames and the Globe Theatre. A thrill washed over her, and she wanted to run out to embrace the entire, dirty, ancient city.

People bustled around, not noticing the great machine she sat in. It must have been invisible to them. Dogs fought a bear nearby, cocks fought other cocks. Men and women pushed each other as they filed into the massive, beautiful Globe Theatre. Shakespeare’s true home.

Then she saw him. He looked like his paintings, only a little muddier in the rain, a little drunker. But there was no doubt. He walked to the back of the theatre, a stack of papers under his arm.

Lucy held her breath. William Shakespeare. Her hero.

She knew that man. She knew everything about him.

Examples gross as earth exhort me.

Lucy took it all in. Every sight, every sound, every smell.

Then she pressed Stop.

Poem for a Bar I May Have Frequented in My Youth On the Occasion of it Burning Down by Matt Betts

Matt Betts is a former radio personality and newsperson whose work appears in AlienSkin Magazine, Rogue Worlds, Coyote Wild Magazine, Big Ugly Review and A Thousand Faces among others. Matt leads a long-running critique group in Columbus, Ohio called the Naked Wordshop and teaches writing at area conferences.

Poem for a Bar I May Have Frequented in My Youth On the Occasion of it Burning Down

If I remember right,
the bartender was a behemoth.
Bald.
Muscular.
Horns.
Awe-inspiring.
A relief map of the Andes tattooed on his left arm.
One-to-one scale.
Swear.

Jukebox blared
Springsteen.
Screached
Off-World Jazz.
Tuesday was Twenty-Five Cent
Soylent Taco Night.

The Venusian waitress—Sandy was her name.
No, Wait.
Yeah, Sandy had a thing for me
would whisper dirty missives
in my ear

whenever I ordered
a brat combo
with a coke.
So I ordered it
at every
opportunity.

Hold on
a second.

This could be the bar
where I shot
that bounty hunter,
tackled that pick pocket,
retired the Replicant,
drank that nasty red stuff
that made my ears itch
for a week.

No.
No.

Maybe this was the bar
with those dancers
that stole my pass key
robbed the lab
and cloned the
dinosaur
that later destroyed
the garment district.

If it is true
this burnt out husk,
blackened shell
is the place of so much
youthful indiscretion
then I miss it.
I miss it
like I miss
my home planet.

Out of Shape

by Rabia Gale

Rabia Gale's work has appeared in Deep Magic and The Sword Review. Her virtual home is at www.rabiagale.com. In this story, a man learns who he really is.

Thaddeus Pudgekin, middle-aged accountant, paunchy and balding, ran for his life through the gloom of Blackburn. Sweat plastered his thinning hair to his scalp and stained the underarms of his silk suit coat. Acrid air scoured lungs, blood bludgeoned heart and brain, and skin strained against shirt. He cursed his flabby body and all the food it had ever consumed, the buckets of deep-fried eels, trays of trembling soufflés and luscious bonbons, even the two biscuits with his mid-afternoon tea.

They were all around him, slipping like shadows from crumbling archway to hidden alcove. Thaddeus sloshed through a puddle, looking for help—a pedestrian, an open door, light glinting through a shutter. But the life of Blackburn happened behind locked doors and boarded windows. He was alone in the sickly twilight.

Who were they? The City's agents? But he had always paid his own taxes on time and in full. Had he offended one of his clients?

A distant rumble and clanking raised his flagging hopes. Wheezing, Thaddeus tottered towards the tracks that ran down the middle of the street. A trolley trundled into view. Metal clanged against metal. Thaddeus flexed his knees and jumped on, almost slipping in oil, the impact jarring his ankles. He squeezed between piles of rusty cans and tin coat hangers. A sharp edge tore his sleeve.

Dark figures slid past as the trolley picked up speed. Thaddeus pumped his arm, danced a few steps and howled, the rush of escape making him heady. The trolley rumbled under a bridge; the world grew dark, roared and echoed in his ears.

Something thumped on the roof.

Thaddeus went cold, hand upraised in mid-obscene gesture. His feet locked in place.

A skein of darkness twisted, a pale face flashed, and the trolley lurched back into twilight. Thaddeus stared into eyes red and bloodthirsty, madness writhing within.

“You can run, fat one, but not forever.” The voice was raspy, with a

knife-edge of lunatic laughter. Sharpened teeth snarled at him. A dozen gold rings winked from eyebrows and ears. Thaddeus turned and looked at gray road. Trolley-clank, metal-screech, sooty air whipped into a bitter, gritty wind by the velocity.

He jumped.

The ground rose up to meet him and Thaddeus slapped it. Whoosh! went his breath. He lay stunned, tiny stones digging into his cheeks and palms. The rattle of the trolley faded into the distance. Thaddeus scrambled up, clumsy and aching.

Mad Eyes watched him. "Nice try." His pupils were flames in their flat, black irises.

Thaddeus backed away. "I don't know why you're after me, but I assure you, I have done nothing."

"Done?" Mad Eyes' smile did not reach his feral eyes. "It's not what you've done, but what you are."

Revolutionaries! Thaddeus' knees nearly gave way. "I... I'm no one important. I just keep books and count up columns and..." He groped for some way to persuade the other that he was a harmless clerk, conveniently forgetting his office suite on Bankers' Row, the five underlings in the back room, the cherry cabinets filled with black ledgers, and the leather-upholstered chairs.

"Maybe not to anyone else," said Mad Eyes, "but you're important to us." He gestured, and Thaddeus gaped as others emerged from doorways and swung down from the cables overhead. Cable Boys with their blue scarves, Trolley Lads with yellow waistcoats and tin whistles, soot-covered Smokers and sewer-smelling Smidgens, all thin to the point of emaciation, curiously soft-skinned and bloodless, and like Mad Eyes, their eyes...

They were eager and preying, feeding on his fear. They were toying with him and enjoying it, and they would continue until his pain and fear grew and grew. Something inside Thaddeus snapped and a crimson and black tide surged over him. His heart must have burst. He was surely dead...

...but the tide swept him up and took him over. A roar began deep in his belly, filled his lungs, stretched out up his throat and echoed against the sky. Scarlet washed his vision. Thaddeus put down his head and charged, blind and lumbering like a construction machine. Hands grabbed his clothes and wrapped around his neck. Thaddeus shook them off like so many insects, his fists flailing.

And then he was free, his wind-milling arms swishing through empty air. He stared stupidly at the empty street before him and heard the howls of outrage behind. He ran.

They were behind him and beside him, jumping from roof to roof, swift and silent, cutting off the mouths of streets so that he was forced into darker and narrower regions. They were corralling him, and when they were tired of their sport, he would die.

Or he could end it here. His thighs were numb, his feet leaden, his breath belabored. He could just stop and lie down. His mother would be looked after. He had set up a trust fund for her care long ago. Besides her, he had no one to mourn his end. Thaddeus slowed.

A female voice hissed from the darkness of an doorway. "Quick! This way!" Fingers wrapped around his wrist and tugged. Without hesitation, without thought, Thaddeus plunged into the midnight of the building.

His rescuer's footsteps were quick and light; his own were heavy and clumsy. Thaddeus wanted to speak and ask questions, but his lungs burned and the girl pulled him on, her nails biting into his wrist. The air was thick with the scent of dust and mold and abandonment. Shards and pebbles crunched under his feet. A weak light struggled through holes in some of the rooms, relieving the black, but the respite was temporary. Thaddeus stumbled. Something scooted across the floor and clanged into the wall.

"Quiet! We're not safe yet." From far off behind them came the sounds of footfalls.

"Rest," panted Thaddeus, pathetic and humble. "Rest." His body sagged.

"Up!" The girl dragged at him and he flinched at the fire in her voice. "Or I'll leave you for them to find, you great lump!"

A hot flush spread over his face and neck and he straightened.

She muttered something low; his ears caught "useless" and "should've left him." Thaddeus forced his feet forward.

"This way." It was a mere breath, barely stirring the silence. She dropped his hand and he heard scrabbling. Thaddeus reached out and his fingertips met stone.

"Where are you?" His voice was thin, terrified.

"Shhhh! Right in front of you, oaf!"

His fingers found and grasped the lip of a vertical crack in the wall. Her voice had come from beyond it. Choking back a sob, Thaddeus turned sideways and squeezed himself in. And stuck.

"I can't move!" Thaddeus heaved, but his belly and buttocks were too ample. He cursed those dinners at his clients' expense and strained. If he survived this, he vowed, he would be at the gymnasium every night.

"They'll be here soon," warned the girl.

"I can't!" He struggled like a landed fish. The girl pulled at him, nearly

yanking his shoulder out of his socket.

“It’s no use,” she said. “You’re too fat. No point in both of us getting caught.” Her footsteps receded.

“Don’t leave me!” Thaddeus lunged after her. Rock scraped his abdomen and back as his body came free with a pop. He took two steps and his feet found air, then crashed down onto stone. Stairs! Thaddeus rolled and hit bottom.

“Well, that’s one way of doing it.” Her voice above him was amused. He decided he hated her.

“If they make it this far, we’ll lose them in the tunnels.” A light flickered in the darkness, showing crumbling brick walls, low ceilings and slime-encrusted channels. He saw old waterways, disused and barely remembered. His rescuer was a small, slender silhouette.

“Come.” She did not offer her hand. Thaddeus used the steps to lever himself up and hobbled after her.

“I think I may have broken a rib,” he said.

She threw back over her shoulder, “Just think, it could’ve been your leg. Come on.”

And women supposed to be empathetic? Thaddeus shook his head and urged his aching fat body after her.

* * *

The girl stopped after what seemed like an age. He heard movement in the dark, a metallic clank. A door in an alcove swung open. Thaddeus followed her in and was almost bowled over by someone who came rushing to greet them.

“Irina! You’re here! You found him!” Spittle flecked Thaddeus’ cheeks and he started back. The man was short and slight, wrapped in several coats whose skirts flapped and swirled about him. The room was dim and small. The only furnishings were packing crates and battered kegs.

“Yes, Nose, I’m here. And I found a him.” The girl — Irina — fended Nose off with her left hand. Her right arm, thinner and shorter than the other, was limp by her side. She caught Thaddeus staring and her dark eyes flashed. “You wish to say something?” Her teeth bared.

His gratitude was wearing thin. “No.”

The man stood back, staring from one to the other, his head cocked and his eyes bright.

“There’s been a mistake, Nose.” Irina turned away from Thaddeus, the good shoulder shrugging dismissively. “We have the wrong one.”

Nose lunged forward and caught Thaddeus by the lapels. A strong smell of unwashed body and canal fish hit him. Thaddeus gagged and tried to pry the man's thin fingers from the fabric.

Nose's hold tightened. He pushed his face—shiny with oil, blemished with old scars, pockmarks and blackheads—into Thaddeus' and sniffed.

“No, no, I am right. He is the one.” Nose threw himself to the ground and wrapped his arms around Thaddeus' legs. “Master! You have been found! Do you remember your faithful servant?”

Irina snorted. Thaddeus gaped.

“Master, indeed!” said Irina. “Do get up, Nose, and stop groveling over that lump of blood pudding. He's no Grayfang.”

A chill went down Thaddeus' spine. That name. He had heard it before. Was it at some party hosted by the gang-lords whose books he kept? He tried to be deaf at those events, concentrating instead on the chili-stuffed eels.

“No!” Nose pressed his face against Thaddeus' knees. “Nose always knows! It is he!”

Irina snorted again. “This one's heart is about as soft as his belly.” One finger jabbed Thaddeus' abdomen. Thaddeus squawked and tried to retreat. Nose's hold was like a steel band around his legs.

“Irina.” Thaddeus appealed to the girl.

Her lips curved up mirthlessly. “Give him a good kick.”

Thaddeus' leg twitched. Nose looked up at him, his eyes shining, adoring, and the twitch disappeared. It would be like kicking a puppy.

“What's all this about? What about those men chasing me?” Thaddeus' arms sketched shadows as he gesticulated.

Irina and Nose both bared their teeth, like dogs facing a threat. “Blood-suckers,” hissed Nose, his hold loosening.

“Soul stealers,” snarled Irina. Thaddeus skipped back.

Their hatred was so strong, he could feel it. “Surely not...”

Irina turned on him, quick and violent. “Don't you think they would have killed you, and enjoyed it?”

Thaddeus shuddered, picturing Mad Eyes. “Why were they after me?”

Irina shrugged. “You were unlucky enough to be caught up in their sport.” Nose made a quick movement of denial. Irina continued. “According to Nose, because you are Grayfang. Are you?” She sounded tired.

“No.” I am Thaddeus Pudgekin of Banker's Row, formerly of Muckletown. Not that he was proud of his Muckletown roots. If it were not for his mother, he would have happily forgotten its crumbling brickwork and soot-blackened houses.

“I thought not.” Irina’s face softened. “Grayfang was a king among us, and even as a man he would be a prince among princes. Not...” She made a curt gesture at Thaddeus.

“He can be again,” said Nose.

“Maybe I can be of some assistance in finding him? I know many people, and a prince ought to be easy enough to uncover.” He would do anything to get out of here, return to the whisper-quiet leather and goose-down-comforter atmosphere of his rooms.

Irina laughed. “You would find one of the People of the Forest?”

“The forest?” A fresh wave of horror loomed over Thaddeus. “People outside the walls?” They were mad. And dangerous. He shuffled back another step.

“Yes!” Irina’s eyes shone. “The people, swift and sleek under the silver moon and the black sky. The blood within hot and willing, the blood without hot and calling. The chase in the snow, ice rimming coats, breath turning to vapor, the taste of live flesh in the mouth.” There was savagery in her voice, and yearning. A lightning bolt seemed to rip through Thaddeus’ skull; he felt sick, nauseous.

He pressed against the door as if he wanted to sink through it. “What are you?” Their eyes so keen and gleaming, their expressions so wild, they were alike, the girl and the odd man.

“The shape-shifters,” said Irina, her voice low and ecstatic. “We are the werewolves, the sworn enemies of the bloodsuckers, the vampires who feast on the rot of the cities of men.”

Blood hammered in his ears, calling out a warning. His hands fumbled with a handle; the door swung open. Thaddeus sprang out of the room and ran.

* * *

“Oh, Mr. Pudgekin!” trilled the nurse on duty. Her smile was too wide, showing large teeth. “I thought we wouldn’t see you today!” Her false eyelashes flickered at his disheveled appearance.

What was her name? Marge? Mary? The nurse turned towards the old lady sitting and staring out the window and cooed, “Look who’s here, Mrs. Pudgekin!”

The lady, a tiny porcelain doll of a woman, did not turn her head. Her weary words drifted like a sigh across the room. “It’s Miss Plum, Marilyn.”

“Of course, of course!” cried Marilyn. She rolled her big dark eyes at

Thaddeus and leaned close in a confiding manner. He nearly gagged at the strong scent of her perfume. Had she bathed in the stuff?

“She’s reliving her past, poor thing. Her memory’s gone back to her girlhood. It happens to those of her age.” Marilyn patted Thaddeus’ arm. Her touch was too warm, burning through the fabric of his coat and shirt. “I’ll leave you two now.” Her starched uniform crackled as she left.

Thaddeus sagged. His thighs ached, his trousers were wet to the knees and his neckcloth had vanished into the muck of the underworld. How he had managed to get out of that maze, he did not know. But now that he was above ground and back in the safety of the Upper City, he would make it a point to stay here. No more walking about the streets. He would use the covered walkways and the guarded tunnels like the everyone else he knew. He was cured of his habit of walking the streets, before merely an odd quirk, now, a danger.

The moon wept silver light, crying for the lost friendship, and the stars hid their faces in sorrow. He had turned his back on them.

Thaddeus shook his head free of the sudden fancy of a sky he had never seen and advanced into the room. His armchair and a glass of port awaited him at home, but he needed to recapture his Muckletown roots, reassure himself of who he was.

“Mother.” Thaddeus sank down onto a chair.

She did not move. The skin of her face was fine and translucent, her expression both severe and tranquil. Her wrists were so delicate, her fingers so small.

Beside her, he had always felt like an overgrown carter’s boy.

“I may not be here tomorrow.” Where had that come from? Images—memories?—swirled in his head. The moon, the wind, landscapes bare of streets and buildings. He shook them away. “That girl, Marilyn. Do you like her?”

Mrs. Pudgekin stirred. “She talks a lot, but she has a good heart. I wonder..” Factory chimneys belched red sparks behind the darkened buildings seen through the window.

“Yes?”

“I wonder what happened to my house?” That, again. She brought it up every visit, without fail. “Papa and I lived there so happily. The boys would come courting, but I never wanted any of them. It would’ve meant leaving the house and the garden. We had one of the last gardens in the city, you know. It was small, but things grew. How they grew!”

“You lived there for a long time, Mother.” Thaddeus took one blue-veined hand in his. “With Grandfather, then Father, and with me.” A phan-

tom wind touched the back of his neck with chill fingers.

“I don’t remember that,” she said. “I remember the lavender bushes and the kitchen ceiling stained with smoke and the boarders leaving their shoes all over the front hallway.” She did not look at him. She never looked at him. Her mental state was fragile, the doctors said. She had never recovered from that night. Thaddeus bit back his frustration.

It was late, and he was restless, in spite of the deadness of his limbs. His senses were alert; he smelled clean cotton, lavender soap and talcum powder in the room, and beyond that, the institutional smell of boiled cabbages and ammonia. Pots clanged, voices called, feet shuffled, carts creaked, and the walls closed in.

Thaddeus surged to his feet. “Good bye, Mother.” He bent to kiss her papery cheek.

She did look at him then, her eyes bright and sad. “Good bye. You’ve been a good boy to me, even though you’re no kin.”

Thaddeus forced a smile. “I know my duty, Mother.” He turned away.

At the door, he heard her murmur, “They always called me Miss Plum.” He did not look back.

* * *

Thaddeus hesitated at the foot of the stairs. Two flights up, across three buildings, through a series of locked doors and bored guards and he would be home. On the other hand, if he went three flights down, out the door and through a tangle of streets, he would be at the house. Or what was left of it.

He had always meant to go back, someday. But he was always too busy, then too important for the neighborhood he grew up in. He remembered the house vaguely, as a creaking old building smelling of big dinners and old shoes. He supposed he had run around in the little garden his mother spoke of, with the boundless energy of young boys, and played with the other urchins who inhabited the neighborhood. He supposed he had tracked mud all over the freshly-scrubbed kitchen floor and been scolded for it. He had memories of...

Running, yes, but there was a bitter wind wailing. He was not cold, no, he was hot and his blood burned and his speed was a song in the night.

Thaddeus put one foot on the downward stairs, then another. Regret was already coiling around his guts, but the need to know was sharper, like a knife pressed against his throat. As the low plaster ceiling gave way to indeterminate twilight, a small panicky voice scolded him for his carelessness,

reminded him of the events of the day, of Mad Eyes and scary Irina and bizarre Nose still prowling the streets.

* * *

The house was sandwiched between two taller buildings, a black husk, sagging in the middle, shuttered windows blank and staring. Like a corpse.

His mother had never liked shutters.

Thaddeus stood across the street, willing for some memory to ignite. He thought it was nighttime. It was hard to tell with the eternal smog reflecting the yellowish light of gas lamps and the fiery belches of the factories. The movement of sun and moon and stars did not matter in Blackburn.

A door opened nearby, throwing a square of orange light onto the pavement for a brief moment to eject a reeling figure. Snatches of raucous song, the tired complaints of an accordion and the stench of sweat and beer assaulted him before the door banged shut.

The figure, muffled in hat and scarf against the acrid air, caught Thaddeus' arm to keep from falling. " 'Ullo, mate! What ye doin' out 'ere?"

"Just looking." Thaddeus' voice could have come straight from an ice house.

"Beggin' yer pardon, guv'nor." The man jumped back as if stung, and tugged at his cap. He started to sidle away from the quality gent, but Thaddeus stopped him with a lift of his hand.

"What can you tell me about that house?"

"The ol' Plum place?" The man followed his stare. "Not much, guv'nor. The li'l lady, she were an ornery one. Lived there all 'er life, and spanked any young'un who trod on 'er cabbages. Then the fire came, and she just up and left. They say she's in some fancy hospice now. Me, I think she's in the po'r 'ouse." He nodded his head sagely.

"What about the son?"

"Son? Light love ye, guv, she didn't have a son. Wouldn't take any man. Too good for any who came courtin'. She kept boarders, and there was one when the fire happened. A no-good one, if ye ask me. Lean fella, with a wild look in 'is eye. Wouldn't be surprised if 'e had sommit to do wi' the fire. What be yer concern, guv'nor?"

Thaddeus felt the keen gaze from under the man's hat searing his skin.

"I. I. have a mind to buy the place. To fix it up, rent it out, that sort of thing."

"Do ye now?" Thaddeus recalled belatedly that the commonfolk had no love of landlords. "If ye're done wi' the askin', I'll be off." He did not wait

for a response.

“Wait!” The man slowed. Deference to the gentry ran bone-deep still.

“The boarder,” said Thaddeus. “What was his name?”

The other sniffed. “Wha’ ‘is real name was, I don’ know. But ‘e called ‘is self Mr. Gray.”

* * *

Thaddeus rambled in the alleyways, not seeing, not heeding. Cats pressed against brick walls watched him out of lamp-light eyes; mice skittered past his toes. A faint scrabbling pinpricked his ears. He stopped.

“Come out, Nose. I know you’re there.”

The thin comical figure materialized out of the shadowed alley. Puppy eyes, droopy shoulders, like an affectionate dog caught piddling on the carpet. “Nose knows,” he said. “He knows, no matter what Irina says. And,” the look was sidelong, shrewd, “Master knows, too.”

Thaddeus hunched. “I’m fat! I can’t be some.. some lycanthrope! And maybe that man didn’t know about me. Maybe I ran away from home and apprenticed myself to an accountant and came back all grown up, after the fire.”

Nose said nothing—or rather his eyes said it all. Was there pity in his look?

Thaddeus went on, the words pouring out of him. “But why can’t I remember? Why can’t I remember anything before my clerkship, before that miserable little boarding room at Madam Grudger’s where all of us slaveys lived? And yet.. and yet.. why does the moon draw me when I’ve never seen her face in this thrice-nighted city? She knows me, and I know her.”

The other’s silence was a void, drawing the words out of Thaddeus. “I must’ve known the moon from an earlier time, the time I don’t remember. Maybe I was this blackguard Gray, maybe I was a pirate or a smuggler or a train-robber. A lycanthrope! No such thing.”

“You see,” said Nose. “You hear. You smell. You know even Nose is watching you, and Nose is quieter than a mouse.”

Thaddeus looked about him. Yes, the darkness seemed to have taken on a hundred nuances, a thousand new hues. And the slight stirrings of the air brought scents subtly different from each other to his nose. And his ears—he could hear the pitter patter of an insect here, the grating snore of a man several buildings over, the growl of a..

“Irina!” Nose shot away, coats flapping and smacking his ankles. Thaddeus groaned and followed.

If he were really a lycanthrope, he thought as Nose outdistanced him, he would be able to change to a form more useful for running. Instead, he just got sweatier and more tired and his bones jarred with every step. He put his head down as though he were charging against the very air.

Concrete turned to gravel turned to rubble under his feet. He stumbled over a sly stone, and fell on hands and knees.

Laughter. He looked up. Oh, the dickens! Mad Eyes and his crew stared at him with their mad mocking eyes. Irina, small and defiant, was backed against a wall. Nose crouched beside her, every hair on his head raised.

“Here he is, the hero! The Great Grayfang, reduced to a tub of lard with no hair,” one of them mocked. A wave of shame surged over Thaddeus. He took in a breath and gagged. They smelled sickly sweet, like rotten fruit, coppery on his lips.

“Take the others first,” said Mad Eyes. “He,” with a contemptuous flick, “won’t be going anywhere.”

They turned as one to Irina and Nose. Irina’s face was granite, her chin up, her good fist balled. Nose shifted, squirmed, whimpered and lunged.

Midair, he was a blur, a writhing ball that hit one of the bloodsuckers full in the chest. There was a flurry of movement and clothes flew every which way. Out of the tangle of bodies jumped a wolf, covered in matted fur, with serviceable teeth. He flung himself at another bloodsucker. Irina threw a rock at one of her tormentors.

Thaddeus scrambled to his feet. He tried desperately to do what Nose had done. He hopped, he jiggled, he closed his eyes and tried to flick some internal switch. Arms grabbed at him, the too-sweet smell almost made his stomach turn inside out. He lashed out wildly, remembering that while he may be a tub of lard, he was a big tub of lard and his fist made satisfying contact with a nose or two. A yell escaped him, and he waded into the fray, thumping flesh, swiping bodies with a wave of an arm.

Teeth sank into his hand. Thaddeus yelped, opened his eyes.

“They’re too many.” Irina grabbed his arm. “Come on.”

Thaddeus looked at the two bloodsuckers at his feet. They were still moving, trying to get up. The rest surrounded the whirling ball of fur that was Nose.

“Nose?” he gasped.

“He’s giving us a chance to run! If we won’t take it, he’s doing it for nothing!” Irina tugged him again.

Thaddeus kicked the nearest set of ribs and staggered after her.

* * *

The smog lightened as if somewhere above it a sun had come up. Thaddeus stood in the broken mouth of an old sewer tunnel and stared out at the city wall. It stood about twenty feet high, built of earth and stone, sagging in places, growing over with tiny determined weeds. It was not the best of walls, but it was a barrier.

“They know you’re here,” said Irina, “and they will never stop hunting for you. They may fall as if dead, and the men will come and throw their bodies in the river or down deserted cellars, bury them in pauper’s graves, but they will crawl out again. They always do. Grayfang is too big a prize for them to forgo.”

“You think I am really he?” He could not bring himself to say the name.

“They think so.” Her direct look gave nothing away.

“And Nose?”

She shrugged. “Dead, probably, for your sake. But that was the duty laid on him, to bring back the great Grayfang. He was sent many years ago, before my time.”

“Why?”

“My people have missed their hero. They believe their luck left with him, and will return with him.”

“And you? Were you sent to find Grayfang?” There, he had said the name.

A small crabapple smile flickered on her face. “Oh no. I came of my own accord. I could’ve stayed with the pack, I suppose, and seen how long I’d have lasted with this.” She looked down at her paralyzed arm. “Or how long before they decided that it was useless to feed a wastling.”

Thaddeus shuddered. “They sound cruel.”

“That is the way of the outside.”

“And you’re going back?” He raised his brows.

Her smile was self-mocking. “Cruel or not, that is the way I want.”

Thaddeus looked at the wall again. “I think,” he said softly, “that I will be coming with you. If,” he flushed, “you’ll have me.”

“A cripple and a man who just might be Grayfang grown old and fat.” Her eyes glittered with laughter, but it was not malicious. “An interesting pair.”

“Irina,” he said in sudden terror, “I don’t know.. I don’t remember how to change, if I ever could...”

She shrugged. “They say the longer you spend in one shape, the more the other side fades into memory. You’ll remember, or learn again, or die.

There won't be another way." She watched him closely." Or you could stay here and never walk the streets again. Live in Banker's Row your whole life."

Banker's Row. He was so tired, all of the muscles of his body queued up to make their protests known to his sleep-deprived brain. A hot bath in lavender-scented water, a clove-spiced toddy, a long sleep in silk sheets. And then what? Live the rest of his days looking over his shoulder? Be haunted by the memories of the moon? Driven mad by scratches and rustles that only he could hear?

Thaddeus shook his head. "No. I'll come. Besides," he thought of Miss Plum, his not-mother, "I have no one here. Not friends, only underlings and clients."

"Then let's not delay any longer." Irina scrambled out of the tunnel. "Remember," she called over her shoulder, "if you can't keep up, I'll leave you behind!" Her dark hair swirled in the wind; he caught a fresh fierce scent in it.

A weary grin cracked his face. He hurried after her, careful not to look behind him.

Status Quo

by Sabrina Naples

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Status Quo

Cruelty can wear two wings.

If left unclipped, angels tend to circle, or
perch side by side on mortal made wires, iron beaks clacking,
clamping,
and clamoring for souls,
whether candy apple sweet or sour as gin-soaked grubs.

With talons sharp as judgment day,
they pin you
they rejoice, oh unhappy unfortunate.
Because
here, it is written, exist the sloppy mouthfuls that
someone
anyone
and everyone
accepts.

Decay, both inner and outer, seasons meat nicely,
drying the flavor to a one note spice.
While to swallow requires a single lift
of a divine bird's neck.

A cornfield of ignorance is harvested each year,
by pretty ladies
with feathered feet.

And day by day we goad them on without fears,
careful as always to cultivate our doom.

References

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