

Short Story

Competition 2026

**TEENS & ADULTS
SHORTLIST & WINNERS**

Teens Shortlist & Winners

(aged 12-17)

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1

The People of the Bonsai by Eloise Vaatstra

Chapter 1

Fynley hauled on the handle, bringing the bucket closer with every pull until she gave one last heave and it clanked against the windlass. Brushing her blond hair out of her face, she peered inside. The bottom of the bucket was coated with thick brown mud, and a depressingly small puddle of grimy water reflected the cloudless sky and her sunburnt, freckly face back at her. She sighed. Ever since the drought had started, the water level in the well had been getting lower and lower. She didn't know how the Tree was surviving, but somehow it was. Her thoughts were interrupted by a voice.

"Fynley!"

She turned around to see her best friend Harper running across the sun-scorched grass.

"What's up?"

"I've got bad news! The Council has decided that we all need to ration water!" Harper yelled.

"Oh no." Fynley sighed again. "Like that's going to help."

Harper skidded to a stop next to her and leaned over, her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath.

"It is! The mayor said so! Besides, everything that we can get has to go towards keeping the Tree alive." Harper looked sad.

"Yeah. And I just checked the well."

"Oh. Is it bad?"

"Empty."

They started walking back across the grass to the entrance of the Tree. Huge, twisted roots formed the entrance and slowly transitioned into a smooth trunk. Purple foliage exploded like fireworks over the trunk and, through the leaves, tiny wooden bridges and houses could be seen.

At least, that was how it had been, how Fynley remembered it up until last year. The once-purple flowers were brown and wilted now, the bark cracked, the branches brittle and easy to snap. The wooden bridges were old and broken with disuse and age. But that was how it was now, and how it had been since the drought started. There was nothing that she could do to stop it.

Chapter 2

Fynley pushed through the crowd of people, ducking under arms and elbowing her way towards the front. Finally, she reached her parents and grabbed her mum's hand. Her dad had her younger sister on his shoulders, and all of them were looking to the front, watching the mayor as he made another of his long, tedious speeches. The whole village had turned out to listen. Evidently this was an important announcement.

They were standing outside the Tree, the mayor standing on the entrance like it was a stage. The sky was soft shades of pink and lavender and pastel yellow, the sun just setting on the horizon.

Fynley listened half-heartedly to the mayor, who was blathering pompously on about some food rationing regime that hadn't worked. She spotted Harper and her mum in another part of the crowd and waved. Harper waved back.

Then suddenly, the mayor stopped talking.

The crowd went silent.

"Anyway, none of these things have worked," he said, twisting his hands together anxiously. "We've tried everything, but nothing has worked. We need a solution, and fast. Therefore, I suggest that we leave the Tree in search of a new one."

Silence.

Then the crowd erupted, yelling at the mayor, talking loudly, offering their opinions. Fynley just stood there, in shock. She had lived in the Tree her whole life. Leaving it

would be like leaving a family member to die or abandoning your best friend. She had a hot, prickling sensation behind her eyes, and desperately hoped that she wasn't going to cry in front of everybody.

"Silence! SILENCE!" the mayor was yelling now, trying to get the crowd to calm down. "This is the only way we can keep the village alive! You have to face it; we will starve if we stay! Besides, the Tree is dying and there is nothing we can do to help it. Nothing.

We leave tomorrow morning."

Chapter 3

The next morning, Fynley dragged her trunk down the steps of the entrance into the Tree. It was a gray, blustery day. The sky was covered in high clouds that were being driven along very fast. Over half the village was already huddled outside, luggage crowding the ground around them. It was almost time to leave. Some of the older members of the village had refused to leave, saying that they would never leave the Tree while they were still alive. Some had family members who stayed behind to look after them. Some stayed behind alone, regardless of the risk.

"Fynley, can you run inside and grab the bag by the door? Lila's fussing and I can't get it." Fynley's mum said, holding Lila, Fynley's little sister.

"Alright."

Fynley ran into the Tree and grabbed the bag, just as the mayor came bustling out, his attendants dragging his massive bags.

"Come along, come along, we don't want to have to leave you behind!" he said jovially, catching sight of Fynley by the door.

Fynley nodded, then watched him bustle down the steps and address the little crowd of people in front of the Tree. She rested a hand on the entrance and sighed. She could feel a throbbing noise, the sound of the Tree sending whatever water it was finding to its roots. She wanted to stay so badly that it hurt inside whenever she thought of it, which was most of the time.

"Fynley, come on, we're leaving!"

Her dad ran up the steps and grabbed her hand.

“Come on, Fyn. We need to go.”

They walked down the steps and joined the procession of people, winding their way away from the Tree. She looked back at the Tree, its flowery leaves all brown and droopy, the bark cracking and peeling away in places. It looked so sad and forlorn. A tear trickled down Fynley’s cheek, then another one, then another one. She wiped them away impatiently. Then, she felt a drop on top of her head. And another on her hand. She looked up, and got one in her eye.

It was raining. Finally.

The gardener finished watering his jacaranda bonsai. It really hadn’t done well while he was away; he should’ve gotten his neighbour to water it. He moved on to the next one, sprinkling water over the leaves, making sure it got down to the roots.

He had no idea what joy he had just caused.

2

A Man Designated Nobody

by Conner Marshall

The sound of gunshots tore throughout the slimming hallway, boots hit against the floor like a march off to war. Among the good men and women in tactical gear was, as the rest of Epsilon-11 called him, Nobody. Nobody's eyes slipped from side to side of the bloodied concrete walls, searching for them, the chaos insurgency.

He couldn't understand why they'd go deviant from the foundation, It was appalling frankly to believe such traitorous scum and once been considered valued members of staff.

Nobody was brought out his idly passing thoughts with another group of retching bangs. The two agents in front of him had their heads blown off with a single shot—Blood now on Nobody's Nozzle, sparing the wires under—the sight did not scare him, he'd died before. The perpetrators, none other than The Chaos Insurgency. Identical and Blooded stood an uncountable number of soldiers, making their Section look more like ants in comparison to the Platoon ahead, all of them branding that red dotted symbol.

The two rows of Agents ahead jerked around still standing as the Insurgency punched holes through them, pushing nobody and the other agents to the front. Making a hasty retreat, they all pushed the hallway like canned sardines, the Hostiles shooting through them like prey. Nobody soon found himself Charging down a hallway, his long power tank weighing him down. He shot behind him, hitting a hostile that had split off to chase him. His time was limited; he knew that. On the horizon was a set of stairs leading down to the Archives, a place they'd go yes, but a place Nobody knew was a dizzying and a conjunction of security checks. He grazed down without hesitation, scanning his led eyes and clearance card every so often.

After at least a dozen doors he was neckdeep in papers borderline rotting from age, their dust pouring into his breathless lungs. He reached for his radio, holding it in his non-dominant hand so he could keep his pistol readied just incase he walked in on someone out of place. His shoulder brushing against a thick protruding vanilla file, he whip around. Nobody was about to ignore it, march onwards when he spotted a photo, of what almost looked like him, same white-ish grey hair, same faceshape, but maskless, clear glassy eyes, unlike his oddly red ones. He hesitated a moment, but rationalised that it wouldn't be too long. A mere skim read on this strange mirror of him. He pried it open, he glanced around slowly, before taking out the first of many pages. A small paragraph at the top read:

Project Resurrection: DS-J-5

The R&D department was given the former research assistant DS-J-5 (known prior as Dr "Iceberg" or civilianally as Julian Gill) in 1997 as a cadaver. Researchers later had chosen DS-J for Project Resurrection due to unremarkable life, career, and lack of connections both within and outside of the SCP Foundation.

This will be the fifth attempt to reanimate DS-J, and the thirtieth attempt to reanimate a body that is no longer in rigor mortis.

His eyes darted across page after page, as the similarities between him and this "Julian Gill" grew, far out weighing their differences, to a near crushing extent. The things they documented: a successful re-animation sustained without air or blood, wires pulsating in a mask and tank, a pet project of the foundation—created from the same one too. Perhaps there was just more like him, yes, that's what it was. But soon what doubt he had was eradicated by: A copy of his professional record, dating every incident, every assignment, and his code name.

The approaching gunshots didn't seem so important. Nothing seemed that important, as his brain refused to accept his reality other than one thing: he had a name, a real one. Julian Gill. Something about that was flooring. Then—more jaringly—that his life hadn't been his own. Maybe ever. He'd never questioned it until now but this was all he knew wasn't it? This constant servitude to an organisation that didn't even think to give him a codename past Nobody, because that's what he was to them.

He suddenly felt something jagged and hot rise from a pit in his stomach he hadn't noticed until now up, through his throat and spreading throughout his body like

a plague. Anger. What had he done to deserve this? To a second chance but so he could be mutilated into this, his body felt wrong now knowing he was once complete flesh, not this mass of metal and flesh that was underqualified to be human let alone truly living. Were those failed attempts not an omen to stop? He tried to tell himself that it was just what had to be done, that this was the cost of safety, but those words echoed through his soldered skull: "due to his unremarkable life, career, and lack of connections."

They'd dubbed him unremarkable yet choose to play god with him, perhaps because of that.

He could sense the Chaos Insurgency growing near, the amount of twists and turns to where he was growing thin, even if they weren't after him. In that moment he made a rash choice. A part of him urged to pull him back, that what he was doing went against his reason for life, but an even louder part drowned it out screaming that it wasn't truly his life, Not yet at least. He stepped out into the hallway, raising his gun to the sky, shooting off a security camera.

He would be someone to them, even if he had to abandon the only world he'd known, even if it meant joining the insurgency, even if it killed him.

After all, he'd died before.



3

The Price of Forgetting by Sophia Cameron

Boots crunched down into the gravel. The rotor's whirl roared, flinging dust into the air.

"Move! Move!" someone shouted, muffled through the hum of the blades.

Zeppelin charged forward, rifle raised, scanning the fragmented landscape. Shattered concrete, twisted rebar, a small, half buried doll smiling up at him. The air wafted with heat and the scent of gunpowder, entering a sense of dread.

"Drop, I see 'em!"

"Left- building!" Zeppelin called out.

Bodies hit the dirt in quick succession. Zeppelin's finger curled around the trigger, shattering the silence with a loud crack. Bullets followed, spat out from their barrels erratically.

Ritchie broke cover, sprinting forward, his arm wound back to hurl a grenade. A flash, the crack of a rifle split through the dust. Embers raged out of the shattered window like hell. Thump, thump. Zeppelin's heartbeat filled his ears, shielding him from the piercing cry – almost. The landscape spun around him, a loud ring shrieking in his ear.

"Zepp!" Ritchie's voice groaned out, pulling him back into reality.

His feet carried him forward. Zeppelin dropped beside him, his hands plunging into the red pool of Ritchie's stomach. Blood spilled out fast. Hot. Relentless. Slipping through his fingers like oil.

"You're alright," he whispered, a lie crumbling in his throat.

Zeppelin's hands trembled. It wasn't supposed to be this much blood. It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

"I'm gonna get home, right?" Ritchie gasped out.

"Yeah, mate," Zeppelin barely choked. "I'll get you back home."

Ritchie's eyes flickered, like a lamp running out of power.

"You'll get me back home," he mumbled again, softer now.

"Zepp," he breathed. "Tell my mum-"the words dissolved, unfinished, like a sentence cut short, ink trailing off the edge of a page.

Zeppelin nodded, lips parted, but no words would come. Blood kept spilling. But now it looked darker, thicker, like ink. Ritchie's fingers slipped from his grasp. The hum of the rotor grew louder. Dust rose around them, slowly at first, then violent. Ritchie came apart in it. Not all at once. Piece by piece. Lifted. Torn. Scattered into the sky like glitter.

Zeppelin jolted awake, his chest heaving rapidly. Shadows slithered across the walls, lit by moonlight spilling through the windows like liquid silver. A cold ripple of fear snaked up his spine, stiffening his shoulders. Blankets rustled as he yanked them up to his neck. His eyes darted through the abyss of his bedroom, searching for the source of a fear he couldn't name. The room was still. Too still, too quiet. His breath came out in ragged gasps. He could feel the warmth of Ritchie's blood on his palms. He rubbed his fingers together beneath the covers, expecting to find them slick and warm. But they were dry. Cold.

His body jerked upright before he could understand why. Like something inside him was still trying to run. He lifted his hands. No blood. No stains. Just trembling. He could almost see Ritchie's eyes in the darkness, but he had to remind himself it was a lie. A wave of nausea climbed his throat, only to sink again. Zeppelin pressed a hand to his chest as it felt like it was caving in, trying to hold down panic. But the ache settled in his bones. He wasn't in the desert anymore. No bullets. No screaming. Just his bedroom and his mind. A graveyard of old memories. He was home. But the war wasn't done with him.

His eyes drifted to his nightstand. A hint of moonlight caught on the dull metal chain hanging from his lamp. Zeppelin reached for it. His fingers twirled around the cool slab of Ritchie's dog tag. The stamped letters blurred in his vision. He ran

his thumb over them slowly, as if memorizing the name could bring him back. But the tag was cold. And Ritchie was gone. Zeppelin closed his fist around it. His hand shook as he held it to his chest.

Under the bed, his other hand found the bottle without searching. The glass was cold. Familiar. The liquid whispered promises of sleep. Of forgetting. He unscrewed the cap with a soft click. The first mouthful burned, second didn't. It was the only thing that kept his mind quiet. Even if only for a while. His door creaked open, revealing the silhouette of his mother.

"You okay, Zepp?"

"Yeah."

The lie came easy this time.

She lingered in the doorway. Like she knew. She always knew.

"Try get some sleep," she said softly.

Zeppelin nodded. He waited until her footsteps faded.

Then reached for the bottle again.

A Car, a Torch, a Death

by Rhea Wilson

In Dema, there was no sky.

While that may be difficult for most people to understand- how could there be no sky? - for the brainwashed people of Dema, it was simply their reality.

It wasn't that there wasn't actually a sky. It was just that to them, it simply didn't exist. Mindless individuals stuck under the Bishop's control had no reason to look up- to them, the Bishop's towers and the tops of the city walls were where the world ended, and the closest thing they had to stars was the harsh fluorescent glow of the lights that lined the streets in even, perfectly spaced rows. They would never know what it felt like to wish upon a falling meteorite or pick out glittering constellations from the myriad of stars that lined the sky. The majority of them would never even look up at all.

Clancy was not a part of that majority.

When he'd first escaped from the city's confines, he'd been far too overtaken with adrenaline and the need to get as far away as possible as fast as possible that the thought of stopping to take in his surroundings hadn't really occurred to him. Sure, he'd glanced around at this unfamiliar new world, the sights and sounds and colours of this new land, but he'd been more focused on just running.

In a way, it was ironic that the vast beauty of Trench was only properly revealed to him when Nico, the head Bishop out of the nine, came back to get him. As he lay there on the ground with Nico's hands around this neck, that was when he saw them. The stars. Beautiful, sparkling dots that hung in the wide expanse of what he now knew to be the sky.

That was also when he saw them.

The Banditos.

At least fifty of them, standing all along the ridges that towered above Clancy and his captor. They were a thing of legend, a group whose existence no one could really confirm. There were whispers of them, dangerous outlaws who defied the city, spat in the faces of the Bishops and denounced the sacred religion that was Vialism. They wore dark outfits adorned with yellow, and despite the fact that Clancy's head jerked violently up under his touch to look, Nico did not seem to notice them. One of them, a man holding a torch, stepped forward, staring directly into his eyes, and he found himself frozen under his sharp gaze. There was something undecipherable held within his eyes...

The man nodded solemnly at him, then turned, and then they were gone. Clancy's vision went black.

The next time he escaped Dema, things were different. The man from before was waiting outside the east exit for him, like he somehow knew he'd be there. Clancy learned that he went by Torchbearer, and that he was the Bandito's leader. He gave Clancy yellow tape, and taught him that it was the colour that the Bishops could not see. The colour of rebellion.

Clancy knew that he should be scared. What he was doing went against everything that he had ever been taught. And for what? For all he knew, these people really were savages who were trying to lure him into a false sense of comfort so that they could hold him hostage and use him as leverage to get what they wanted from the Bishops. But despite all of the evidence pointing to the fact that he should be fearful, he wasn't. He looked into Torchbearer's eyes, into the faces of the Banditos sat together around the campfire, and he couldn't. All of a sudden, Clancy was sure that the stories that he had been told were just that. These were his people. Trench was his home.

"I."

His voice was cut off by the unmistakable pressure of hands around his windpipe. Clancy choked, his own hands going up to his neck, fingers clawing at his throat as he tried desperately to escape the grip that he knew to be Nico's.

His vision went black.



They let him write, at least, but none of it was real. Not really. It was all a big song and dance, literally, and Clancy was the puppet that the Bishops used to spread their propaganda. The one they used to foster a fake air of happiness and content, to make it seem like everything in Dema was all fine and dandy and perfect so that the spark of rebellion he had ignited in the citizens with his previous escape would be swiftly extinguished by his own hand.

He hated it.

He still performed his little show for them, partly because he had to and partly because it at least meant that he could keep writing, but he hated it. The glittering stage lights on the set of Good Day Dema reminded him of those sparkling stars, and every night he lay awake, dreaming of the day he would get to see the sky again. He wished he could drop this exhausting cheerful facade and let the citizens of Dema know that there was more than this, that it was all out there if they'd just look up. But he couldn't. He knew that the Bishops would hurt him if he tried. And so Clancy held his tongue, and dreamed of seeing the sky—of seeing Torchbearer—once more. The death of Keons, the kindest Bishop out of them all, gave him the opportunity to escape once more and make that dream a reality.

The night before the final stand, Clancy lay with Torchbearer on a hill not too far from the Bandito camp, staring up at the sky with the man who he could now not imagine his life without. The situation was almost poetic, in a way—this was it. The moment that would determine whether or not the neverending cycle of their fight against the Bishops was finally broken. And he was the key to it all. He alone was their hope, the Clancy who would finally go against his nature and make things right. The future of what could be rested upon his shoulders.

And yet, at this moment, he felt so small.

A part of him, a selfish part but a part nonetheless, wished that he could just stay here forever, perfectly content with the man he loved by his side and the stars in the sky. But he knew that he couldn't. Still, he found no motivation within himself to get up as he slipped his hand into Torchbearer's.



"Hey."

"Hey."

When he turned to look at him, Torchbearer's gaze stole Clancy's breath away the same way it had the very first time they'd met.

"You okay?"

"...fine. Just... ugh."

Clancy closed his eyes, rubbing a hand tiredly over his face.

"What if... what if I fail, Torch? What if all of this was for nothing?"

Torchbearer's brow furrowed in concern, and he rolled over, cupping Clancy's face gently with one hand.

"It won't be. This cycle has repeated so many times that I've lost count. But I can feel it, this time. I promise you, Clancy. This is it."

Under Nova Bishop Clancy, citizens learnt about the sky.

Truth or Dare

by Katy De Reus

I'm running

not fast enough

never fast enough

I can't outrun my life

but I will never end myself

I will never admit defeat

I guess I have to keep running

Why am I running?

To escape, to clear my mind from all the horrors I've seen today

running, putting everything I have into an endless sprint, running till I collapse, all for the few seconds of ignorance, freedom from the horror that surrounds me.

There's no other escape, not even sleep, if I sleep at all.

It's not working

Faster

Maybe It'll help if I blast my music

louder

faster

faster

enough

I'm wasted, exhausted

My mind empties while I focus on getting my breath back

blissful forgetfulness

it's not enough, it doesn't last

but I guess that'll have to do

I should explain.

Take a deep breath, this might be hard for you

it's hard enough for me.

especially after her.

Ok

I'm ready

First of all, the year is 3032

The sky is blue, the grass is green, and we are surrounded by animals who were nearly extinct a thousand years ago. You won your battle against climate change.

Sounds pretty good, right?

Ha.

The animals are more important than us now.

There are, according to the government, "too many humans"

because of that "necessary steps must be taken to ensure the safety of the animals we've worked so hard to protect"

Can you guess what that means?

If you guessed population control, you were right.

but you'll never guess how.

Ever played truth or dare?

Of course you have, who hasn't?

A harmless children's game. Tell a secret or execute a dare.

-I licked the dog for that.

Told my mother I didn't like the dinner she made

(I don't even remember whether that was true or a dare)-

Not so harmless anymore.

Everyone is given a choice. It only happens once each.

"Truth or dare?"

Choose truth, whatever you say will cease to be true

Think on that for a minute.

You could twist that, right?

Say something like, 'I'm hungry', and be full?

Yes

No

People have tried that.

They're not hungry anymore, that's true.

They never feel hungry, so they don't eat.

They starve to death.

Anything else you can think of, twisted to be the end of the person who says it.

Someone tried "Our government is corrupt", once.

If only that had worked. The problem with that is, though, the government decides what's truth and what isn't.

Telling a lie is against the rules of the Game.

Choose dare, you'll be dared to do something like drink hemlock tea every morning for the rest of your life.

Or worse, you'll be dared to end someone. Usually someone close, or someone who's been making trouble for the government, or trying to.

Either way, death. For you or someone else.

But wait

Maybe you could say something like "I'm not playing" or even just "No."

that's what she did

Truth or dare is life or death.

Refuse a dare, you're not playing.

If you're not playing, you don't live.

Dear Diary

by Hazel Middleton

1/3/24

I've been told to keep this journal with me and write in it as much as possible. Apparently it might help, somehow. I don't know how to feel about it, but the doctor said I have to keep it for a month.

3/3/24

I looked into the mirror. It was a pretty old thing, ornate and complexly decorated with golden carvings of angels with bows and elaborate swirls. It's graceful, in a way. My eyes scanned my reflection. I stood taller, automatically lifting a hand to fix a loose strand of raven colored hair back into place. I smiled, pearly teeth and peach pink lips grinning back at me. My fingers fell, lingering on the rough collar of my burgundy coat. I imagined Ruan, his bubbly persona and green-brown narrowed eyes. My thoughts seem stuck on him, ever since I first met him four nights ago from across that crowded room. It hadn't been dark, despite the fact that it was night. Stars shimmered brightly, littered across the sky. His smile was mesmerizing. I remember standing closer to him, smelling lavender cologne on his clothes. The scent was intoxicating. He was the start of something great, but what was the saying?

All great things must come to an end, eventually..?

19/3/24

It's early afternoon now. The day is dragging on, slow and sluggish. It's been nearly three weeks since I met him, and it's hard to believe it could have gone better. He's perfect.

21/3/24

I noticed something today.

I saw Ruan, standing across the street. He waved at me, excitement etched in every crease of his face, a huge smile spread across it like butter. I returned the smile, grinning stupidly. I saw his eyes imitating the gesture. It seemed genuine, happy.

His eyes crinkled, mine stayed blank.

Was that normal?

We walked together the rest of the way.

24/3/24

Life carried on like this for a while, us meeting up, talking, laughing. We're happy, something I didn't know I could even feel. Everything is perfect. Until it's not. I've started waking up in the middle of the night, lavender in my head and Ruan on my mind. He's there, at night. When it's dark. He enters my room with a strange face. It's getting scary. I can't tell if I'm dreaming anymore.

25/3/24

A butterfly landed on my finger today, fluttering magnificent orange and black wings at me. For a second, I smiled at it, cocking my head. So graceful, so innocent, so pure.

I crushed it with a single flick of my hand. A scowl crossed my face, dark and deep as I discarded the creature, its leg twitching violently. Someone saw me, and walked the other way, a funny expression on her face. She looked almost scared, but with something else mixed in that I couldn't quite place.

I could feel her eyes on me. I hated it when people stared.

27/3/24

I think I'm changing. People are giving me weird looks in the hallways and from across the streets. Perhaps it's because of my sunken face. I hardly sleep at all anymore, telling myself it is a solution, but the images of Ruan still play in my head, the version with soulless eyes and crooked limbs.

29/3/24

I talked to Ruan today.

'You're different, Leo. You're acting weird and I don't like it. I don't like it at all.' He'd told me, then started walking away, his eyes hadn't crinkled with a grin this time. Not even a shadow of a smile played on his face. Anger rushed through me. I wasn't the one haunting his thoughts, ambushing his every move, taunting him constantly. My fingers closed around something sharp in my pocket. A knife. I started to walk

towards him, rain falling and dripping from my slick hair to my open mouth. He looked back, as he saw me his expression changed to something resembling fear. He sped up, and so did I. We were running, and I was yelling, making no effort to conceal the blade in my hand. He turned a corner, disappearing into a building –the library– with glowing yellow lights, illuminated in a pitch

black of the night. There was not a single star to be seen. He'd locked the door, so I smashed the window with a heavy fist, crimson trickling down my knuckles.

'I know you're there. Don't hide from me, Ruan. I can feel you here!' I screamed at him, circling the small room. My eyes darted around furiously, undressing the space. The heel of my boot caught on something sharp, I reached down and picked out a shard of glass. I glimpsed myself. A frenzied expression has overtaken my face. I saw the craze in my eyes, sharp and steely. I yell at the glass before throwing it to the ground. 'Come out, now! stop looking at me. Stop it!' I spat, my voice high, panting heavily, saliva dripping from my tongue.

Stop staring, stop staring, stop staring. I hate it, I hate him. I clutched the knife with both hands, my fingers wrapping around the hilt, bringing it closer to my heaving chest and raising it in case he came out. My tongue flicked across my lips nervously. I knocked down stacks of books, sending paper and pages and ink sprawling across the carpet.

Ah hah. Caught him.

'Don't try to run away, there's nowhere to go,' I laughed at him, cowering in the corner, armoured by a table. I swung the dagger around aimlessly, stabbing at the air.

'Don't do this, you know you don't want to do this. Whatever it is you think I did to you, Leo, I promise you I didn't,' my eyes flickered at his words, my movements faltering. My vision was blurring, red and yellow and blue spots dancing behind my eyes.

'But I have too,' my voice broke. His eyes widened, mine stayed narrowed.

I swung the blade, thrusting the knife into him, the sensation of delicate layers of skin and muscle tearing engulfed me. The scent of blood tainted the air, spiraling into my lungs. I brought the knife down repeatedly, making certain that he was

dead. I looked down at his tear streaked face, his soft skin now splattered with scarlet. A tear rolled down his cheek, mingling with the blood. I closed his eyes and laid next to him, banging my hands on my head.

Stupid stupid stupid. I killed someone. I killed him. I'm an idiot for thinking this would help. Pictures flashed through my head, Ruan, but not Ruan at all. His figure was sunken, his skin grey, his neck too long and his arms skeletal. I haven't made it better. I've made it worse. I'm scared.

I'm writing this now because I need someone to know what I did. Know that the last thing I will ever do is penetrate the lethal weapon in my shaking hands down into my own, pounding heart. That the last thing I'll ever listen to is the beating fading away...

Thu-thump.....

Thu-thump....

Thu-thump.

Buck's Journey

by Ethan McErlain

Buck lives in big rocky hole. Buck wears big wildebeest rag because it is comfortable. One day Buck hear loud noise on roof of his cave.

Buck cautiously looks outside to see what is banging. Big T-rex look Buck in his eye. Oh no, T-rex dangerous. Buck has to stop it! Buck pick up Buck's whacky stick, and SMASH! SMASH! SMASH! Buck has beaten it. T-rex falls down, and Buck think he has won, but T-rex smashes Buck's cave when it fall. No! Buck has no cave now! Buck use his stick hand to move big rocks and free Bal. Bal is Buck's ter- terad- ter a dac tul. Yes, pterodactyl. Bal is pterodactyl which is kind of dinosaur.

Now that Buck has no home, he must find new one. Buck must go on big adventure to find new home!!! First, Buck goes East, to the big bright glowing thing in sky. Bal fly alongside Buck. But Buck get tired half way through so he ride on Bal's back. Flight much faster way to move. Buck see more dinosaurs on the way. He have to bash three fast-feet, seven hard-head, and one big-neck with his whacky stick. After some days of flying Buck and Bal try to rest, but T-rex surprise us at night. Buck wake up and bash it before it hurt Bal. It not die, it just run away with big red scar.

Next day Buck go out to find Lion. He love taste of lion. It juicy and tender. When he find lion, he sneak up on it and bash it on the head with whacky stick. Buck find dry sticks and light fire. He tie lion to one stick and cook it on fire. Yum yum. Buck share some lion with Bal. Bal's favourite food is mouse but lion tastes fine so Bal happy. At midday, get up and walk more.

Bal look exhausted but we must keep moving. When the big bright yellow thing was gone for long time, we find new cave! But Bal too tired to enjoy it. Buck bury Bal outside new cave and walk inside. Buck have strange feeling he never feel before. Then Buck's eyes start leaking!! Buck not like leaking eyes so he try to stop them. He try lighting them on fire. He try to wipe them off face. But they keep leaking. So Buck give up. Soon Buck's eyes stop leaking. But now Buck have burn marks on cheeks from lighting eyes on fire.

Buck is lonely so he want to steal. Buck goes out into the desert to seek people. He hear voices over a hill. Hmm... neighbours. Buck not like neighbours, so he sneak up on them at night... HE STEAL THEIR MEAT! Now Buck has free meat. Now Buck happy again. Neighbours mad, Buck has meat for next few weeks, and Buck has new cave! Very good.

One day Buck go outside cave, and find Bal's head sticking out of dirt!
Buck scream...

The Weight of Truth

by Heba Eldho

In a quiet little town in Japan, there was a sixteen-year-old girl named Yumi. Her parents owned a small shop by the river, and the thing they valued most was an old iron balance that had belonged to Yumi's grandparents. It was not fancy or new, but it meant a lot to them because it held so much of their family's history.

Yumi's days were usually spent going to school, helping out at the shop, and being with her best friend, Sakura. Sakura had a way of making life feel lighter. She laughed loudly, shared secrets with Yumi under the cherry blossom trees, and always walked home with her after school.

But that year, things started to change.

The skies turned dark, and the rain fell for days without stopping. The river kept rising until one night it overflowed. Water rushed through the town, carrying away boats, crops, and even homes. When it was all over, Yumi and her family stood in front of their ruined shop, devastated.

As if that was not painful enough, Sakura soon told Yumi something that hurt even more.

"My family... we're moving to another country," Sakura said quietly. "I'm leaving next month."

Yumi felt like her whole world had been shaken. She was losing her shop, the life she had always known, and now her best friend, too.

To help the family start over, Yumi's father decided to go to another city to find work. "I'll come back when I've earned enough money to repair the shop," he promised.

The iron balance was too heavy to take with him, so he asked their neighbour, Mrs. Nori, to keep it safe. "Of course," she said kindly. "You can trust me."

A Photo

by Kailani Kiefer

As I am walking through my rickety old house, the great, big thunderstorm makes its presence known. Each step I take makes the stairs go creak, creak, creak. I arrive at the door of the attic, and slowly push open the door. The hinges groan, for they haven't been used in ages, and I make my way inside. It is a perfect day to clean out the attic, but that is not enough to motivate me. I sigh, turn on some music, and get to work. Starting on the first box out of what seems like hundreds.

After a few hours of good work, a break for lunch sounds like a good idea. My stomach agrees. When I get back, I notice that something feels...different. Shrugging, I think nothing of it and step closer to the boxes. Just as I was about to rip open one of the boxes with my trusty box cutter. I stop. Forcing myself to turn around, my eyes land on what seems like a somewhat normal box, all square in all the right places but my heart flutters with nervous excitement. This changes my mind and I begin to cut that strangely perfect one. This box was just calling out to me, although nothing about it was any different to all the other boxes. But yet...

Riiiiiiiiip! I cut the box open and just as I was about to unfold the flaps, I felt a gust of wind hit my side. Oh no, I think. That can't be good. So just before what's inside the box can be unveiled, I get up to close the sketchy window that is always open. As I sit back down, anticipation strikes and gives me tingles through to my bones, on what's inside the plain old cardboard box.

At last! It's been opened! But what lies at the very bottom of the box, is a photograph. The photo dates back to be from around the early 1900s, and shows a smiling family. The women dressed in blouses and feathered hats and corsets and long, long skirts and men dressed in three pieces and high collars and pocket watches, while the children wore knee length dresses and sailor suits and long stockings.

Behind the happy family stood a castle, with all the roads leading up to it. But wait? How do I know that? I can see only the castle in the photograph. But then I look down, and around, and I don't see boxes or wooden floors, I see a stone path and

old timey buildings. I take small, tentative steps towards the family in the photo, and wave my hand in front of them. No reaction. I step right up really close to one of the teens and pull a face. Still no reaction. I look really hard at the teen, because something about her feels familiar, and realise she looks like my deceased great grandmother, only 80 years younger. Something clicks, and I just have the feeling of immense joy and belief that these people are my ancestors.

But before I could try and figure out who else is who, I feel like I'm being pulled back by an invisible rope, and the family, castle and roads, start to fade away.

I jerk awake, and realise I had fallen asleep. But somehow, I felt lighter, and happier, and more connected to my German family history, even though I couldn't quite remember what I dreamt about. Oh well, I could at least finish sorting out a few more boxes, then I'm going to bed. What a strange day.

This story was written with an idea prompt.

Luna and Her Secret

by Shriya Raghunandan

Hi, I'm Luna and I'm 16, and while most people see me as a shy girl, my life is anything but ordinary. I keep to myself books and Daydreams, trying to navigate the world that doesn't seem to fit me. My life is a delicate balancing of hiding and longing and a secret I guard with everything I have...

My family and I recently moved into a small town called the Whispering Pines nestled into the deep forest. My mum, Celine, said it was for a fresh start but I knew better, she was always anxious, her eyes darting around, she was constantly reminding me to "stay hidden and keep your secret." Ok back to my secret each night as the moon rose I slipped into the woods and transformed into a unicorn, with a shimmering white coat and a horn that glows like moonlight.

But by day I was Luna, a girl who avoided mirrors. At Whispering Pines High, I was the girl always buried under an oversized hoodie, I kept my hood pulled low. I was isolated, not quite fitting in with any groups at school. I didn't seek out friends because getting close to anyone could have put me in danger.

Then came Alex

He's an artist with a sketchbook and a pencil in his hand, always drawing and observing. But Alex is different, his eyes see beyond the surface and he's been curiously watching me ever since I arrived. One day when I was walking he cornered me by my locker "hey Luna I've always noticed that you are always wearing that hood, is there a reason?" I shrugged trying to be cool.

"I like it, it keeps me warm" he raises eyebrows unconvinced. "There's something more that isn't there, you are always hiding". I laughed nervously trying to deflect, "what about you? You are always drawing?". Alex flipped open the sketchbook to reveal a very detailed drawing of a unicorn.

"The other day when I was walking into the woods I saw some strange tracks in the snow, so I did a little research and I figured out maybe, just maybe there might be unicorns out there". Panic flared in my chest. My mother's voice rang in my head:

Stay hidden. I bolted down the Hallways but Alex kept following me. "Wait what if unicorns are real we don't know what's out there," I forced a smile "maybe but I wouldn't worry about it if I were you". Despite my attempts to dissuade him, Alex's curiosity didn't wane. He continued to question me, it made me feel uncomfortable.

One day I was at the park but then I saw Black SUVs begin appearing near the trailhead, 6 men and 4 women in sharp suits, the town whispers, they start knocking on doors. They weren't looking for a missing person; they were asking questions that made my blood turn to cold.

"Have you noticed any unusual lights in the woods at night?" "Have you found any animal tracks that don't match local wildlife?"

When the agents knocked on our door, my mother went pale. She stopped opening the curtains. My mother's hands shook as she bolted the door. "They're getting closer, Luna," she whispered, "we have to be extra careful now luna". I looked at her confused. "These guys are looking for magical creatures, if they find out what you are they'll capture you and use you for their own purposes." I stood there stunned "but I need to go at night, it's the only time I truly feel alive". Mum's eyes filled with tears "promise me you'll be extra careful" I nodded.

That night I snuck out as usual, but the FBI's sensors and patrols made it clear that they were looking for something. My heart raced as I navigated in the forest. I was careful to stay out of sight but in my panic I accidentally left it behind. and some of my few magical mane got stuck in the branch and the next day Alex found the magical strands of my mane. Then the next morning Alex cornered me by my locker holding the shimmering evidence. I tried to laugh it off and ran, but he followed.. "haha magic are you sure?" he nodded, his eyes were serious. "There is something about you Luna you've been acting strange lately". I panicked, "I don't know what you are talking about". Alex let out a sigh "come on Luna I'm not trying to be nosy, I just want to understand." My heart was pounding extremely fast. Trapped by his sincerity, I led him to an empty room. "I'm not like everyone else," I whispered, transforming into a unicorn before his eyes. Instead of fear, a soft smile spread across his face. "Thank you for trusting me," he said.

Revealing my true self to Alex didn't kill the fear, but I wasn't alone. With FBI agents closing in, we had to act fast. "They see you as a monster," Alex whispered as we ducked behind an oak. "We're going to make you disappear. We spent the afternoon planning. Jasper drew a map in the dirt: "They use thermal cameras. If we overload them with light, their sensors will glitch. That night, I shifted into unicorn form. While I prepped, Alex went to work, hanging the mirrors on the low branches of the pine trees and splashing the silver paint on the rocks

"Ready, Luna? Run!" he shouted.

I took off like a bolt of lightning. Every time I passed a mirror, my reflection flashed, making it look like there were ten unicorns running through the woods instead of one. Alex started clicking his big flashlights on and off, hitting the mirrors and the shiny paint. Through the trees, I heard the agents yelling. "I've got a signal! No, wait—it's everywhere! The cameras are glitching out!" I ran right toward their camp, jumped over a massive log, and flared my horn as bright as I could—one last giant flash of silver light! Then, I ducked into a dark, hidden cave Alex had found for me. The agents were totally spooked. "It's just some weird mountain lightning!" I heard one of them cry. "There's nothing here but a light show. Let's get out of here!"

The next morning, I watched from the school window as the big black SUVs drove away, leaving Whispering Pines for good. They were convinced the "magic creature" had just been a trick of the light or had run far away. Alex walked up to me at my locker and gave me a high-five. "They

think you're gone, Luna," he said with a grin. I smiled back, feeling very happy. With Alex, I was finally safe to be exactly who I was.

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(aged 18+)

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Adults Shortlist & Winners

(aged 18+)

1 Lights

by Rachel Astruc

Amy Klein can walk on water.

It's sort of her day job.

On fine days like this the ocean is so still it's like walking across glass and her bare white feet leave tiny dimples in the soft sheath of the Skein. Lace jellyfish swarm beneath her, their feathered tentacles curling up to stroke her soles; shoals of bearded parupeneus bifasciatus, the species the locals call goatfish, chase her shadow through the coral reefs. Now and then Amy sees sharks, the blade of their dorsal fins carving the water more skillfully than any ship's rudder.

She picks her way carefully along the Skein's surface, cleaning as she goes, erasing fingerprints and footprints alike. With a mop in one hand and a bucket in the other, Amy sometimes feels more like a janitor than a research student. But the view makes it more than worthwhile. Right now the Skein is set at 80-50: eighty metres deep, with fifty percent visibility—reef territory. Very soon they'll be powering north and the engineers will crank the Skein up to 300-80, but at the moment the world between her toes is all pink coral and lush fronds of seaweed and the whiskered mouths of anemones, licking food from the currents with their thin worm-tongues.

It's pretty awesome, her day job.

You can see the floating Kruger-Wei marine complex from the easternmost islands of the Seychelles, a great transparent dome like a droplet of water suspended on the surface of the Indian Ocean. It is home to one thousand researchers, engineers, students, and commercial staff—and, of course, the Skein itself, which is almost biological enough to be classed as a being in its own right.

The Skein is one kilometre wide and one kilometre long and takes up the entire ground floor of Kruger-Wei, effectively making it the world's biggest glass bottom on the world's biggest glass bottomed boat. The Skein is made of plates of interwoven plasmid—bio-engineered tissue threaded with conductive filaments that amplify light and texture. According to the engineers, using the Skein is like being

able to cut the ocean into layers, like you'd see in geological diagrams of sediment. But Amy thinks it's more like Superman's x-ray vision, except the walls here aren't solid brick-and-mortar but the liquid stratum of salt-water.

She runs her mop along the lip of one plate and onto the next. Eighty metres down, a tiny white fish—she doesn't know its name, scientific or otherwise—pokes its head out of a hole in the coral and blinks up at her, like a nosy neighbor displeased by the ruckus above. Amy waves and the fish darts away, a pale arrowhead through the weeds. Whimsically she follows it as it zigzags through the reef. Sunlight shimmers through the curved windows of Kruger-Wei and colours her skin gold. Amy spreads her arms to meet the sun and takes a deep breath, like she's doing that move her yoga teacher calls Wake Up To The World.

Amy lets the breath out, and as she does, she looks down. At her feet, and what lies between them, projected onto the Skein's soft plasmids.

Amy sees lights.

They're lights in darkness, their source too deep for the Skein to pick up at this resolution. But they're bright enough to be captured at 80:50—an entire constellation of lights that glow yellow gold, yellow green, yellow gold again. Submarine, is her first thought. Or one of the researchers taking a diving pod for a spin. But then there's something else, something pale and fleshy, something humanoid, and Amy thinks OH MY GOD, all capitals, like something you'd write ironically in an email. OH MY GOD, like For Real.

Amy doesn't say the word mermaid out loud, but she thinks it. And it makes her feel guilty on behalf of her entire profession, because a scientist who jumps to mythological conclusions at the first sign of something they don't understand is really no scientist at all. But.

But.

But the lights and the body illuminated, soft and white and supple as it flickers through the water, its head round, its arms loose. A flush of green scales. A mass of copper-gold hair. And then it's gone.

Mermaid.

Amy stays very still.

The water below resolves back into reef and shadow, harmless, ordinary. Yet she feels a tension there now in the Skein, between each plasmid plane, a tightening against the soles of her feet as if the vast lattice beneath her is drawing in, focusing.

A comms unit overhead chirps: Fifteen minutes to departure. Log anomalies.

Anomalies.

Amy looks down again.

Nothing.

Of course nothing.

She drops her mop and bucket and walks, a little too quickly, to the nearest control node at the edge of the Skein. The interface blooms to life at her touch, a translucent field of logs and readouts.

08:22 — Surface maintenance.

08:37 — Minor particulate disturbance.

08:51 —

The cursor blinks.

Amy hesitates.

Beneath her the Skein breathes against her feet and she recalls, suddenly, a cat she had as a child, the way it raised its back against her hand when she stroked it, the whole-body purr of it. She's sure the Skein has never done this before, never moved like this, never rubbed itself on her as if it were alive. Although in its own way the Skein is a living thing. A biological entity. Technically, a cyborg. Part bio-plasmid, part metal...

08:51 — Mermaid.

She can't log it. Because mermaids aren't real. And if she writes mermaid in an official log her career will be over. She will be ridiculed in every group chat, in every lab room, in every watercooler gossip session for the rest of her working life.

Below her the reef drifts, empty.

Her fingers move.

08:51 — Visual artefact at lower strata. Likely refraction anomaly.

She stares at the line for a long second before confirming it.

The entry folds into the system, neat and unremarkable. Data compresses, files away, becomes nothing.

Departure in one, the comm says.

Engines rumble as Kruger-Wei begins to move. Amy steps back onto the Skein as the plates begin their slow recalibration. The reef beneath her feet darkens as the depth setting climbs. For a moment, she thinks that's it, and whatever she saw belonged only to that precise band of light and depth. Then, far below, much deeper than before, where the Skein should show almost nothing at all... something flickers.

A single point of yellow-gold.

Amy stills.

Another light appears beside it.

Then another.

Clearer now.

Closer.

The lights rise.

The darkness opens.

And the figure resolves again. Not fragmentary this time, but whole. A body suspended in water, oriented upward.

Amy cannot move.

Beneath her feet, the Skein pulses. No longer diffuse, but precise, synchronized.

The figure lifts one pale arm.

Waving.



Reaching.

And for a second, one impossible second, Amy feels the entire surface beneath her incline, just slightly, just enough to be undeniable, as if the vast plasmid is keening toward that gesture.

Toward something like itself.

The Skein isn't just showing. It's seeking.

Amy's breath catches.

Below, the lights flare, bright as a heartbeat, and the distance between them closes.

2 **El Sonido del Cambio** by Sandra Fogliani

Miro un fondo blanco salpicado de trazos de líneas negras, rectas y curvas. Mis ojos mandan la señal al cerebro para descifrar su significado. Hago esto porque una de mis tantas ocupaciones es aprender a leer. La capacidad que tenía por descontada, que me era tan natural como el respirar, resultado de un proceso mental veloz como el aletear de un colibrí, ya no lo es. Y atisbo las salpicaduras de líneas negras sobre blanco, y me concentro, y me esfuerzo... Pero al final solo noto un garabato complejo sin pies ni cabeza.

Unos botones estilo teclado esperan pacientes que los manipule. Las instrucciones que recibí fueron simples y claras: "Aprieta el botón rojo si no entiendes lo escrito; si lo comprendes, el verde". Yo asentí con la cabeza, a ver si de esa manera me dejaban sola un rato, aunque el costo fuese encadenarme a fijar mis ojos en la pantalla que tengo al frente.

No entendí nada de lo escrito. Igual aprieto el botón verde. Al instante, un nuevo dibujo ridículo de lo que se supone son letras aparece frente a mí. Vuelvo a poner cara de concentración y disimulo observar fascinada la imagen. En realidad lo que hago es agudizar mis oídos. El susurro de las hojas mecidas por una brisa me tranquiliza. Esa sutil melodía me indica que está abierta la ventana que da hacia exterior, aquella situada en la habitación contigua. Este cuarto donde vivo no tiene ninguna, es una más bien una especie de caja hermética cuyas paredes grises se hallan desprovistas de cualquier cosa. Habitación cero estímulos, la llaman. Su objetivo es obvio: evitar que me distraiga ni un segundo de la tarea que me asignen. Pero ellos ignoran que la capacidad auditiva que poseo significa mi fuga temporal.

Bloqueo el sonido de sus conversaciones. Conozco de memoria sus comentarios acerca de mí, aunque ellos no tengan la menor idea; el fenómeno en que me he convertido, la incógnita de mi existencia, bla, bla, bla. Ya no me interesa inmiscuirme en sus hipótesis de lo que soy o pueda ser. No, para nada. Al fin y al cabo, yo soy yo, y listo.

El arrullo del menear de las hojas me ayuda a flotar fuera de aquí e imaginarme

los colores de un día de cielo despejado con alguna que otra nube vagando perezosa. No hay pájaros alrededor; se extinguieron hace tantos años que la gente ni se acuerda de ellos. Mas las plantas sobrevivieron al Cambio y si pongo mayor atención, puedo escuchar como los pétalos de unas margaritas se mueven muy muy lento. Sí, margaritas, porque cada flor tiene un sonido particular, claro está.

Aprieto el botón verde.

Las margaritas me llevan a recordar cuando niña, encerrada en el departamento refugio con mis padres durante la cúspide del Cambio. Éramos de los privilegiados que obtuvimos tal resguardo. Muchos no lo consiguieron y perecían afuera, al igual que las aves y el resto de animales, se extinguían si remedio. En el refugio podíamos subsistir hasta cien años, mientras el planeta sucumbía al Cambio. Yo lograba observar el exterior a través del periscopio de mi habitación y, por alguna razón incomprensible, un grupo de margaritas figuraba siempre en el campo de visión. Parecían eternas, nadie les había dicho que debían de morir, así que permanecieron allí, inmutables.

Aprieto el botón verde.

Seguro tengo algo de ellas; también permanecí allí, sin variar. Cuando me descubrieron, me informaron que habían pasado unos trescientos años y pico desde el inicio del Cambio. Yo los miré atónita, intentando comprender. Casi quería reírme porque debía ser una broma lo que decían, ¡si yo tenía apenas diez! Asimismo, caí en la cuenta que mi mente estaba en blanco, recordaba muy poco y menos qué había ocurrido con mis padres. Desde entonces me hacen pruebas, una tras de otra, y me someto a ellas. No conozco exactamente cuanto tiempo ha transcurrido, sin embargo, el notorio envejecimiento de quienes me estudian y su consiguiente ausencia indican que se trata de varias décadas. Además, mi cuerpo se ha transformado un tanto; su reflejo me murmura que mi niñez se ha escurrido.

Aprieto el botón verde.

Voy afuera de vez en cuando. La rutina consiste en guiarme por un corredor hasta donde se encuentran aparcados vehículos de transporte. Me apean a uno de esos que impiden ver al exterior. Me llevan a una localidad carente de construcciones, poblada de escasa vegetación. Caminamos sin toparnos con ningún ser viviente, salvo tímidas plantas que, a toda vista, se esfuerzan en existir. Nos acompaña el zumbido de las máquinas cosechadoras suspendidas en el aire a uno tres metros

de altura. De su nivel inferior, una serie de tubos conectados al terreno aspiran insistentes y no dan tregua. El quejido del interior del suelo llega a mis oídos. Es obvio que mis acompañantes no lo oyen o, quizás, prefieren ignorarlo. El lamento terrible despierta en mí una inquietud que, de ser una pregunta: ¿escuché esto poco antes del Cambio?, se ha convertido en una certeza.

Aprieto el botón verde.

Los mantengo contentos aparentando comprensión y sumisión. No sabré leer sus dibujos, pero leo de otro modo y lo que he deducido es que no queda mucho tiempo de nuevo. Al parecer los humanos son seres de memoria corta. Ponen sus prioridades en la cúspide de la toma de decisiones. No se preocupan de lo que ellos mismos definen como "daños colaterales". Mientras se hallen cómodos, el resto no les importa. Es así que otro Cambio se aproxima y aunque algunos lo sepan, la mayoría prefiere negarse a verlo y continúan tal cual, agotando lo que hay, consumiendo sin pensar en las consecuencias a largo plazo.

Aprieto el botón verde.

Creo que he dejado de ser humana, percibo con claridad tantas cosas en comparación. No soy la única, y con cada movimiento del botón verde me logro comunicar con los demás. La velocidad con que lo presiono y la fuerza con que lo empujo es un mensaje enviado. Somos capaces de leerlo nítido como si fueran las letras que se empeñan en enseñarme.

Sabemos que el Cambio será hoy. En esta oportunidad no lo dirigirá por completo la madre naturaleza.

Aprieto el botón verde.

Con ello,

una orden circula.

Y los demás,

la leen:

"¡Al ataque!"

2 **The Sound of Change (translation)** by Sandra Fogliani


I look at a white background splattered with strokes of black lines, straight and curved. My eyes send the signal to my brain to decipher their meaning. I do this because one of my many occupations is learning to read. The ability I once took for granted, as natural to me as breathing, the result of a mental process as swift as a hummingbird's flutter, no longer is. And I glimpse the splashes of black lines on white, and I concentrate, and I strain... But in the end I only perceive a complex scribble with neither head nor tail.

Keyboard-like buttons wait patiently for me to handle them. The instructions I received were simple and clear: "Press the red button if you don't understand what is written; if you do, the green one." I nodded, hoping they would leave me alone for a while, even if the cost was chaining my gaze to the screen in front of me.

I understood nothing of what was written. Still, I press the green button. Instantly, a new ridiculous drawing of what are supposed to be letters appears before me. I put on a look of concentration again and pretend to observe the image with fascination. In reality, what I do is sharpen my hearing. The whisper of leaves swayed by a breeze soothes me. That subtle melody tells me that the window leading outside—the one in the adjacent room—is open. My living quarters has none; it is rather a kind of hermetic box whose gray walls are devoid of anything. A zero-stimulus room, they call it. Its purpose is obvious: to prevent me from being distracted for even a second from whatever task they assign me. But they ignore that the auditory capacity I possess is my temporary escape.

I block out the sound of their conversations. I know their remarks about me by heart, even though they have no idea; the phenomenon I have become, the enigma of my existence, blah, blah, blah. I am no longer interested in meddling in their hypotheses of what I am or might be. No, not at all. After all, I am me, and that's that.

The lull of the rustling leaves helps me float away from here and imagine the colours of a day under a clear sky with the occasional cloud wandering lazily. There




are no birds around; they went extinct so many years ago that people don't even remember them. But plants survived the Change, and if I pay closer attention, I can hear the petals of some daisies moving very, very slowly. Yes, daisies, because each flower has a particular sound, of course.


I press the green button.

The daisies take me back to when I was a child, locked in the refuge apartment with my parents during the peak of the Change. We were among the privileged who obtained such shelter. Many did not, and were perishing outside; like the birds and the rest of the animals, they were becoming extinct without remedy. In the refuge we could subsist for up to a hundred years, while the planet was succumbing to the Change. I would managed to observe the outside through the periscope in my room and, for some incomprehensible reason, a group of daisies would always be in the field of vision. They seemed eternal; no one had told them they had to die, so they remained there, unchanged.

I press the green button.



I must have something of them; I too remained there, unchanged. When they discovered me, they informed me that over three hundred years had passed since the beginning of the Change. I stared at them, stunned, trying to understand. I almost wanted to laugh because what they were saying had to be a joke—if I was barely ten! At the same time, I realized that my mind was blank; I remembered very little, and even less what had happened to my parents. Since then they have been testing me, one after another, and I submit to the tests. I do not know exactly how much time has passed; however, the noticeable aging of those who study me and their subsequent absence indicate that it has been several decades. Moreover, my body has changed somewhat; its reflection whispers to me that my childhood has slipped away.



I press the green button.

I go outside from time to time. The routine consists of guiding me down a corridor to where transport vehicles are parked. They place me in one of those that prevent any view of the outside. They take me to a locality devoid of buildings, populated by sparse vegetation. We walk without encountering any living being, save for timid plants that, by all appearances, struggle to exist. We are accompanied by the buzzing of harvesting machines suspended in the air about three meters high. From

their lower level, a series of tubes connected to the ground suck insistently and give no respite. The groan from within the soil reaches my ears. It is obvious that my companions do not hear it or, perhaps, prefer to ignore it. The terrible lament awakens in me a concern that, once a question—did I hear this shortly before the Change?—has become a certainty.

I press the green button.

I keep them content by feigning understanding and submission. I may not know how to read their drawings, but I read in another way, and what I have deduced is that there is not much time left again. Apparently, humans are beings of short memory. They place their priorities at the summit of decision-making. They do not concern themselves with what they define as “collateral damage.” As long as they are comfortable, the rest does not matter. And so another Change approaches, and although some may know it, most prefer to refuse to see it and continue as they are, exhausting what exists, consuming without thinking of the long-term consequences.

I press the green button.

I believe I have ceased to be human; I perceive so many things clearly in comparison. I am not the only one, and with each movement of the green button I manage to communicate with the others. The speed with which I press it and the force with which I push it is a message being sent. We are able to read it distinctly, as if they were the letters they insist on teaching me.

We know that the Change will be today. This time it will not be directed entirely by Mother Nature.

I press the green button.

With that,

an order circulates.

And the others,

read it:

“Attack!”



Politika by Paul Archbald

Jack didn't think much of his neighbours. On one side, there was Louie. Louie never returned Jack's greetings. He never initiated any conversation. He never smiled – at least, not in Jack's presence. His regular visitors looked to be of the criminal type. And he was ridiculously fussy about his garden. To be fair, the roses looked nice. But a nice garden was one thing; obsessive pruning, fertilizing and watering – well, that kind of obsessive behaviour was not part of Jack's world view. In his view, plants were only good for putting on hamburger buns to make the meat look a bit more colourful.

Then, on the other side, there was Arthur. Jack didn't know much about Arthur and he didn't want to know more. Arthur was a snob. Talked like he had a plum in his mouth. Too much education by far. Though the two men had rarely conversed, Jack had already surmised that Arthur was the kind of person who had to have an opinion on everything. And not just the opinions one could easily hear on the TV or read in the papers. No, Arthur had to have his own opinions. Definitely a snob. Jack didn't like snobs. He only had time for down-to-earth, normal people.

The only normal neighbour within spitting distance, lived two houses down, on the other side of Louie's property. George was a great guy. Salt of the earth. He agreed with Jack on most issues. Watched the same shows on TV. Voted for the same party. Drank the same kind of beer. Jack and George often watched a game together. Or simply solved the world's problems over a drink.

Moreover, George had little good to say about Louie. What he did say mirrored Jack's opinion. George was clearly a very discerning person. He was all sympathy when Jack complained of the fact that Louie's plum tree was becoming a real nuisance. Boughs from the tree annoyingly overreached themselves and dared to make incursions into the airspace on Jack's side of the fence. In late summer, the tree would drop its dark red fruit, leaving its blood stains all over the nearby path. To add insult to injury, in autumn the tree would leave piles of coppery leaves all over that part of Jack's front yard. No doubt, as intended by the tree's owner.

Jack had asked Louie several times to cut the tree away from the fence. Louie had glared at him and impolitely declined. But George had a good idea. "Cut the branches off yourself. If they are hanging over your side of the fence, he can't do anything about it." George was such a good neighbour!

Assuming that Louie would not be sympathetic to the plan, Jack waited for a day when no-one was home next door. The branches of the plum tree made such a satisfying crack and thud as they came off and fell to the ground.

Later that day, a loud thumping on the front door signalled the fact that Louie had returned to find his ornamental plum had suffered the amputation of some of its limbs. He was, not to overstate the case, livid. "What did you do that for?" shouted Louie. "My yard," replied Jack coldly, "I can do what I like." Louie stormed off, raving about silver leaf disease, or some such.

Jack strolled over to see George, immensely please with this, his first attempt at being a tree surgeon. George was suitably impressed. He particularly warmed to Jack's imitation of the reaction from his angry neighbour. The two men celebrated the occasion with a few drinks together.

However, a few days later, Jack returned from his customary Saturday morning shopping to find that someone had been wreaking havoc in his front garden. Though Jack was not much of a gardener, he did have a row of agapanthus that had somehow spontaneously generated along the fence line. Like many others, Jack despised the agapanthus. But they were his agapanthus – and no one had the right to come onto his property to do them bodily harm. No need to guess the culprit.

That night Jack took to Louie's beloved rose garden. "I think they need a bit more pruning," Jack reflected. "Down to ground level." Louie was devastated when he saw the carnage. "Well, if it's war he wants, it's war he'll get."

As is often the way with the wars of nations – and the all-too-common wars of neighbours – things quickly escalated. Jack discovered that his letterbox had been pulled out of the ground. Louie had his car tires let down. Jack's rubbish bin was emptied onto the footpath before the truck arrived to collect the contents. Louie was bombarded with loud music late at night. Jack found graffiti all over his front fence.

Considering the great evils perpetrated by Louie, Jack was filled with consternation

when, one morning, he noticed that George was chatting with Louie over the fence. And they seemed to be agreeing about something. Louie pointed an accusatory finger in Jack's direction. George nodded and put on his sympathetic face. Then, to Jack's horror, Louie went over the Goerge's place and the two men went inside.

A few days later, Jack went over to chat with George, intending confrontation. The plan was to start easy, lull him into a false sense of security: "George, do you want to watch a game?"

"No, look, I'm a bit too busy at present."

"What about tomorrow?"

"No, well, no, I don't think so, Jack. You know, I really don't want to get involved."

"Well, you were obviously happy to get involved when you were chatting with Louie the other day. I saw you two acting like old buddies."

"Look, Jack, you don't choose my friends. I can have a few drinks with anyone I want. It's not up to you. Now I'm going to have to ask you to please leave."

Still smarting from the reconfiguration of the neighbourhood alliances, Jack spent the next few days re-planting his garden along the fence. He really didn't like gardening. But he'd had such a brilliant idea. He was planting roses. A stroke of genius and salt in the wound.

He noticed Arthur heading out for his morning walk. He called out to him. Arthur turned around and came over to see what Jack wanted. "Have you heard about what's been going on with my neighbours?"

"Ah, yes indeed. Some are calling it the War of the Roses? By the way, do you know how that war started?"

"Don't know, don't care."

"Yes, well, history is most instructive. But look, do you want to come in for a cup of tea? My daily constitutional can wait."

"OK, why not?" Jack couldn't think of any reason to reject the invitation. After all, Arthur seemed like a pretty good guy. Very intelligent, too. Jack was glad to find an ally in his ongoing operation against Louie...and George. It was good to have a neighbour like Arthur.

The Recall Department

by Jackie McCullough

There was a young woman in front of me in the queue. Her baby was seated on the ground by her feet, chubby hands dabbling at a stack of blocks. An older child pulled at her hand, whining. The woman's hair was tied up carefully and I noticed a bead of sweat on her nape, slowly trickling down. The day was not warm.

'Morning, nice day for it,' I had said to the security guard at the entrance when I arrived at my appointed time. Nothing in response. The employees within the Recall Department were polyester-shiny. Busy in their do-nothing jobs. Phones rang and scanners whirred. Pens scratched on regulation notepads and the smell of bureaucracy circulated the room – eau de ink and depression. An army of surveillance cameras watched on. I flashed the peace sign at the nearest camera, underneath my jersey.

'I'm sorry, I can't hear what you're saying,' said the man at the front of the queue, 'I can't afford to get my hearing aids fixed. That's why I'm here, to sell a memory.'

He gestured at his ears in a wild circle. The employee at the counter murmured indistinguishably. She was indistinguishable.

'I don't understand! My name is Nigel Thorne. T-H-O-R-N-E.' The man's voice grew more strident. The forms in his hands were shaking now and the child's whining increased in pitch.

'Oh come on,' I finally called out, stepping to the left so the employee could see me. She locked eyes with me for a second, blue to blue. She tapped on the counter briskly with her pen.

'Yes?' she said. Her eyes weren't asking a question.

'Speak up, he can't hear you when you mumble,' I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me. To the side I saw two black-suited men. Not polyester. They had emerged from a side room.

'Can I come and help him with that?' I said. I knew it was pointless.

'Company directive, no helping,' she said, her words ringing clear.

The little one on the floor started making noises.

'Would you like me to hold him?' I asked the woman in front of me.

'Be careful,' she whispered out of the side of her mouth, 'they're watching you. We need to do things their way.'

Her words tried not to be words. The men in the suits remained in the room, focussed on the goings-on at the front of the queue. Every now and then, one or the other would glance back at me. Eyes on.

'But thanks for offering.'

Her hand danced back towards me and she waggled her fingers low. I brushed them with my own dancing fingers, briefly. She leaned down to comfort her little one.

When it was my turn at the front of the queue, the indistinguishable woman beckoned me forwards.

'I wish to pay for a memory to be returned to me. In full,' I said. A bundle of notes was clenched in my hand.

'Do you know about the fee increases?' the woman asked, eyes darting to the clock.

I had been too busy working three jobs, one clandestine, to keep on top of the latest announcements. Dad had been the one to follow the beige minutiae that ruled our days.

'They've turned the WINZ office into a bloody thing called a Recall Department, would you believe it? Whatever will they come up with next?' Dad had said when I returned home from work one grey day. He'd handed me a bowl of homemade pumpkin soup, the kind your spoon would stand up in, and tossed a handful of garlic croutons on top.

'You work so hard, love. I truly appreciate you,' Dad said, giving me a garlicky squeeze on the arm.

'Thanks Dad, you're no slouch yourself,' I said, not looking at his weight loss, the

change of colour in his skin.

'How much more is it now?' I asked the woman, knowing it was no good.

The woman ran her finger down a list of columns on a memo taped to the counter. The memo was fresh and white, newly printed.

'Fifty more.'

The woman looked at the next person in the queue. She saw right through me.

'I have fifty more. Can you check my log please?'

Just seeing the memory listed would be something, even if I couldn't afford to buy it back. I had pawned all my precious memories to the Recall Department – a trickle at first, and then a torrent.

'Go and buy them all back Jeanie. Don't worry about me, I'm just your old Dad. I don't need that damn medicine,' Dad had said, his voice quavering.

Now, I wanted just one back. All I had of the memory itself was a smudgy blur. A waft of jasmine, a flash of blue – everything else redacted. In the moments when I thought of my father, a pain blazed in my head instead. It burnt orange, bright and sharp.

The woman looked at me, at the wall clock, back at me.

'Show me the money please,' the woman said.

I unfurled my bundle, scrumpled and stark. Fifty short.

'They've gone now,' I said quietly. The black-suited men had disappeared.

'I'll go and see if I can find your log,' she said, heading to the memory vaults in the back rooms.

'She didn't even ask for your name. How will she find it?' the next man in line asked. I glanced at my forms, folded indecipherable on the counter.

The woman returned with a memory log in her hands, bound in a rich green leather. The colour of forested dreams. My name was stamped in a fine gold on the cover. She placed it on the counter and thumbed through the pages. A musty smell of

imprisoned words rose up. I leaned over to see what was written there, and breathe in the scent of memory.

'No looking,' she admonished. 'Step back.'

'No it's not here,' she said finally, leaving the log open on the counter.

'Well where's it gone? Everything should be in there.'

I didn't say everything that mattered was in those pages. Wouldn't let them see me broken.

'Don't you know about last month's purge directive? Random purges of memories - to aid those in need. Your memory must have been purged.'

The man behind me lunged.

'Get out of the way, girl. You're hogging all the appointment time. They won't get to us,' he spat.

His face reddened and sharpened. A stir from the side room frightened him back to his place in the queue.

The woman turned the memory log around to face me.

'See, here,' she pointed at a line, 'it's been removed.'

I stared at the memory description that was still there in black ink. Only people with neat handwriting to be employed here. Oh, the mighty pen.

Father picking me up from school on my first day. We danced walking home on the footpath and his smile was as big as the world. He showed me a caterpillar on a leaf.

'Company directive.'

I winked at my mother, the smallest of twitches. She looked past me to the front of the queue.

'Next!'

Her Photographer's Inheritance

by Philip Luke

The eviction notice stuck to her door like a scab. Kaia peeled it off and read the date. Three days.

She unlocked the door and let herself in. The southerly winds had been at the weatherboards since Tuesday, and the room had long since given up being warm. She dropped her keys on the bench and didn't take off her coat.

Kaia couldn't find the courage to switch on the lights. Letting out a sigh, she saw her breath form and fade in front of her.

Fifteen prints covered the wall above the dead radiator. A boy whose arm bore more needles than years stared straight at the lens. A girl who learned that her mother was not coming back. Near the centre, a woman laughed with her whole chest, teeth broken and head thrown back, the laugh of someone who'd paid for the right to make that sound.

They were all faces that had said yes to being seen. Faces that trusted Kaia and her work.

The SLR camera that took those frames sat on the table as Kaia's last possession of value. She placed the notice beside it and touched neither.

Her phone buzzed against her ribs. This was the third call she had missed from him today. However, in this dark room that was meant to be hers, she eventually touched the green icon.

"Kaia," a voice she knew all too well said. "Sweetheart. How are you?"

He asked how she was only when he needed something. She had known this since she was old enough to notice the pattern. She sat on the couch, pulled her coat tighter, and waited.

"Is the city treating you well? Your mother says you've been busy."

"Dad," Kaia said.

A long pause. The performance had ended ahead of schedule with that one word. She heard a sigh that came through as equal parts caught and grateful.

"My lead photographer quit yesterday," he finally said. "The Karen Walker shoot is tomorrow. The Karen Walker. I've tried everyone I know."

His voice came out smaller. She had not heard it in that size before. "I need your skills. You're good, Kaia. You always have been."

Kaia kept the phone next to her ear, saying nothing.

"I need you," her father said with a desperation only daughters understood.

"Three months behind on the studio lease," he continued. "This shoot saves everything, or it's bankruptcy."

"What kind of work?" she asked.

"Beauty campaigns. Models, studio lighting. You could finally make something beautiful instead of—"

"Instead of?" Kaia snapped.

She dropped her eyes to her camera, picturing the portraits of her own work. Wiremu, needle scars threading forearms like dark rivers. Then Hinewai with her missing front teeth, skin weathered by never having a roof, with a laugh so wide it held everything she'd survived.

"I photograph different people, Dad."

He didn't answer straight away. She could hear him deciding how to try again.

"I don't understand why you focus on... those situations. This prestige could change everything," he said.

"The people I work with trust me."

"Trust?" he said. "But this is photography. Real photography."

"So is mine."

"What you do... I'm not saying it doesn't matter. But this is different. Studio work. Models. Crew. The kind that builds a career and pays the bills."

Her eyes went to the notice on the table. Three days.

"This contract doesn't come to just anyone. You know what that means," her father said.

"I know what it could mean."

"Then use it," he said as his voice shifted into the register she remembered from childhood, the one reserved for work. "This is what you trained for. Making people beautiful."

Beautiful. The thing that required people like Hinewai to exist in shadows so others could stand in light.

She knew this because she had stood in the shadow herself. Kaia had once been twelve, and she had held the light meter close to her face, and she had smiled. Her father's studio then smelled of new cable and dry heat of softboxes that were left on too long. He had called after lunch. She came straight from school, her bag dropped at the studio door.

Her father was already mid-setup, softboxes throwing their warmth across the room. He handed her the incident light meter without breaking stride. The dome was white and small, the size of a large marble. It measured the light falling on whatever stood in the frame.

"Remember, chin height. Face it toward the camera. Don't move when he and I are behind the camera."

"I know, Dad," she said as she held the meter up and found the position. She wanted him to see that she knew.

"And Kaia, don't let me down."

Soon, that famous photographer arrived, and her father shook his hand with both of his. Kaia had seen her father greet people her whole life, but she had never seen him use the second hand before. Her father was already laughing, deeper in his chest than his ordinary laugh. She filed it away the way children file the things they don't yet have words for.

Kaia stood in the model's mark and held the meter steady, and when the famous photographer finally moved to the camera, she smiled into the lens. She had seen the women in her father's studio do this and knew what was expected of her.

The famous photographer looked through the viewfinder and tilted his head.

"Bring the key down," he said.

Her father's hands were already on the light stand. He found the adjustment and turned it, watching the photographer's face for confirmation.

Kaia kept smiling and holding the pose as the light changed across her face.

The photographer kept looking through the camera before releasing a small nod. He stepped back from the camera with his hand on his chin.

"She'd be pretty if not for the jaw," he said. "Shame she got your talent, but not your wife's bone structure."

Her father laughed. She knew that laugh. It lived in his throat when he was with men whose approval he wanted.

Kaia kept the meter at her chin with the smile still on her face. She could feel it there, fixed, like something she had forgotten to put down. The softboxes pushed their warm light into her, and she stood in it and felt, for the first time, that light was not the same as being seen. That one could be flooded with it and remain entirely in the dark.

She did not move. She did not change her face. She stood in the model's mark because that was what she had been asked to do, and she had not yet learned that she was allowed to walk away.

"Kaia. Are you still there?"

Now the room was dark and cold.

She picked up her camera and pressed review. Hinewai was the first frame with her own wide jaw and missing teeth. She had a laugh that had cost something and spent it anyway.

The eviction notice sat face up on the table. Three days written in the flat bureaucratic type of someone who had never needed to count them. The southerly

wind found the gap in the weatherboards again.

She turned the camera over and looked into the black glass of the lens. At twelve, she had learned what it decided. She learned to step behind it and never come back.

"Kaia."

"Hinewai has her housing interview this week," Kaia said. "I told her I'd have the portrait ready."

The line held nothing but the faint static of distance.

"Please," he said, with nothing left in it. "I don't know who else to call."

In the dark, she breathed out and watched it fade once more. Kaia had her father's eye, the wrong bone structure, and three days.

Across the Bridge

by Neil Pates

Decision time, he thought.

The air stilled, as if the world itself held its breath. Below him, the chasm stretched endlessly a black void between two cliffs that had no right being as close as they were. Wind whistled gently up from the depths like a whisper of forgotten promises.

Tony clenched his fists.

Behind him lay the safe, well-lit path. Ahead? A leap of faith. A choice that could change everything.

He glanced down at the disc in his hand, a small obsidian wafer no larger than his palm. The moment he squeezed it, the bridge would form for ten seconds. Ten seconds to cross. Ten seconds to commit.

"You don't have to do this," came a voice behind him.

Sarah stepped closer, her boots crunching on gravel, her brow furrowed, eyes pleading. "There's still time to go back."

Tony shook his head. "I've walked away too many times already."

He looked back into the abyss. It wasn't just a physical void it was a choice between the known and the unknown.

With a deep breath, he pressed the disc.

A low hum vibrated through the ground as threads of light wove themselves into a narrow bridge, shimmering and unstable.

The countdown began in his head.

Ten.

He stepped forward. The bridge creaked but held.

Nine.

Sarah called his name, already distant.

Eight.

Memories surged his brother's disappearance.

Seven.

This was the only way to find him.

Six.

The bridge flickered.

Five.

Tony ran.

Four.

The wind howled, daring him to turn back.

Three.

He kept his eyes forward.

Two.

The far edge rushed toward him.

One.

He lunged as the bridge disintegrated behind him.

Zero.

Silence.

He lay still, heart pounding, breath shallow. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

He was across.

A new world stretched before him dim, strange, alive with pulsing lights and towers

that bent like reeds in the wind. He didn't know what waited here, but for the first time in years, he felt something sharp cut through the numbness.

Hope.

Tony stood, squared his shoulders, and stepped forward.

The ground beneath his boots seemed to shift.

Not physically not at first. It was more a sensation, like the world itself adjusting to his presence. The air shimmered faintly, and the pulsing lights around him settled into a rhythm.

"Alright," he muttered. "You wanted different. You got different."

The terrain sloped upward toward a cluster of towers. Up close, they didn't look like buildings so much as living structures semi translucent, their surfaces rippling as if something moved within. Veins of light ran through them, brightening and dimming like a heartbeat.

Tony took another step.

A low tone resonated in the distance.

He froze.

The sound came again deeper this time, almost musical, vibrating through his chest more than his ears.

"Hello?" he called, immediately regretting it.

The tone shifted.

Then something moved between the towers.

Tony tensed, ready to run or fight though he wasn't sure which would be more futile. The figure that emerged was vaguely human, but elongated, its limbs fluid, its edges soft, as though it hadn't settled on a final form. Its surface mirrored the environment, reflecting light and shadow in fragmented patterns.

It stopped a few meters away.

Tony raised his hands slightly. "I'm not here to cause trouble."

The figure tilted what might have been its head. The surrounding lights brightened.

Then it spoke.

"Tony Varrick."

His breath caught. "Yeah," he said slowly. "That's me."

"You crossed."

"I... did."

"Few do."

Tony swallowed. "I didn't come here for sightseeing."

"You seek the lost one."

"My brother," Tony said. "Yes. Where is he?"

The being turned, gesturing toward the deeper expanse.

"He is... integrated."

Tony frowned. "Integrated? What does that mean?"

No answer only that low hum, growing louder.

"Hey," Tony pressed, stepping forward. "I didn't risk my life for vague answers. I need to know if he's alive."

The figure shifted. When it spoke again, its voice layered, multiple tones overlapping.

"Alive is a limited construct."

"What?" Tony snapped.

Before he could say more, the ground pulsed. Once. Twice. A wave of light spread outward across the landscape. Tony staggered as the air grew heavy.

"What's happening?"

The being didn't answer. It was looking up.

Tony followed its gaze.

The sky fractured. Lines of brightness tore across it like cracks in glass.

We don't have time. Take me to my brother."

The being hesitated.

"Integration is irreversible."

"I don't care."

"He may not be what you expect."

"He's my brother," Tony said. "That's enough."

Another pulse shook the ground. A distant tower bent, its light flickering out.

The being made a decision.

"Follow."

It moved swiftly. Tony ran after it.

They wove through the towers, the air growing dense, charged with energy. The hum intensified, rising until it made his teeth ache.

"Almost there," the being said.

They emerged into a vast basin, ringed by towering structures. At its centre stood a column of pure light, rising into the fractured sky.

Tony slowed. "What is that?"

"The convergence."

"And my brother?"

"He is within."

Tony let out a short laugh. "Of course he is."

Another crack split the sky. A dark, angular shape forced its way through.

Tony's hesitation vanished.

"One more leap," he muttered.

He stepped into the light.

There was no motion. No ground. No wind.

Only light warm, infinite.

"Tony?"

He turned.

A man stood a few paces away.

"Marcus?"

His brother looked the same and not. There was a clarity to him, a stillness that felt deeper than anything human.

"You shouldn't be here," Marcus said gently.

Tony laughed weakly. "I've heard that a lot."

He stepped closer. "You're... okay?"

"That depends."

"Don't do that," Tony said. "Tell me are you coming back?"

Silence stretched.

"There is no 'back' for me," Marcus said.

Tony's chest tightened. "What does that mean?"

"I'm part of this now." Marcus gestured, and the light shifted forming glimpses of the towers, the landscape, everything. "This isn't just a place. It's a network. A consciousness."

"And you joined it?"

"I became part of it."

A distant rupture echoed.

Another tremor shook the light.

Marcus said. "You have to choose."

"Choose what?"

Marcus smiled, sad but certain. To stay or go.

The light surged.

Tony felt something vast press against his mind waiting.

All his life, he had hesitated.

I have to go back.

He opened his eyes.

"I choose life."

The world answered.

Light exploded outward, pushing back the darkness. The cracks sealed, one by one.

Silence.

Tony stood, breathing hard.

Marcus was fading.

"Wait "

"It's okay," Marcus said softly. "You do what's right."

"Will I see you again?"

A pause.

"In a way."

And he was gone.

Tony opened his eyes.

He stood once more in the basin. The column of light had dimmed to a gentle glow.



The towers pulsed calmly.

The being stood nearby.

"It is done," it said.

Tony nodded. "Yeah."

He looked around this strange world.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"You must go."

The being gestured behind him.

A bridge formed again.

Tony smiled faintly.

He took one last look back to where his brother was and walked back over the bridge



Frampton '73

by Colin Phillips

Stevie sat in the diner nursing a cup of coffee. Jack's was an all-night diner just off the highway. A welcome bright spot in the dark when Big-T had dropped her off.

Stevie had rushed from the warmth of the cab to the diner. Big-T had hit the rig's horn, a sad goodbye, as he pulled back onto the road.

A single waitress served the truckers coming in for their coffee refills. Stevie wondered what the day might bring. The \$10 in her pocket would hold her for a while. After that? Stevie wrapped her Afghan coat around her.

Big-T had picked her up, wanting company to keep him awake. She had taken out her guitar and sang for him. Loving her voice, he'd called up his fellow truckers to hear her play. They'd hollered their requests over the CB.

Big-T gave her the handle 'Stevie-T' as they talked to the other rigs. Eventually, as her voice grew hoarse, she agreed to one last song. The sweetest version of 'Maggie May' rang out over the airwaves.

"Go with god," he had said as he dropped her off at the diner, pressing \$10 in her hand with a smile.

Stevie looked through the window. Frampton seemed to have expired. Most of the buildings were boarded up, and there were only a few beaters on the road.

"Refill, sweetheart?"

The waitress was a big-boned woman with a home-dye job that didn't quite cover the grey. Her name badge said "Tammy," and Tammy looked all kinds of tired.

Stevie smiled her thanks. The diner was a morgue. She looked at her stuff: a small day pack, a sleeping bag, a large-brimmed hat and her guitar. Everything she owned. It didn't matter. It would be warm in California.

A police cruiser pulled into the empty lot. Stevie watched the two officers get out

of the car. The door dinged, and they sat in what Stevie imagined was their usual booth. The big cop looked at her, then turned to the waitress. Tammy hustled their coffee, laughing and chatting with the men before taking their order.

The grill cook started the eggs. The smells made Stevie's stomach rumble. The bagel she had eaten earlier had barely touched the sides.

Tammy switched on more lights, lighting up more of the diner in advance of the morning rush.

The door dinged. Another waitress walked in, cold and hassled. Younger than Tammy, tired but not yet worn down. She rushed to put on her hat and apron.

"Late again, Darlene."

Darlene went behind the counter to talk to the man. Stevie caught the last bit, something about a kid with croup. A few minutes later, Darlene emerged and made fresh coffee.

A group of men in work shirts that read Frampton Sugar came in and settled in a booth. Darlene soon had coffee on the table and took their orders. Stevie looked up to see one of the cops looking directly at her. She looked down, rearranging her paisley scarf.

Darlene offered Stevie a refill. Stevie didn't want it but knew it would buy time. Darlene noticed the guitar.

"You play that thing, Hun?"

Stevie nodded.

"What can you play?"

"Just about anything you want to hear."

"For true?"

"True."

"But you're good, right?"

Stevie laughed. "Yeah, I'm good. I can sing, too."

"Wait here, Honey."

A few minutes later, Darlene returned smiling. "The boss said he will stand you breakfast if you play."

"I can't play on an empty stomach," Stevie said with a hopeful smile.

"Give me your order, Hun, and while Jack has it on the grill, you can sing."

"I'll take the big breakfast, eggs over easy, with hash browns and extra bacon."

"Now, what you gonna sing?"

Tammy walked up. "Cover your tables, Darlene."

"Hold your britches, Tammy, just getting us some music. This here young girl, what's your name, sweetheart?"

"Stevie."

"That's a pretty name. Tammy, Stevie's going to play for us. Got any requests?"

Tammy walked off, grumbling.

"Never you mind her, darling. Can you play 'A Horse with No Name'?"

Stevie nodded and tuned her guitar.

The diner was filling. Stevie started strumming, then began to sing. She found the beat, her voice growing in confidence. People turned and stared. Darlene started dancing between booths, taking orders and pouring coffee. Even Tammy gave the odd smile.

Stevie finished the song to a smattering of applause. She moved straight into another song, her voice pure and soulful.

Tammy brought her breakfast. She put her guitar down.

"You can sing, kiddo," Tammy said.

Outside, trucks were pulling up as drivers stopped for breakfast, and the diner became busier.

Twenty minutes in, and the big breakfast was beating Stevie. She reached for

the ketchup as the officer approached her. She looked down, pretending she was unaware of him.

"I haven't seen you around here before. Do you have ID?" The officer's nasal voice cut through her. His spit landed on her arm.

"What's this about, officer?" She couldn't look away from it.

She dragged her eyes up. The name badge read Zachowski.

"It's about me asking you for ID."

The diner went quiet.

Stevie's hand shook as she gave the officer her student ID.

"It says here your name is 'Stephen Deschanel.' You don't look much like a Stephen to me."

Darlene stepped in. "I bet that's one of them French spellings—"

"Shut up, Darlene." He looked back at Stevie. "You got someplace to stay?"

"No, I'm... I'm just passing through."

"You hitchhiking? We got laws against hitchhikers. "

"No, sir, I'm... waiting on a friend," Stevie lied.

"Any other ID?" Zachowski asked.

Stevie hesitated.

The big cop approached. "What's going on?"

His badge read Travener.

"ID says her name is Stephen."

The officer stared at Stevie. She refused to meet his gaze.

Darlene tried again. "It's pronounced Stephan—"

"For god's sake, Darlene," Zachowski interrupted.

Zachowski leaned in, "Suppose I look in that purse of yours. Would I find an ID listing your sex... as male?"

Stevie felt nauseous, her face clammy.

"Sir, I'm arresting you for vagrancy and hitchhiking."

"But I told you—"

Zachowski dragged her up, cuffing her hands behind her back.

"C'mon. A few nights in a cell will sort you out"

The door dinged. A trucker walked in, a giant of a man with a full beard and a D-cap.

"Is there a Stevie-T here, plays the guitar?"

"That's me!" Stevie said, then looked at Zachowski. "I told you I was waiting for a lift!"

Zachowski twisted the cuffs. Stevie yelped.

"Is there a problem, officers?" the trucker asked.

"It's none of your business," Zachowski hissed.

"You know this girl?" the Travener asked, suspicious.

"Sure do. Been talking to her all night. Big-T dropped her off. Put out a call for someone to pick her up. I was the nearest."

"Let her go, Zachowski."

"Goddamn it, Earl—"

"I said let her go." Travener snapped.

Zachowski hesitated a beat longer, then released her.

She headed towards the driver.

Seeing this, the second officer walked to his booth, leaving Zachowski standing there.

"Darlene, how about we get us some pie?"

Noho Marae

by Ali Banks

Evie sat uncomfortably on the couch and tried to look relaxed. She was way out of her comfort zone, but didn't want to give off the wrong vibe. She wanted to look like she belonged here. She felt like she should belong here. Marae experiences peppered her own history and memory. She watched, as those who really did belong greeted each other with such ease. Familiarity and love seemed to ooze out of every "Kia ora!", every hand shake, every cheek kiss or hongī.


All these actions were familiar to Evie, but foreign too. They weren't a part of her daily life, but she had seen them before.

The room filled with laughter as more people gathered. Many knew each other through their work or families. Evie felt like an outsider. She was going to be here for three days. How would she survive this noho?

As everyone had arrived, the instructor, Dave, called them together. He explained that they would soon leave the building and head around to the marae entrance, or waharoa, where they would participate in the powhiri. The women would enter first, onto the courtyard, te marae atea, and begin the karanga.

Sam, from the host party, began to call out, in Te Reo, to the welcoming party. This was lead by Marama and the wahine. The two women ushered the small group from the wharoa to te mahau, the porch of the building. Evie watched as the two women lead the group forwards with an intimate grace, speaking fluently to each other. Evie felt an emptiness at not having a cultural connection like she was witnessing.

They all moved onto te mahau, removed their shoes and entered the building. The men sat across from each other and conversed in Te Reo, while the women were seated behind them. Evie couldn't follow what they were saying and began looking around the hall. The men's dialogue becoming a rolling lullaby in the back ground. She began to take in her surroundings. Wharenuī, she thought to herself, "the big house". Dave's words going through her mind. She looked up at the majestic ceiling. The rafters and structure showing. Like a vast backbone with ribs stretched out over




the ceiling canopy. She thought of the human ribcage, how it protects our most important organ, the heart. The big house wrapped around its heart, the people. The people gave it life, as did the stories of those before them.


The men had completed their dialogue and the group began the waiata. A word familiar to Evie. Her nieces and nephews spoke of singing waiata at school. This song was one she remembered from her own school days. She felt her shoulders soften a little as her body relaxed and she began to sink into the moment.

After the waiata the visiting party lined up and passed by each host member and were greeted with a handshake, hongi or kiss on the cheek. It was like meeting with family after a long separation. Although, Evie would seldom greet her own family with such warmth and acceptance.

Dave announced that the best was saved for last, kai time! They were to return to the main hall and eat together. Evie followed the group back, lingering around at the back, Until only two seats were left and she chose the one that was nearest to her.



The food was blessed, and plates were filled. Evie surveyed the table as she struggled to swallow her food. It was delicious, but her nerves had kicked in again. There was a mix of people around the table, singles, couples and staff. Evie's attention was drawn to the group of young women. They seemed like sisters. Comfortable together. Laughing and talking. One had a beautiful moko. Her dark hair was pulled back into a low pony tail and her eyes showed wrinkles when she laughed.



Beside Evie was an older woman, Marama. She had led the visiting party onto the Marae. She was quiet and spoke softly, for which Evie was grateful. It helped her feel more comfortable.

After the meal they all returned to the wharenui. They removed their shoes and took theirs seats in a semi-circle around Dave. His passion and knowledge for his culture invited Evie in. She imagined Ranginui and Papatuanuku in their embrace, their children desiring escape and using force to separate their parents. Tane, turning onto his back and exerting the strength of his legs, tearing apart the embrace. A messy, painful birth as the children of Ranginui and Papatuanuku spilled out onto the earth, finding their places of dominion.

Over the weekend Evie learnt about Po, the darkness before Ranginui and

Papatuanuku. The darkness full of potential. It resonated deeply with her. Reminding her of the beginning in her favourite book. "The earth was without form and void". The birthplace of creation.

She struggled with her whakapapa. She could recall some of her genealogy, but felt no connection to it. Being the first generation in her family to be raised in New Zealand. She knew little of her heritage and felt more connection to New Zealand than her place of origin.

She desired connection, belonging, history. But it was out of her grasp.

She could write the words, and did, but they seemed lifeless. Whakapapa was alive and vibrant. Entertwined with the present and the past. Closing the gap on linear time and bringing us all together to where we began.

Evie whispered in her heart, "Help me God."

They had all been given a guide to fill out for their pepeha, which they would use to introduce themselves. Evie turned the page and read the portion for 'the non-tribal pepeha'. Instead of naming the places your ancestors came from, you could refer to 'the mountain that stirs my heart and the river that quells my worries'.

Something locked in place. Something in her heart shifted. A memory rose of driving alongside the local river when first arriving in the Hutt Valley. The peace that washed over her at seeing the current move, just as she was moving, relocating, to a city for the first time in a long time. Her anxieties and worries being swept away with the current.

Ko te Awa Kairangi te awa e mahea nei aku maharahara.

The Awa Kairangi river is the river that quells my worries.

As the weekend came to a close. The group shared their last meal. They laughed together and said goodbye.

Evie hugged Marama and said "I will see you again".

Finally something felt right.

Conscription

by Lee Bowden

The draft was supposed to be impartial. A series of random numbers selecting viable candidates who were deemed fit for service. Jack scuffed his foot and scanned the sterile length of the loading docks. He saw a mass of faces, none of whom seemed to be particularly comforted by the knowledge that they were united by sheer dumb luck.

The call had been sudden. Jack had been asleep; it was his wife, Emily, who had been sitting by the bed, acutely tuned to news and updates.

Emily had gently shaken his shoulder, waking him as unconfirmed reports began to filter into their home. She held his hand as a stream of snippets and rumours flowed in with a heavy dread that settled upon them. They sat together, quiet and still, arid listened to shaken accounts by displaced victims.

The description came from less than an hour away. It crafted a bleak picture of broken buildings and missing family members. The raw vulnerability sharply juxtaposed against the warm glow of Jack and Emily's bedroom. As the minutes passed, Jack's practical mind dimly converted to this new reality. He moved mechanically to shut off the light. The street outside, which had always seemed serene and calm, became a looming expanse of darkness and threat. The comforting normalcy of peace, the underlying bedrock of their existence, seemed to be a broken illusion.

The nighttime bombing of a civilian suburb had been a shocking and unexpected escalation. The decision for reprisals seemed inevitable. Within the hour, the confirmation was given nationwide. Jack had expected the moment to be more dramatic, like an explosive crescendo on the pyre of their previously peaceful lives. Emily had just slumped her shoulders with quiet resignation before softly asking, 'Please don't wake the kids. Let them sleep.'

The next three days were a blur. Jack had never lived abroad, but he had heard about culture shock. The feeling of being emersed in a foreign place, learning a new language and a new set of social norms. This new world seemed to have unfurled a

prepackaged zeitgeist which was immediately draped over the bones of his familiar town. Excited groups clustered around propaganda posters and recited slogans with the same vitriol usually reserved for local sports teams. Children ran past, divided into ruleless teams of heroes and villains, acting in a bloodless pantomime. Jack had barely seen his son since the news had broken. Nick was almost the same age as these kids, perhaps a little older.

He hoped Nick wouldn't engage in this sort of behaviour.

The supermarket was awash with signage, indicating limits on items, or recommending foods with long shelf lives. At the checkout, an older man – too old to possibly serve, was confidently speaking about 'assured victory'. Jack tried to breathe slowly as he felt his ears burn with simmering indignation. None of this seemed fair. The lottery system had been running at a deficit. Every single eligible person had been called, with only a handful of exceptions made. Only one thought kept running through his mind.

Now Emily was doing her best to be brave, to put on a reassuring smile as people filtered past them on the loading docks. The groups of numbers being announced over the loudspeakers were a cruel countdown to the moment they would be torn apart, and Jack felt the same embarrassing burn in his ears as another pulsing rage steadily grew.

'It should be me.' Jack forced the words out through gritted teeth.

Emily looked briefly surprised before a sad expression of amusement fell over her. She reached out her hand and cupped Jack's cheek.

'You're so old fashioned.' she teased, 'I always loved that about you. You're turning into your grandfather.'

'No, he always hated your kind.' Jack murmured as he reached up and took her hand.

'Maybe, but he was always nice to me.' Emily replied, mildly defensive.

Their hands lowered but stayed connected, their fingertips intertwining. Jack steadied his breath, 'Well, he liked you. He wouldn't have wanted this...'

Jack trailed off as another group of numbers was announced. A choked sob rang out nearby. Jack couldn't tell if it was male or female. He felt pin pricks behind his eyes as his frustration welled to a breaking point.

'What am I supposed to tell the kids? You've always been better with them. You carried them, you bought them into this world.'

'I wanted to.' Emily squeezed Jack's hand tighter.

Jack's voice dropped to a quiet plea.

'But you didn't have to go that far. We could have incubated, or hatched them, but you -'

Emily cut him off, 'But I wanted to be old fashioned, like you.'

Jack took a deep breath, forcing his voice to a lower, more suitable tone, 'You loved them before you even knew them. You were the one who taught them, you cared for them...'

'While you provided for us.' Emily insisted smartly as she brushed a non-existent piece of lint from Jack's slumping shoulders.

Jack continued, 'You're better at this than me. I don't know how to explain to Lisa why Mommy isn't coming home tonight. Hell, I've barely seen Nick in days...'

Emily stifled a giggle. Her hand flew to her mouth. The sound seemed almost taboo amid the shared melancholy of the crowd.

'I'm sorry.' Emily smiled softly, 'He's been collecting scraps. He wants to build me a new body if... if the worst should happen.'

'Scraps...' Jack repeated softly with dawning comprehension.

'He's a smart boy. Don't discourage him from perusing the things that interest him.' Emily warned Jack with a stern look.

Jack tried not to think of his son over a pile of mismatched salvaged parts, or the grotesque version of his wife that a child might cobble together.

Emily continued softly, in a reassuring whisper, 'Even if the worst happens, I'll be uploading to the cloud until the very last second.'

Jack clenched his jaw to avoid saying the possible problems that could occur. Processors had been known to glitch and spend years in limbo before they were physically recovered.

Data centres holding personality and memories were critical infrastructure. They would make ideal targets if raids continued. Even if everything went right, the war efforts had already drained the limited supplies of precious metals and rare earths. It could be years, or even decades, before droids were made available to the general population again.

'Batch A-003-C7' The speaker announced.

Jack pulled Emily close, 'It's not fair. I didn't vote for this; I never agreed to any of this.'

'Actually, you did.' She smiled up at him as tears rolled down her cheeks, 'It was in the terms and conditions. You need to read those for yourself while I'm gone.'

They kissed for a moment, before she pulled away with a sad smile.

'Maybe just don't update anything until I get back.' Emily teased, wiping her eyes.

Jack nodded mutely. Emily turned and walked straight towards the glowing jump columns, standing shoulder to shoulder with her designated batch. She looked back for a moment, her eyes flashing with determination that shone as bright as the electrical sparks raining around her.

Then she was gone.

The Storyteller

by Nicholas Cottrell

Nobody saw the end coming. Not the end of the world, but the end of an age. Humans had had a good run. Although the 10,000 years or so of known history paled into comparison with the age of dinosaurs.

'What are dih-no-sors?', asked a small boy of about five. Matted hair, muddied face and dishevelled clothes several sizes too big for him showed he was one of the 'Tunnellers'; impoverished scavengers eking out a living digging sheltered troughs for their families to huddle in.

Sunrise Barnaby had seen some of the roughest edges of humanity in this forsaken world – travelling coast to coast, peddling her talent where it was welcome, and running for her life where it was not.

By and large most were welcoming of Storytellers – the nomads that carried with them living memories of the Time Before. And Sunrise found herself in one such community.

'Dinosaurs? They lived before you and I, before your parents and grandparents and their great-grandparents. Have you seen a lizard?'

The boy nodded, shaggy hair standing on end. Sunrise could see things crawling across the grubby thickets. Poor lad, she thought.

'Well, dinosaurs were like giant lizards that were the size of your Church Ruins.'

The boy fidgeted, his mouth and eyes wide with wonder.

Sunrise continued the story of the beginning of the end. 'The world you live in has looked so different and changed many times. There have been times of dinosaurs – the giant lizards. There were times of ice, where massive woolly creatures and giant cats with teeth as long as your arm roamed and hunted. There were ages where people lived in and worshipped the sun in far away deserts and buried kings in pointed stone mountains built by men.'

'I want to see all of these things!', said the boy. The other children – equally adorned in mismatched rags and lacking in hygiene – nodded and mumbled enthusiastically.

'Yes, yes, each of those things are their own story. This story, however, is of the time of the end. It's important you know. It's your parents' history, the time they lived through.'

'I ain't got no perints. My granders look after me', said a tiny girl. Coffee coloured lesions covered her dark skin and she held the battered remains of a stuffed toy bear tightly, as though it was her only possession. It probably was.

'I'm sorry to hear that little one. If I tell the story, maybe you can tell your granders.' Sunrise got great joy storytelling to small children. They always listened intently, as a visiting Storyteller was rare and gave parents relief while they mined in the Landfills or farmed whatever meagre scraps they could muster in the scorched broken earth.

'The people had grown too comfortable. They had machines for everything - drying hair, trimming grass, making food, entertaining them with pictures and music, and even thinking for them, would you believe.'

'But the machines needed energy. And the energy came from a rare thick nasty smelling liquid that came from deep in the ground.'

'I knows that, Missy, I knows it coz my grander was an oiler,' said a boy of five or six who bounded excitedly at his inside knowledge. His grandparent most likely worked in a petrol station or a rig worker but Sunrise didn't want to go off on a tangent.

'Yes, that's right. Oil was what kept the machines running. But the people became so comfortable they didn't think about how much was left. And then the world ran out. There was none left. They searched everywhere, scraping the holes deep into the ground and under the sea.'

'Now, people were also very clever. They had made other machines that used energy from things other than oil. Some drank light from the sun and turned it into power. Others used turning cogs to make electricity. They could turn cogs using windmills taller than trees or water leaked through holes in giant dams.'

'I don't understand what you mean,' said tuft-haired boy.

'That's ok. Imagine giant walled lakes and flat black surfaces like rocks that get hot in the sun. Not many people are left that know how they worked. They were called engineers.' Sunrise too didn't know how they worked. That knowledge was beyond the simple talents of a Storyteller.

En-jan-eahs the children repeated, savouring the new word.

'Back to the story. They had many ways to make electricity and some places made so much they could even store it and send to others. But...,' and here she leaned forward, as if conspiratorially, 'the chiefs and leaders didn't want them to use those machines. They owned the taps and pipes that got the oil and so they made sure people kept using the machines that used the oil because people then gave them money.'

'As the oil ran out people started fighting. They used machines that made big fires and smashed things. They destroyed each other's roads and homes and machines. And they killed people. Many, many people. All so that they could have the last bits of oil for their own machines.'

'Missis?,' said a polite red-haired girl with bright freckles, who shyly raised her hand to talk. 'Missis, that seems really stupid. Why didn't they share the oil like we all do with our food and water?'

'That's a very good question, sweetie. Because people are very stupid sometimes. So, what happened next you might wonder... well, once all the oil had gone even those who had machines that made electricity from the sun, or the wind or the lakes did not have machines that could get food to places, or get the things people needed to live across the land. And there were not enough machines that didn't use oil.'

'Eventually people had no way to get to other places or carry large things or make machines work. And that's how we got to where we are. Everything you might have - tables, clothes, roofing sheets and tools and all the things in the Landfills, were once carried by oil-using machines. Now, we have to carry everything by horse, so we carry less and not as far.'

'Miss, I don't get it,' said a boy of nine or ten. He looked cleaner than the rest, his hair still fair and unmatted and his clothes fit. 'Why dint they just use what they had? What was it they wanted that wunt around 'em?'

'Yes, that's a very good question. It seems the more people have, the more they want. Right, it's growing late young ones and I need to be on my way.'

As she bid them all farewell, and accepted food and items, Sunrise headed off by foot to spread tales to other communities. Maybe the next generation will learn to live life simpler, better. Maybe there's hope yet she thought as she turned away from the children and into the dusk. Though she had told herself that in every town.





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