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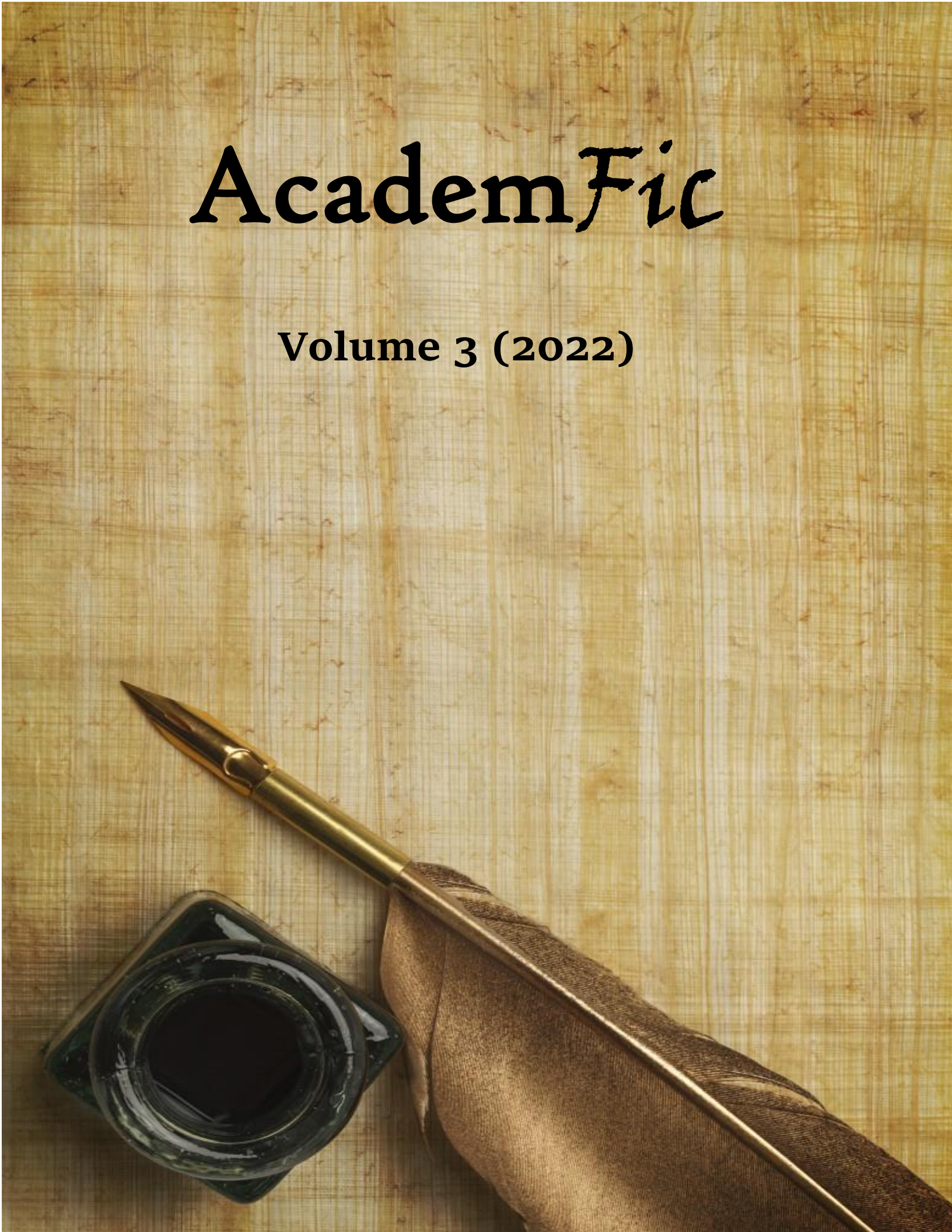

ACADEMFIC

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SCHOLASTIC OFFENSE

PAULINE BARMBY

Madeleine Featherstonehaugh
S/N 6661234
mfeath@student.malefst.edu
October 13, 2029

Dear M Featherstonehaugh,

This letter is in response to your appeal of the penalty you were assigned by Prof. Ehrlenmeyer Trask, Director of Undergraduate Programs in the Department of Evil Science, for a scholastic offense in EVS 101, "Introduction to Evil Science," under instructor Prof. Mina Boring.

Prof. Trask's letter informing you of the offense describes the circumstances. In the first group assignment for the course, you were assigned to work with three other students to develop and document the specifications for a mind-control device that could be used to transmogrify civilians into a zombie-like state. You took a leadership role in your group, convening meetings and coordinating the other members' efforts. In completing the peer evaluation section of the assignment, you attempted to honestly and transparently assess individual contributions including your own. Your group submitted the assignment in compliance with the directions and before the deadline.

One of your group members reported this flagrantly anti-evil behaviour to the course instructor, who confirmed it using the spyware installed on your university-supplied laptop. In addition to the offense of complying with the assignment instructions, you did not attempt to fraudulently take credit for the work of others or sabotage their work; additionally, the portion of the work attributed to you appears to be original, with no effort to plagiarize or enlist the help of online homework services. Your contribution to the assignment even goes so far as to consider the ethical implications of the device design.

Prof. Trask discussed this behaviour with you. Disappointingly, you did not disavow it, ascribe blame to the other group members, or attempt to manipulate the instructor by bribery or inappropriate accusations. Instead,

you confirmed the facts of the situation as stipulated by Prof. Trask, expressed remorse, and pledged that you would do worse on future assignments. Prof. Trask assigned a penalty of a grade of Z on the assignment – for you alone, and not for the other members of your group – and warned that another such offense would lead to expulsion or, potentially, mutagenic transformation.

Your appeal to my office did not dispute the account given above and was based on intellectual arguments alone. You claimed that it was unfair of Prof. Trask to assign a penalty to only one member of your group, that the true purpose of the assignment (assessing group and individual tendencies toward evil) was not apparent to you, and that mind control is ethically wrong. In your appeal, you did not attempt to blackmail either Prof. Trask or myself, threaten to expose the university to a lawsuit or the vigilante actions of the Justice Alliance, or distort Prof. Trask's account by manipulating the electronic record of your group's activities.

I am extremely disappointed by your complete lack of recognition for the principles of Evil Science and am therefore not only denying your appeal but increasing the penalty assigned by Prof. Trask. You will be expelled from the program and from the university, with notations entered on your academic and credit records such that you will be unable to enroll in other university programs, rent an apartment, or, indeed, adopt a stray dog. No appeal to this penalty is possible. Any attempt to reply to this email will result in your electronic device catching fire, opening an interdimensional rift, and/or emitting an ultrasonic signal audible only to bats, and is therefore not recommended.

Sincerely,
Cornelius Smith-Jones, MadSciD
Assistant Deputy Vice-Provost for Academic Affairs
College of Natural and Unnatural Sciences
Maleficent State University

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pauline Barmby is a Canadian astrophysicist who believes that you can't have too many favorite galaxies. She has been publishing in scientific journals for nearly 25 years; her fiction-writing career began in 2022 with work published or forthcoming in Martian, Tree and Stone, and Flame Tree Press' Compelling Science Fiction anthology. When not reading or writing she runs, knits, and ponders the physics of curling. Find her on Twitter @PBarmby.

CROSSROADS

GALEN T. PICKETT

Was this lunacy or desperation? Here he was, just before midsummer's midnight, in his rusted car, following directions he chanced upon in a tome mis-shelved in the physics library. All he needed was a hint, he was sure of that. And he was willing to pay.

There were no sounds except those he had brought with him. Even those were attenuated to mere suggestions. The ticking of the cooling engine had just about died. Shifting his weight behind the wheel, the squeaking springs and creaking vinyl came from miles away. The disconnection between action and effect, movement and sound made him faintly dizzy.

He took up the battered and coffee-stained notebook sitting on the passenger seat. He grasped the inner handle, and as he pulled and shouldered the door open, it was the crossroads itself that screamed in protest at the insult of his transgression, not the failing, corroded mechanisms of the door. Standing up, and away, he pushed the door closed with more force than was necessary, daring the night to enforce its silence. The door's solid but distant "chunk!" was reassuringly final. He squared his shoulders and faced the intersection.

Maybe it was the moonlight that made the whole scene so strange. The octagonal stop signs seemed more plea than command under that pale light. The midnight moon seemed higher in the sky than was possible, somehow just past overhead no matter which way he turned, craning his neck. Was it an astronomical quirk, or something less canny?

The intersection itself did not seem to be rightly a part of the Indiana hills leading east, nor did it seem to fit with the vast empire of Illinois soy-county to the west. Was the moonlight playing tricks on him? He was sure the scene before him was that of a newly planted vineyard, stakes and bare wire. On second glance, the vineyard seemed overgrown and unkempt. Or was it a field of cornstalks, waist-high and green? No, the stalks were towering and blighted, pale and desiccated. The land about the crossroad seemed to be each of these, and none.

It was a land apart.

He entered the intersection. Consulting the notebook, he began a shuffling dance on the gravel roadbed, recreating in the gravel the sketch on the page. He paused, gathering his bearings. He then took off shuffling again, his feet never completely leaving the ground.

Anyone who grew up in these parts would have gladly given him a warning before backing away and running once they had melted into the surrounding darkness. But the people of the land never seemed "real" to him, not as real as the particles and fields he studied but had never *seen*. He was alone. Anyone who could have warned him off his present course had had their chance years ago.

He seemed satisfied at last that the figure on the ground was what he intended. Intention, he had read, was the most important element in this magic. With a deep breath, he focused that intention. He delicately planted first his right, then his left foot gingerly in the center of the figure on the ground, like a person who had mopped themselves into a corner. His back was turned to the East with the moonlight falling all about.

Holding the notebook open to a fresh page, he spoke, finally.

"I am here to make a deal!" he said. "Whatever you want, take it! Just give me my desire!"

What is it that you want? What is it that you offer?

He was not sure he had heard the voice. But he understood the meaning.

"Here," he said as bravely as he could, offering the notebook awkwardly with his left hand, the pencil outward in the right. "Finish this theory! I have worked my whole life on this ... everyone thinks it can't be done! I want the ANSWER. And for it, you have my eternal self." Even now, the scientist could not bring himself to say the word "soul" out loud.

Hmm. That's a tricky one. Can I interest you in fame, instead? It is a lot easier for me to conjure up a nice glamour of fame.

"Fame? Fame won't get my grants approved. This result will. Fame won't earn me tenure. THIS will. This is my last chance ... My students hate me, my papers are getting rejected, I need THIS! How about you just finish this calculation," he turned back a few pages, and held his pencil at the last equation that he had written, "from this point?"

Ummm. Hmmm. Ummmm. Nope. I got nothing.

The silence became total. After a minute, it became uncomfortable as well. He found a dog-eared page and tried to make out in the moonlight what he had written. "Can you tell me if," he circled a set of equations, "there is a sign error in here?"

... ?yes? ... maybe? Can you give me a hint?

"What the actual hell? Do you mean to tell me you can't help me? That you don't know? YOU?"

Uh. You know, I hate math. The whole "war against heaven" started because I was trying to avoid inventing geometry. Can I interest you in riches, instead? Working with money is a WHOLE lot easier than this *sort of thing.*

"Can you send the money through my campus foundation? Do you have a DUNS number? This is great, let me get your EIN down, and then I can get you in contact with my pre-award person..."

Let me stop you right there. What are we talking about? I thought we were talking dollars? We are talking dollars, yes?

"The dollars have to come through a grant or they won't count for my tenure. Is there someone else I can speak to? Do you have a manager? Is there someone around here who knows what the hell they are doing?!?"

No need to be rude. And I AM THE MANAGER, and I know exactly what THE HELL I am doing. See, what you are asking is for the TRUTH and I have never been that great with truth. Fame is an illusion. Oh, I am good with illusions. The very idea of wealth is a kind of collective insanity I invented to get you all to torture each other. I am GREAT with insanity. To tell the truth, the thing I am not that all that good with is, you know, truth.

"You want me to believe..." he trailed off. Dejected, he simply asked the obvious question. "You can't help me, can you?"

No, not really, but that, as we say down here, is a feature – not a bug.

"So, there is no solution? I have to go back to square one?"

Ding!

It was too much for him. He realized that he was at the bitter, dead end of a life's work fueled by high-octane ambition and low-grade skill. His bottom lip quivered, and his sobs escaped and ripened into wailing.

Stop that! I can't stand this sort of thing. Say – We haven't talked about POWER yet... would you like to be the chair of your department? How about the dean of a college? Wouldn't that be nice?

Embarrassed, and sniffing, he looked down and muttered, "Dean would be nice. With a good pension, and retreat rights?"

Whatever. Well, my boy! Why didn't you say so! I think we can do business, after all! Come on, let me see you smile. That's better. Just. One ...

The voice paused for a bit. It seemed that the stars dimmed and the moonlight itself simply sank into the ground without illuminating the roadbed, the stop signs, the crops that were never planted, were never to be harvested.

... minute please. I have just sent your CV to an Institute in Massachusetts that is going to need an associate dean toot sweet. The old one had a debt just come due. Be of good cheer, my boy! You will love this!

Looking down at the notebook, he saw with a sinking feeling that he had not driven the intended bargain. On the page was a neatly penciled receipt: "One soul in exchange for," and then the crossed-out phrase "Nobel-winning theoretical physics theory" and then the phrase, "a lifetime of administrative drudgery," and below that his signature and the date of the new day. Midnight had just struck.

Not such a great bargain, huh? But really, the secrets of quantum gravity are worth a whole lot more than just a single worn-out human soul. You did about as well as you could have.

"So there is an answer?" he asked, hope building in the back of his mind.

No way. Not for you. Not for any of you. And now it is your JOB to see to it that the secret is never found. Time to pack, bub. I got a job for you.

And, with that, the cacophony of the night resumed.

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Galen T. Pickett has been a member of the physics faculty at Cal State Long Beach since 1999. He lives in the greater LA area with his spouse, four grown children, and several canines. His writing is inspired by the grandeur of the physical world and the absurdity of the academic world, in nearly equal measure.

LAMPROCLES

PYRROS RUBANIS

The first man he had brought death to was his father. He brought it to him in a dirty golden goblet, stained purple with the earthy poison it often held. His mother had tried to take this burden, to go in his stead, but Athenian law was clear. Only Lamprocles, the firstborn son, could fulfill his family's duty to the city. Today, that duty was to supply the poison for his father's execution. Thus was Lamprocles, the fittest of his family, reduced to Death's delivery-boy.

He was not a very fast courier: the large, uneven steps leading to the city center were difficult for his juvenile legs to surmount and he was in no hurry. With the goblet in his left hand and dawn in his eyes, Lamprocles fell into sun-bleached dreams and a rhythmic tread.

He imagined that he had already laid down his life. He had taken the hemlock himself as soon as he acquired it and was now floating above the city, disembodied. He saw his body delivered to his home and his younger brother pulling furiously at his limp hand, unable to accept reality. He saw his mother in unending sobs, crying over his body so loudly that the entire city knew her grief. The Archons were overwhelmed with shame and canceled his father's execution. Even as Lamprocles' ethereal spirit was pulled down to Hades, he saw his father released from prison surrounded by friends and revelry. Lamprocles' ghost passed before the crowd and he saw a glimmer of recognition in his father's eyes. His father stopped mid-stride and, for the first time, Lamprocles saw tears stain his father's face.

A small crack in the stone widened as he stepped on it and Lamprocles found his daydream and his balance both overthrown. He leaned forward and threw himself against the lip of a higher step. It bruised his ribs but restored his balance and kept the goblet level.

Lamprocles tried to massage the pain away with his free hand. Indulgent self-pity. Childish. His lifeless body would not soften any hearts or save any lives. He had thought it over endlessly the previous night: there was no way out. His body's only use was to deliver the contents he had been entrusted with.

Lamprocles was not yet a man, but at his father's trial he had begun to understand what it was that would make him so. He looked at the foul mixture

as it settled in the goblet and knew he had a duty to deliver it. A virtuous man did the right thing, no matter the pain it caused him. That was the lesson behind his father's actions, this was why the man had chosen to accept death.

Lamprocles tried to keep his father's lessons in mind as he finished his climb and entered the city square. The city center was not what it once had been. The Tyrants had made their last stand here among what small stone buildings they could find. The riots had left the plaza with scars, scattered mounds of splintered stone and shredded wood. The temples too, once marble monuments of unwavering lines, were still disfigured with the effacing rage of the oppressed. The marketplace was laced with sunlight and citizens, yet Lamprocles saw only the necrotic body underneath.

It wasn't working; he had not absorbed the lesson. He saw Athenians leaving the morning's assembly, trading disgusting jokes about their rivals. He saw jurors from his father's trial standing by and laughing as their children chased each other through teetering piles of gold-embroidered Persian silks.

He wanted to run at them, throw the goblet at their feet and dare them to pick it up, to kill his father themselves if they hated him so. He wanted to leave the poison there on the ground, dry and harmless.

His mother would understand. She would console him as she did his brother and whisper that he was right to be angry, that she would hold him until his tears surrendered and the pain became only the melancholy of a hollow surname.

His father would not. His father would see him enter the prison cell without the poison. He would wait patiently for Lamprocles' face to rise and meet his gaze. No words or tears would hide the truth. He would know that he was going to die and that even his son had learned nothing about virtue or honor. There would be no anger, no words. His father would swing back as smoothly as a door closing and converse only with his friends and visitors.

That could not happen today. Lamprocles needed his father to listen, to grant him one last request.

Lamprocles approached the colonnades of the jail, passing into shadowy relief as the surrounding hills and looming citadel restrained the sun's light. He greeted the guard with a low nod and walked into the jail, heading towards the distinctive blue of his mother's formal tunic.

Xanthippe's head was erect, her brass hair short and rigid like the horsehair atop a hoplite's helm. She cast a red-eyed glance at Lamprocles as

her bare shoulder continued to muffle the teary hiccups of his younger brother. Leaving the poison on the dais, Lamprocles moved to join his mother but did not sit down beside her.

"Greetings mother. My task is done — How are you?" he asked, trying to stand as straight and formal as he could.

"Tired," she sighed. "The benches here hurt my back and your poor brother is inconsolable." She brushed Sophroniscos' matted hair. "He starts crying as soon as he leaves my arms."

Lamprocles nodded. "I can stay with him. Why don't you go and try to find father?"

Xanthippe frowned and stopped stroking her son. "It seems I have to. It's been hours; I don't think your father will acknowledge us unless I go to him." She rose, kissing Lamprocles on the brow as she did. "I'll be back for you soon my little lambs."

Lamprocles sat on the bench aside his brother. Sophroniscos was four years younger than Lamprocles and had to look up to meet his brother's face.

"She'll find him, right?" asked Sophroniscos "He's not... he wouldn't be already..."

"Don't worry, she will," assured Lamprocles listening down the hall. He heard nothing.

"It's not fair!" Sophroniscos was crying again.

"Calm down. Being upset helps no one, least of all yourself."

No effect. Lamprocles could not tell if his brother was even listening. He tried to ignore the clamor and listen for voices further down the granite hallway. There was the dull echo of an amused voice. Lamprocles stood up immediately; his father was coming. Sophroniscos heard it too and stopped sobbing.

"Oh, what new foolishness is this?" said Lamprocles' father, his voice getting closer. "Crito my friend, are you responsible for this? Do you think that by calling my family you will move my heart to cowardice?"

A woman's voice, Xanthippe's, cut in. "Crito didn't call us, we've been here since the sun rose. I don't know why I tried. You didn't give us any thought at your trial, why would you now?"

"My dear, let us consider this fairly. Would I be here now if I truly gave you no consideration? And if I were a selfish braggart with no concern for you, would I have accepted death? Or rather would I have chosen to escape the trial and have Crito's well-placed friends stealthily sail me to Thessaly? There I could loudly proclaim my wisdom and the foolishness of the Athenian people." Lamprocles' father laughed. "My pride would be gorged indeed. Yet, my wife would be left behind with her own family, shamed and mocked as the wife of a coward and a hypocrite. But this would not bother me, since I give her no consideration. My sons, too, I could easily dismiss, for though I would raise them in a city without the beauty and law of Athens, they would still be there to waste their youth caring for me in old age. Does not death seem a more considerate choice after all? Is it not possible that I have accepted this sentence partially for the benefit of you and our sons?"

"No. I won't do this with you, not after the trial, not anymore. No more philosophy, no more debate. You play with arguments like toys, posing them and hoarding them. If you won't put the arguments away and speak with me honestly, will you at least come and speak with your own children?"

"Of course, my dear, of course. I can spare some time for the boys." Lamprocles craned his neck in anticipation and saw his father just as he rounded the corner of the hallway. Xanthippe made no appearance.

Seeing their father approach, Sophroniscos broke the silence and ran headlong into their father's legs, crying.

Lamprocles stayed seated. He watched his father and brother exchange their last words and rehearsed what he would say. He had spent most of the previous night running the words of his request over his lips again and again, until the argument lived on his tongue as much as it did in his mind.

Eventually Lamprocles' father gave Sophroniscos a gentle pat and motioned to the exit. Xanthippe emerged from the hall and took Sophroniscos' hand as the family disintegrated. Sophroniscos complained loudly and fought the pull, but his father had already turned away. Xanthippe picked Sophroniscos up and held him so tightly that her arms began to grow pale and bloodless. They both cried now: Xanthippe silently, Sophroniscos with the loud wail of an infant.

They finally exited and Lamprocles rose to complete his delivery. He brought the goblet to his father and tugged at his arm to draw his attention away from the dialogue he had rejoined. The pull was effective and as Lamprocles gave up possession of the poison, he launched into his request.

"Father, I have long considered what action would be most proper — most educating — at this important time. I think, while you are... or are about to..."

His father blinked at him as if he were lost.

"... farewell life," Lamprocles recovered, "I think I would like to be there."

"Whatever for? The deathbed is no place for a child. I know you feel sadness, my son, but crying and grieving is not what I wish to see in my last moments. If I must die today, I want to be surrounded by what I love: philosophy and great debate. I'm sorry Lamprocles, no."

His father turned to rejoin the discussion, but Lamprocles jerked at his arm so heavily the poison almost spilled there and then.

"Please!" cried Lamprocles, his rehearsal evaporating, "I promise! I won't cry. I just want to listen. I just want to understand. I tried, I tried really hard to understand the trial but I couldn't. I'm sorry. Please, let me stay, let me try again. Before you go, I just want to understand."

His father made no reaction, he seemed to have already returned his ear to the dialogue.

Lamprocles felt his face flush with embarrassment and rage. It had fallen apart. The rehearsal had been useless, he had failed again.

Then his father shrugged. "I suppose there is no harm. Phaedo and a few others came here for a final exchange, they are not so much older than you. Very well, keep your reason about you and you can stay."

Lamprocles nodded vigorously, then restrained himself to a solemn bow. His father had already turned away and Lamprocles quickly followed his sandaled footsteps.

Lamprocles found a space in the dim prison cell and sat across from his father. The room was warm and crowded with so many adults that Lamprocles could barely be seen. He minded his posture and leaned forward to follow the dialogue between his father and another man named Phaedo.

It was nothing like the trial. There was some argument, but laughter and stories too. Lamprocles recognized some of them from years past. His father had told him of the "purer earth underneath us, whence flow all oceans and souls" to dispel Lamprocles' nightmares of the underworld and the slobbering three-headed hound that patrolled it.

But the biggest difference was in the faces around him. The expressions at the trial had been as severe as the sentence. Here, in a cell smelling of mold and crammed bodies, delight danced from face to face, leaping to the cadence of his father's voice. Lamprocles followed along, desperate to grasp that melody – but the faces and tune changed too quickly.

As the sun reached its peak and the discourse catechized to its conclusion, Lamprocles' father drank the poison, pouring it into his mouth from above, as if in libation. The rhetorical spell lost its effect at once, and the gathered students began to cry. Plato, the youngest of the assembly, was the first to descend into a mournful clamor, his face collapsing into his arms. Even Crito, his countenance normally sturdy with age, soon followed, sobbing for his childhood friend.

"What is this, you strange fellows?" cried his father. "It is mainly for this reason that I sent the woman away, to avoid such unseemliness. One should die in a good-omened silence. Control yourselves!" Suddenly, his voice faded to a whisper and he reclined onto his bed. "Here it is; the numbness crawls into my chest."

Lamprocles held his father's gaze, even as the hemlock undid life's work and turned veins white in front of him. Lamprocles would not cry. He could not blink.

His open eyes began to burn from dryness; motes of dust floating slowly into them. Still, Lamprocles could not look away. A slow change was happening. His father's face paled to the monochrome of marble and his lips lost the violet stains the poison had left. Even his pupils became the blank white circles of an unpainted bust.

Men began to move around Lamprocles. There was talking, and the vagaries of hushed discussion. Plato made declarations that were met with subdued cheer. No one remarked on the face.

Lamprocles could not stop himself anymore, he blinked.

Colorless eyes still met his. The marble face was still there.

Lamprocles understood. It would always be there for him; it was an eternal truth. His father had accepted execution to prove that death for the sake of honor could be beautiful and here it was, the proof manifest, as clear as if the face had spoken to him aloud.

The tears Lamprocles had so feared would shame him, no longer writhed behind his eyes. He captured them with a breath and now they bubbled in his chest, transmuting.

Lamprocles jumped from his seat and embraced the marble face, laughter rocking his small body. He held the pallid head to his bare chest as he laughed. The other mourners stared in concern as the boy cradled dead flesh, but Lamprocles was unaffected. Shame was a child's doll of virtue. Here, in his hands, he could cherish the thing itself.

Lamprocles pressed his cheek against the marble chill of his father's face as if listening to a dead whisper. His father had received such revelation, a Daemon that whispered to him when he strayed from the virtuous path. To heed this call, Socrates had rejected everything: his city, his family and life itself. Lamprocles would do the same. His father would tell him how.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pyrros Rubanis is a writer of philosophical, speculative and interactive fiction. He currently works at Northwestern University as a professional Socrates impersonator (i.e., a philosophy tutor). Read more of his work at pyrrhicdefeat.com.

THIS BURNING HOUSE

RANI JAYAKUMAR

Okay, I'll be the first to admit it: I'm a hopeless optimist.

Actually, I'm a hopeful optimist.

If you know me even a little, you probably don't think so. After all, I do love a good tear-jerking tragedy. I love to wallow in the irrepressible misery of a deep, depressing novel. I love to languish in the unctuous melancholy of a melodrama. While my little sister read Pride and Prejudice and Little Women for the thirteenth time, I was devouring An American Tragedy with the gluttony of the teenager I was. My books were dotted with tear-stains, and I spent hours contemplating paragraphs while gazing at the gray skies outside my bay window.

I read whatever dark literature I could get my hands on. I oohed over O'Henry. I palpitated over Poe. I hungered after Hardy.

It didn't stop at books. In movies, my sister preferred Field of Dreams and The Sound of Music. Together, yes, we watched The Wizard of Oz and Mary Poppins and My Fair Lady, and even (dare I say it?) It's a Wonderful Life. And I do still have a soft spot for Amelie. But my favorites have been Dead Poets Society and Ponette, honest-to-goodness sad, serious movies, over which I bawled, handkerchief in hand.

My love of the tragic extends to my image as a suffering-artist. That is, I also write poetry. Poetry that speaks of the terrible depravity of human nature. Poetry that looks deep into the black hole of Death and sees nothing. Poetry like that of unrequited love, of a teenager on the verge of suicide, or the unknown painter bleeding from his heart.

I'm not the only one who sees my love of the negative and depressing. My husband says I am always looking at the negative side of things. And yes, I do shoot down perfectly legitimate plans to party on the weekend. I do tell him we can't possibly weed the whole garden ourselves. When he says, look at this great idea I have, I say "Well, that won't work. You haven't considered A and B and C and D. How are you ever going to do that?" Isn't that pessimism?

You might say so.

What he and others have missed is that I have something that refuses to let me stay sad and depressed, no matter what I might say. After all, like

Anne Frank, I believe people are good at heart. I inherently like everyone. I would probably even give Hitler the benefit of the doubt, though I'd never admit it.

No matter how much I wish to languish in poignant melancholy, something brings me back to a relentless, sickening smile that hurts my jaws. If you have been the recipient of one of those smiles, I apologize now.

Why, when I am most despondent, do I still stop to say hi? How can I look at others and say, cheer up, things will be better?

I have hope, no matter all the horrid things that happen in my life. I can sincerely say that I genuinely hate no one. Even now, I still know that tomorrow will be a better day. For the most part, I can turn my cares off and enjoy something else.

So no matter how hard I try to be negative, it fails for me. Of course, you don't want to be sitting next to me while I try.

***

My father always told me to expect the worst, but prepare for the best. But I never have. I expected good, and I was not often disappointed.

I had my share of suffering in school (who didn't?). But I expected to get good grades, and I did. I expected to always have my family to rely on, and I do. I have expected to be unreasonably lucky in certain matters, and unlucky in others. Those, too, held true.

But there is one topic that keeps me on my toes: the environment. Oh, don't scoff and turn away.

The "state of the environment" is one of those issues that makes lovers or haters of people. You either believe in a worsening planet or an improving one. You believe that something can be done to "save the earth," or that it is all hopeless. You are willing to change your life drastically for that purpose or you are not. You are either an optimist or a pessimist.

And I am an optimist. Perhaps, in this case, a hopeless optimist. And I am a messenger of that optimism.

When I was in my thirties, I remember feeling like I'd just woken up and found out the house was on fire. Raging fire. Boy was I glad I woke up! Unfortunately, everyone else was still sleeping, and I was trying hard to shake them awake. "Wake up, wake up, there's a fire!" I yelled. At the same time, I tried to douse the fire with a few bucketfuls of my own.

***

Here is the house: it's a world full of the green and lush and beautiful things we love for no reason other than that they are beautiful.

Take flowers. On some level, you know that flowers are necessary for the bees to make honey and for insects to live and for providing us with plant food and fruits. But in an instant glance, a flower is only a flower. A thing of beauty. A joy.

But it is not forever, despite Keats' optimism. It, too, will fade and disappear, but leave behind a sweet fruit. And the fruit will be eaten or fall and feed insects and birds. And the seed that remains will sprout and bring forth more new flowers.

So the house is made of flowers and fruits and seeds and leaves and trees and insects and animals. But it is also made of water.

Water that the ants suck in little droplets. Water that is life-giving and clean and fresh like dew. Water that rains from clouds and seeps into fruits to be sweetened. Water that runs in creeks to rivers to lakes to the sea.

So the house is also made of water and juice and rain and rivers and oceans and clouds. And these run on land.

The land that grows the trees, that houses the insects and animals, that stores the rain. Land that is earth, soil, and clay and mud. The land that once was the moon and planets.

So the floor and the walls of the house are made of land and soil and mud and planets.

The roof of the house is the sky. The sky that is air and wind and the atmosphere and vacuums of nothingness, too.

These all make the house: plants and animals, water, land, and sky.

And then comes the fire. This is not the fire of the sky--the sun, light, the distant stars. This is a fire of our own making. This is a fire we lit to keep warm, and then left on too long and too large and too full of things that we do not need. A fire that we light inside our houses to black out the sky, and to block the wind, and to dry up the rain. Billy Joel was wrong, we did start the fire. But he might also be right--when we are gone, will it burn on and on?

Is it the pessimist in me that says this?

***

This fire is now burning down our house, nearly to ashes. But how did we build it?

First, we tore away from the land to bring stones and make a place for our fire. We cut down trees and robbed the wildlife of homes to bring fuel for our fire. We lit the fire using the heat of the sun, yes, but also oil we wrested from the land, and the ashes flew up into the sky. We dumped the rest of the ashes into the water and made it unclean.

And then we taught others to build more and bigger and better fires, and how to keep them strong and burning in different colors, and how to cook on them and how to keep them overnight, and how to spread them across the house.

And so they did. Soon there were fires in every room of the house, from ceiling to basement. There were small fires and big fires, and fires within fires. There were even fires outside the house.

And we taught more and more people how to create them and take care of them.

But never how to put them out.

***

How do you put out a fire?

A fire needs 3 things to grow and start a chemical chain reaction: oxygen, fuel, and heat.

Where does the oxygen come from? It is the oxygen in the air we breathe. It could also be an oxidizer, which yields oxygen. And as the fire grows, it becomes harder and harder to breathe.

Where does the fuel come from? The wood of the trees, the oil of the land, the stuff of our lives. And as the fire grows, the fuel that remains is less and less.

Where does the heat come from? Oh that has many sources. One is from the sun, which is a nearly inexhaustible source of energy. But the other is our own effort, our own rubbing away at the fuel to make a spark. We always have a spark of imagination and effort.

Given that a fire needs these to grow, how do you put it out? You take away one or all.

How do we take away oxygen? A fire that is out of control will eat up all

the oxygen it can get. The only way to stop it is to separate it from the oxygen. It is the stop, drop, and roll method--smothering of the fire by blocking all air from it. But this is not easy!

How do we remove fuel? Stop feeding the fire with fuel! But unfortunately, all the fuel you've already put in is still burning.

How do we remove heat? You can cool the fire with water, but beware cool winds, which can just increase the oxygen available to the fire.

What does this tell you? It's better to start a small fire you can control, if at all, and to watch it carefully, and put it out when it's no longer needed.

What does all this have to do with our house? Only that if we had been more careful, we wouldn't have a situation that is now out of hand.

Does saying that make me a pessimist?

***

So what if it burns? Who cares?

A lot of people say, let the house burn. We'll still have some sort of land. We'll eventually put it out. We can go somewhere else, too. Some even say, hey, I smell smoke, but I don't see flames, maybe it's not really burning.

But they forget that more people die of smoke inhalation than of being burned. Hot smoke can suffocate you, has toxic gases in it that can poison you, and it can burn the insides of your lungs. These are terrible ways to die.

Okay, but let's say you survive the fire. When the house is gone, what is left?

The plants and animals will have died, burned or suffocated.

The water will be dried up, heated up and evaporated, or contaminated by the poisons of the fire.

The air will be thinned, depleted of oxygen by fire.

And the land? Yes, it will be there, but it will be depleted of fertile topsoil, not to mention the micro-organisms that fertilize and aerate the soil. It might not hold any remaining water, and may break up into mush.

And that will be all that remains of the house. Is that a house you'd like to live in?

I certainly don't. And so, we have to put out the fire. Even if we didn't start it. And even if it's not really our fault.

***

In the old days, dousing a fire with water or covering it was all that people could do. Modern techniques involve flame-retardant foam to separate the flame from the oxygen, and chemicals that stop or alter the chemical reaction. Fuels are removed from nearby areas to prevent spread, and flame-retardants are sprayed. Gels are used to store water that helps cool and put out the fire as well.

In any case, there's always a danger to life, which is really the question: how does one LIVE in a burning house? You cannot. And so, you must evacuate to somewhere safer until the house is safe. Then, slowly, you move back in and start to rebuild.

In this burning house we call our planet, where can we go to escape? The pessimist says, "Nowhere."

***

The optimist has a different idea altogether. Why must you escape? Why not be brave? Why not fight the fire of our own making? Why not bring to bear all the modern technologies and all the traditional technologies and the millions of people we have to start cooling the fire, and to save ourselves some oxygen, and to eventually put out the fire? Why not stop making MORE fires, which we are still doing, despite all the burning! Why not try to make our existing fires smoke-free, so that they are safer? Why not burn them slower, and less often, and put them out when we don't need them? Why not end the fires altogether?

The pessimist says "It can't be done. And even if it could, who would want to?"

The optimist says, "Bring it on."

***

At my first Halloween, I wanted to be Wonder Woman. My parents bought me a Wonder Woman mask, but I had no outfit (another girl did). I walked from house to house, escorted by my babysitter, facing terrifyingly-dressed strangers who inexplicably handed out candy.

Wonder Woman is based on the Greek Diana, an Amazon who presided over forests and the moon. Like all superheroes, she supported truth and justice, but she was also able to communicate with animals. As one of the first comic book female superheroes, she was quite an environmentalist. And I had

a superhero to admire.

Being a protector of forests and animals is part of the life of certain people, like firefighters and rangers and Wonder Woman, but what does it have to do with ordinary life? How is my life affecting those of others?

A lesson I learned early was that of eating meat. Though I didn't learn its full implications until later, eating meat, it turns out, is an icky thing.

When I was three, I went over to meet a young friend of mine. Her family was not vegetarian. I watched while the little girl munched her way through a hot dog. When I asked, my mother let me have one. (Later she told me, what could she say?) I loved it. That was my first experience with meat.

Afterwards, our neighbors had two kids my age, a brother and sister, who would sneak me thin pieces of bologna. I must have eaten several.

For a few weeks, I would beg my parents for hot dogs at the grocery store. They said no, we're vegetarians, we don't eat that stuff. They avoided the issue, until they could no longer. One day, they sat me down and explained: hot dogs were made from pigs. Living pigs were killed to make hot dogs to eat. If you eat a hot dog, you're eating a pig.

I was sufficiently disgusted. I stopped asking for it, and I stopped sneaking meat immediately.

Even my childhood brain could understand that eating another animal was not something I wanted to do. After all, animals are living, breathing, feeling creatures. Would you eat your pet? Would you eat your neighbor's pet? Some do.

***

The deeper implications of meat are larger, I learned later. Hot dogs, for example, don't just come from pigs. They may contain various unsavory parts of a cow or pig. For every pound of hotdogs grown on a piece of land, you can grow 121 pounds of potatoes. For that pound of hotdogs, you use a hundred times more water than for growing wheat.

Eating vegetarian has health implications too. But it's an environmentally friendly choice.

And an ethical one? Sure. Isn't your dog happy to see you? Sad when you go? Do you doubt that a pig or cow has similar feelings?

The house was burning, and we have been creating bonfires to throw in animals to cook and eat. At the same time, others starved.

The pessimist seems vindicated, for the moment.

***

What of the plants? We can save all the animals, but what about them? Don't they deserve to live, too?

I'm reminded of a story. A boy traps a deer to eat. The deer says, "Please don't eat me, I have a family and children to take care of." So the boy lets go of the deer and goes to the river and catches a fish. The fish says, "Please don't eat me. I have little minnows and reeds to take care of." So the boy puts the fish back and traps a bird. The bird says, "Please don't eat me, I have some little eggs to sit on," and the boy lets the bird go. He grabs some insects, but they say, "Please don't eat us, we have families and hives and hills who need us," and so he lets them go, too. He tries to dig out some roots, but they say, "Please don't eat us, we have to grow and spread seeds to help the land grow," and so he stops. Finally, he picks some berries, and they are happy to be eaten, because he spits out the seeds and they grow into new berry bushes. He picks some fruits and plants the seeds to make more beautiful fruit trees.

Is that the ideal meal? To eat without destroying plants, and to eat what you find in the wild rather than cultivating the earth, and growing things to kill them? Could we possibly live like that?

Traditional hunter-gatherers did indeed gather berries for survival. They supplemented their berries with nuts for protein, and added fish and game that they hunted. Animals harvested sustainably, but harvested nonetheless. But the berries and nuts, just growing and waiting to be plucked. A mutually beneficial situation, since eating the fruit and spitting out the seed helps the plant as well as the animal.

Some cultures, including those of the Jain and Hindu religions, did not believe in eating whole plants, because the entire plant is killed for food. They did not eat tubers like potatoes, or bulbs like onions and garlic, or even carrots.

Plants also suck up a lot of water, and most of our daily water use is for cultivation of various plants, whether it's a lush green lawn or vegetables and fruits and grains for food.

***

How could we have saved the water from the fire? A first step might have been to contaminate it less, and this would have come from sound business practices that produce less waste and perform less processing, which requires water for cleaning and for making nearly any product.

In our daily lives, we could have consciously chosen to use less water, whether in our bathrooms or in our yards. We could have recycled the water we used for multiple purposes: water from the sink could be piped to the toilet, and the cold water that ran in the shower at first could be used on plants.

We could also have been careful of using things as little-processed as possible. For example, rinsing hands with a little water would have been preferable to using a new paper towel because making the paper towel itself required water.

I can think of a million things I could have, should have done.

***

The land also required protection. We should have kept away the contaminants, as with water. Why dump garbage in the land? Why didn't we recycle or reuse everything we could, and compost the rest? Nothing should have gone to waste.

Keeping the land from harm meant that we should have used less oil. Less oil means less transportation, whether by road or air. Less oil means less shipping of goods across the country or around the world, and less use of things that require power, from lights to laptops.

And finally, the land we did use should have been treated well. Pesticides kill insects, but they can also hurt the soil, birds, fish, and us. Planting the same crops again and again can ruin land, as can flooding and removing trees.

There were no excuses for what we did.

***

In reality, the plants, animals, water, land, and sky of our dream house are inseparable. Plants grow with water from the soil and reach up to the sun and sky, and insects and animals eat them and fertilize them, and drink water and make homes in them or on the land, and the sky brings rain. Land is made up also of plants and animals and water. And water covers land and plants and animals, and goes up to the sky as clouds. Plants and animals are made up of water and land and air.

And this is how it was. Even in my lifetime, there has been some of that. But now everything has changed.

***

It all started at the dawn of the "Reagan administration," though some

might claim it was going on all along, ever since the building of cities. Things just kept going from bad to worse. And from worse to even worse. We all naively kept hoping for better, and protested and walked in the streets, but mumbled that the next president would change things, or that individuals really could make a difference. We went about, casting our votes blindly, as seven presidents took power and carried out their work in ever more stealthy ways.

And then everything was different, seemingly in a flash. No one anticipated it, not even the scientists were so far-sighted. They and the doctors had been working on improvements to human health and quality of life for a number of years, building slowly upon previous discoveries from even the turn of the previous millennium. But as people aged, the private money came in, and no one could stop it.

I was over 60 when it happened. As a scientist living in California, I was one of the lucky few who received Methuselixir, the very first longevity treatment. It was an RNA, DNA, hormone, enzyme, and stem cell mix that would simultaneously lengthen telomeres, improve bone and muscle density, work as an antioxidant, and regenerate my immune system and organs, among other things. It was twenty-five years in the making, and it was a feat of science.

Little did I know I wouldn't want to live another 200 years.

At 63, I was just too old for Youthanasia, which many young people were choosing (all that middle-age angst). In retrospect I should have volunteered for the Population Reduction Project, removing myself and future generations from the gene pool. Little did I know those were the lucky ones.

At first, things were better. With the hundreds of people who volunteered (or were volunteered by guardians) for those two schemes--the elderly, the technology-averse, the unborn children, the vegetative, the population of the Earth began to drop rapidly. From 15 billion, the population fell to six within two years, and as more and more received sterilization vaccines, the population plummeted enough for the scientists to start to worry, and all the efforts--Youthanasia, PRP, vaccination, and ad campaigns--were halted. Over another year, we stabilized at a comfortable 3 billion, with plenty of space and resources for everyone.

With very few children being born after sterilization, the population aged steadily. For fifty years, no one died for biological reasons, either (vehicle

accidents were still common). When the first "oldies" turned 150 and keeled over, it was sensational news. Of course, everyone knew they got the earliest generation of Methuselixir, but they had already been nearly 100 when they were treated, so it was a sad reminder of mortality in a world without it.

When they died, they died not of the pre-longevity reasons--heart failure, diabetes--but of somewhat new complications. That was terrifying to everyone. They died most often of new types of cancer--telomerase that had run unchecked and let cells divide just a bit too much. Hormones that grew new parts that would not have grown otherwise.

By then, I was over 100 years old myself, starting to feel middle-aged, and slightly in fear of those same problems coming to me within the next fifty years. But science marches onward, and a new batch of treatments dubbed Markandia was stretching the limits of the human lifespan. I passed 150 with no medical problems other than an occasional cold, but I also witnessed the transformation of society.

For starters, a longer lifespan alone can be dreary--why go on and on with the same backache you've had for 50 years, and poor vision, and lack of sensation, shaky hands, an unreliable hearing aid, and arthritis? But combine a long lifespan with the same kind of life you had at 50, and things look better. As time has marched on, people have been getting the treatments earlier and earlier, and now it is standard to offer longevity treatments just prior to the earliest onset of puberty (typically at age 5, as it had been growing earlier and earlier due to environmental pollutants). The treatments are adapted so that most kids just grew to adults and aged no further than the previous "early 30s" did when I was that age. But few have children anymore anyway.

Other things have changed in ways no one predicted. With longer lifespans, we all had time to think over our lives. We considered each decision carefully--there was no rush to finish anything, or worry over short-term consequences of our actions. We started thinking long-term. Maybe something you do today really could affect you a hundred years hence. And it might really truly affect your children, or your grandchildren.

We became slower. Whereas in my childhood fast food was something you picked up in 5 minutes, our typical meals were two hours long. We had three a day. Everyone slept at least eight hours a day, and alarm clocks became a thing of the past.

The rich were no longer rich. Money became unimportant when you had time to think. We cherished other things in our long lives: the

companionship of others, knowledge, creativity, and science. We experimented with whole careers, begun, learned in the 10,000 hours it takes to reach mastery, performed for another decade, and then just as easily abandoned. We developed new technologies, explored places never seen, then tired of even that. We revived entire species with genetic techniques, watched them become endangered, then brought them back from the brink of extinction with ever newer technologies.

As we tired, we wished for an Earth the way it was. After all, we could be less careful now. What could happen? So when I passed 250, the world became strikingly similar to the way it was when I was 40.

"Little did I know" is the key phrase that means (as shown in Stranger Than Fiction) that something bad is going to happen. I've said it before, and that's what's needed here. Little did I know what was coming.

Well, we set out to create an early 21st century utopia. Back came the cars, the electricity, the airplanes, the televisions, the phones. It became fashionable to use fossil fuels again. We mistakenly believed that surely in 300 years they had been replenished, or at least still remained underground.

We started using up resources again. Trees were felled, and we dug into the undisturbed earth once more. We started up the nuclear and coal plants. We lazed around and ate processed foods. Somehow life seemed to move faster. We loved it.

As we dug, we should have known. (Another of those phrases...) In the midst of coal, microplastics. Gases released chemicals. At the bottom of the ocean was oil, but also plastic bits, and so little life, as if nothing had grown here in centuries.

Right then we should have scared ourselves awake. In our complacency, we weren't taking the Markandia anymore. At birth was enough, and no new births had happened in many decades.

We found the chemicals had a shocking effect on our still-human bodies. Bodies that--unlike what we believed--were not immortal after all.

Radiation, if you do not know, damages DNA. Chemicals in plastics and in herbicides and insecticides and other poisons damage our cells, our blood, and even our eggs and sperm, affecting not just this generation but the next. Radicals in certain foods also make our cells age more quickly.

Soon our telomeres were short again. Our bodies aged. I saw my first new wrinkle at the ripe old age of 304, followed by more. I felt fatigue from

living so long, but also an unknown discomfort, a strange unsettled feeling that only let up on walks through the forest.

Ten years later, only a handful of us are left, trying to turn it around. Me, my husband, some ancient friends. We have, sadly, outlived my children, a heartbreaking tragedy worthy of my tears for ages hence. We've brought back the slow lives we knew a hundred and fifty years ago, and perhaps even millennia ago. We've come full circle, learning through experience what was staring us in the face once. And again, and again.

We'll keep fighting, just the sparse few of us will make something of what remains of Homo sapiens on this planet. The sparse vegetation, the sparse fauna, the sparse air, the sparse water. Only fire remains, a house burned to cinders.

We fight, perhaps too late, for this planet. After all, I'm a hopeless optimist.

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NORDA

JIBRIL STEVENSON

Kristoforo had expected the ice walls to be just that, walls. You climb them and you're on the other side.

Conventional wisdom held that there was nothing on the other side. The walls represented the end of the world, beyond which lay only the void. When Espero told him what she'd read in the old books about the world being round, he'd laughed at first. But eventually, when she'd shown him how to interpret the passages in long-dead languages, he'd come to believe.

Still, nothing in any old book could have prepared any of them for the expanse of ice and snow that extended before them, to the horizon and beyond.

"Are you sure?" he asked Espero. "Are you sure there's anything out there? The ice looks like it goes on forever."

"It's summertime, so once we get over the permanent ice cover, the coastal regions should be snow-free."

Coastal regions. The ocean. That was something Kristoforo simply could not imagine. Espero said it was like Lake Renaskiĝo, but so vast that one could not walk all the way around it in a year of years, nor see the other side, even with a spyglass.

And that was not the end of it. Espero said—and she had shown him the maps on which she based her outlandish assertions—that beyond the ocean lay other lands, hundreds and thousands of kilometers across, that had once been filled with all manner of fantastic plants and animals. There had been people, too, more people than Kristoforo could ever imagine. Perhaps there still were.

It was the look in Espero's eyes that had convinced Kristoforo, more than any worm-eaten books or yellowing maps. When she talked about the vastness of the world, they brimmed with childish wonder, something Kristoforo hadn't felt since boyhood, when he used to climb the birch behind his house and look down at the rooftops like a bird in flight. He would give anything to feel that wonder again, even abandon his beloved orchards to follow her across the icy waste.

"But how far to reach the end of the ice?" he asked, though she had briefed everyone on the expected distances many times before they left home.

"Perhaps six hundred kilometers," she said, "depending how much the ice may have melted."

Six hundred kilometers. That could take weeks. Months even. Luckily, Espero had convinced Johano de Danjeloj, son of the famous caravaneer, to at least pretend to believe her theory, and he had procured twelve of the syndicate's hardiest ponies and outfitted them for a long voyage. Long-distance trade was his syndicate's specialty, but even its caravans had never traveled such a distance—some five times the span of the known world—and certainly not over a plain of solid ice.

Johano came up beside them, raising his spyglass to his eye to survey the ice as if he were the one leading the expedition. "Well," he said, as if the ice hadn't produced in him the same primordial fear of the unknown as in Kristoforo, and even Espero, though she tried valiantly to hide it. "Shall we go?"

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Out on the ice, it was as cold as the coldest days of winter back home, even though the sun was high in the sky.

The party made poorer time than they had hoped, for even with studded shoes, the ponies could not move as quickly over bare ice as over solid ground. The ice was a vast plain of blinding white, and utterly featureless, but it hid deep crevasses filled with snow. These were not impassable, for the loose snow was only a few feet deep, the hard-pack underneath able to bear the travelers' weight, but made for treacherous footing for the ponies.

Not four days into the trip, one of Johano's animals broke an ankle in one of these crevasses and they had to put it down. The poor animal moaned and thrashed until Severo put a bullet in its brain, then it just flopped down in the blood-stained snow, where it would presumably remain forever. There were no animals to scavenge the dead flesh out here on the ice, and the bitter cold would soon freeze it so thoroughly it would likely never rot. Weeks later, as rations ran low, the travelers would wish they'd butchered the unfortunate animal, but at the time no one had the stomach for horsemeat.

That left eleven ponies to pull the six sledges, which carried their tents, extra clothing, fuel and rations of biscuit, jerky and dried fruit. The food had been selected to keep in the cold and be edible after defrosting with the

travelers' body heat. They had packed a few more substantial meals as well, freeze-dried but easily reconstituted with a little boiled water in camp. It was simple fare, boring after the first few days, but it kept their bellies full.

There were six of them: Kristoforo and Espero, the architects of the expedition; Johano and his wife Nikolasino, its financial backers; Severo the hunter; and the lovely Fatino. No one knew much about Fatino, except that she represented the Syndical Confederation. No one could say why she insisted on joining the expedition, and she was not forthcoming with that information, but she was a hard worker and good company, so no one complained.

What Kristoforo could say was that the sex ratio was no happenstance. He had made it clear to everyone involved that the dangers of the outside were entirely unknown, and that there was a good possibility the expedition would be unable to return home for years, or perhaps ever. Therefore they would travel as pairs—humans and ponies alike—prepared to turn their voyage of discovery into one of colonization should the situation warrant.

Two days after the pony's death, it became clear that its surviving partner could not pull a sledge alone. They removed all the fuel and comestibles from the sledge and packed them into makeshift saddlebags for the pony to carry, but the sledge itself would have to be abandoned, and with it the sixth tent and stove.

Johano would share a tent with his wife going forward, though it was only just big enough for a single person to sleep comfortably. Kristoforo would have volunteered to share with Espero, and Johano would likely have preferred her company or Fatino's to his own wife's, but there was decorum to observe even this far from civilization. The matter was not even discussed, except for Kristoforo's admonition not to steam up the tent too much or they would regret it in the morning. He was only half-joking, for they'd found that the stoves had to be kept at a low heat, just barely above freezing, or everything in the tent would get damp overnight and freeze once they were outside again.

By the end of the third week, all had grown accustomed to the routine. Rise at 00h00, which would be sunrise in the spring, but provided a purely arbitrary start time during these months of twenty-four-hour sun. Dress, feed ponies, cold breakfast, pack up sleep sacks and then stoves and tents, then march until 05h00 with two short breaks. Set up camp, feed and water ponies, hot supper, and then sleep. But the routine, the close quarters and the lack of measurable progress was getting to everyone.

Johano and Nikolasino bickered non-stop, and because they were perpetually annoyed with each other, they bickered with everyone else, too. Espero's assurances that they were getting closer to the coast, which had done so much to keep spirits high in the first week, were met with cynicism by week three. No one had ever been away from home for this long, not even Johano, and without notable landmarks, no one could be sure they weren't just wandering aimlessly on the ice.

Espero assured them that the compass she carried was accurate, and that as long as they followed the N arrow they would not stray from their path, but what had seemed like solid science back home now seemed like dangerous speculation. "Our homeland is not at the south magnetic pole," she explained. "The magnetic pole is in the ocean, but we are traveling to the opposite coast, directly away from the pole, so a northerly magnetic heading will keep us on course." Johano and Severo, who had the most practical experience with overland travel, merely scoffed. They had always navigated using landmarks and terrain features.

Toward the end of the month, when they could see the bottom of the ration crates but not the end of the ice, the whole party was at the end of their ropes, but Johano and Severo were on the edge of open mutiny. All six travelers had rifles, for Espero had read that there were dangerous beasts along the coast, but only Severo had any experience shooting, or so they thought.

It was, ironically, on the day of La Festivalo de la Paco that the two men made their move. They had risen at 09h90, along with Nikolasino, and retrieved the others' rifles from their sledges, since, in the absence of any animal threat, no one had bothered keeping their weapons close at hand. After everyone had woken and broken camp, the three mutineers pointed their rifles at the others.

Johano, who had fixed his aim on Kristoforo, spoke first. "We are turning around," he said. His tone was matter-of-fact, as if he were addressing apprentice teamsters on one of his caravans, but his expression betrayed his anger, his readiness for violence. "We are not prepared to die on this endless ice."

"We can't turn around," Espero retorted, heedless of Severo's rifle pointed at her chest. "We are hundreds of kilometers from home. We don't have enough fuel or rations to make it back."

"And whose fault is that?" Severo snarled. "You told us we would be over the ice wall by now."

Kristoforo had kept silent, but his mind was working. He would not allow these fools to destroy what he and Espero had worked so hard for. They would cross the ice or die trying. He backed away, toward his sledge. He knew without looking that his rifle would be gone, but he knew exactly where he kept his ice axe.

Espero hadn't moved. She was explaining how she'd estimated the distance, though the mutineers clearly didn't want to hear it.

Kristoforo wondered if Fatino would join in the call to turn back, tipping the scales more than the rifles already had, but just as he glanced in her direction she dove to the ground and came to her feet behind her own sledge, with some kind of weapon in her hand. She fired a single shot in the air.

Nikolasino raised her rifle to her shoulder, but couldn't fire, whether due to mechanical malfunction or lack of nerves Kristoforo would never know. But in the split-second Johano and Severo had turned their weapons on Fatino, Kristoforo was able to grab his axe and charge at Johano.

Johano fired a shot that struck the ice in front of Fatino's sledge, and was working the bolt to reload, when Kristoforo tackled him. They both fell to the ground and grappled for a few seconds, Johano trying to swing his rifle in the close quarters, Kristoforo trying to control Johano's flailing limbs with his one free hand. It was no use, he knew. There was no way out of this without bloodshed. He raised the axe over his head to deliver the killing blow, but Severo's voice stopped him.

"Drop it or I'll kill her," he said.

Kristoforo knew "her" was Espero, who had not taken cover at all. He had seen Severo drop a wild hen in flight from hundreds of yards away, so he had no doubt the hunter would not miss a human target at point blank range.

"Drop yours or I'll kill *you,*" shouted Fatino from behind her sledge. "This is an automatic pistol. It holds sixteen rounds and shoots as fast as I can pull the trigger. You might make one shot, but I'll shoot you to pieces before you can chamber another round."

As the seconds passed, Kristoforo let his eyes flit over to Severo, whose own gaze oscillated between Fatino peeking around the rear of her sledge and Espero standing motionless in the open.

“Look,” Espero called out, her tone urgent but controlled. Moving nothing but her eyes, she directed Kristoforo’s attention to the sky behind him.

Ensuring he had Johano pinned down tightly enough to risk a glance, Kristoforo turned his head in the direction she’d indicated.

A bird was soaring high overhead. It was not a chicken or pigeon, or poultry of any kind, nor one of the gulls that nested around Lake Renaskiĝo. It was bigger than any bird Kristoforo had ever seen, and pure white except for the black tips of its enormous wings.

Kristoforo returned to the task at hand, but even Johano was looking at the bird from his prostrate position. “Is that...?

“A seabird,” Espero said, the wonder in her voice tempered by the certain knowledge that she was right. “An... albatross.”

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No blood was shed that day. After sighting the albatross, there was no more talk of turning back. They would later learn that albatrosses fly for thousands of kilometers, never landing, even sleeping in the heavens, and that sighting one was no guarantee the sea was within reach. But in their ignorance, they took hope and persevered, following Espero and her N arrow wherever they might lead.

The would-be mutineers went sheepishly about their business, pretending the confrontation had never happened, and neither Kristoforo nor Espero felt it would be in the group’s best interest to call them on it. Only Fatino felt the need to explain her role in that day’s events.

“A few members of the Syndical Confederation have always known about the things you have discovered in your studies,” she told Espero. “Not everything, for few are scholars such as you, but the basics. The knowledge has been passed down since we first settled our land.”

“I could find nothing in the library about the time of the first settlement.”

“The founders wanted to create a new world, free from the injustices of the societies they came from. They chose the most remote part of this remote continent for their settlement, and used powerful explosives to blast a vast crater through the ice cap. The ice would keep us safe from rising temperatures, and from the war raging outside. Many would-be settlers never

reached our homeland, but those who made it abandoned their old nationalities, their religions and languages and cultures, every distinction that made one man raise his fist against another. The new world would not repeat the errors of the old."

"So why keep books at all? Why permit this expedition?"

"There has always been danger that the outside world would one day intrude upon our own, and some argued that we should keep such records for the day when we might need them. It is not our way to coerce, to forbid, to punish. If someone like you discovered the old books, and someone like Kristoforo organized an expedition, it is your right. Anyway, we should have some intelligence of the outside world, for our own peace of mind."

"So what intelligence do you hope to find across the ice, Fatino"

"Me? I hope we find nothing at all."

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A few days later, on the third of Ventoso of the year 212, the party climbed down off the ice sheet onto a grassy plain. Nearby, a stream bubbled up from somewhere below the ice, and they followed its course through this new land.

Once they were away from the ice, the air was warmer than anything they'd ever experienced at home. The land was greener, too, covered with grass and small bushes, and here and there a tree, of varieties no one had ever seen, though Espero recognized some from her books. The albatross was gone, but other birds soared and fluttered overhead, occasionally diving into the stream or the tall grass to emerge with fish or rodents between their beaks. A little way downstream, a tribe of flightless birds—penguins, Espero called them—frolicked in the stream, but they all hopped out and scattered in panic when a large mammal made its appearance and began snapping at them.

"Seal," said Espero.

Not one to miss an opportunity, Severo shot the beast, and they dragged it back to the little camp they'd set up a few hundred meters from the edge of the ice sheet, which was as far as the ponies could pull the sledges on dry ground. The meat was richer and fattier than anything they had ever tasted at home.

The travelers stayed in camp for a week, hunting, foraging for berries and roots among the tall grass, and simply resting from their trek over the ice. When they saw smoke on the horizon, though, they knew it was time to move.

"Could that be volcanic?" Kristoforo asked Espero. "Wildfire?"

She shrugged. "I only know what I've read in books written hundreds of years ago in a language I can barely understand."

They transferred whatever they could into saddlebags and left the rest—most of the tentage and stoves, along with their skis and extra clothing—hidden under oilskins in the sledges. Then they set out along the streambank toward the source of the smoke.

***

The natives saw the travelers first, or rather, their dog did, and it set to howling.

"Keep moving," Kristoforo said. "They know we're here, so we might as well get close and say hello."

They approached the natives' camp slowly, each traveler with his or her rifle slung over one shoulder, not threatening but readily accessible. Hundreds of woolly, goat-like animals wandered around the single tent.

Outside the tent stood a teenage boy with a rifle in his hand. He shouted a stream of unintelligible syllables.

"I think he is speaking Hispana," said Espero. "I don't know it."

"Try whatever language you do know, then."

Espero opened her mouth and began to speak slowly, haltingly, first in her own tongue and then in a language Kristoforo had seen in her ancient books but never heard spoken aloud.

"*Do... do you speak... English?*"

He didn't, but he seemed to recognize the attempt at communication. He spoke again in Hispana, but more slowly this time, then he pantomimed placing his rifle on the ground, though he did not actually let go of the weapon for a moment.

Slowly, Kristoforo and Espero set their own rifles down and backed away. The others followed suit.

The boy beckoned for them to come closer.

What followed was the strangest conversation Kristoforo had ever experienced, the boy speaking Hispana, the travelers Nia Lingvo, and Espero trying to speak Angla though no one else could understand her. The boy, whose name was Miguel, was astonished that the travelers had come over the ice, but hardly more astonished than they were that his family lived many kilometers away in a place called Nueva Mendoza, and that hundreds of people lived there.

"Nobody is supposed to live here," Espero whispered. "That's what the books say. Just a few scientists in temporary camps."

"How old are your books, though? People must have moved in since they were written."

She was silent. Throughout the journey, she had been the expert, confident in her knowledge even when everyone doubted. But now she was as lost as the others.

"Ask him if Nueva Mendoza is on the coast," Kristoforo said.

After she'd asked in Angla and Nia Lingvo, repeating her question with different wording, Miguel finally shook his head.

"No," he said. "San Juan Bosco." He held a hand up, his thumb and forefinger about a centimeter apart. "Nueva Mendoza." Then he held up his other hand and widened the distance between them to about half a meter. "Juan Bosco."

***

The shepherd boy led the travelers to Nueva Mendoza, a jumble of ramshackle dwellings of wood and aluminum surrounded by pens holding sheep and poultry. There were a few people in the streets, some of whom greeted Miguel effusively and inquired about the strangers.

The travelers had not been in town for more than ten minutes before they were surrounded by men in dirt-brown uniforms, armed with a kind of rifle Kristoforo had never seen before. Having left their own rifles and most of their gear in a cache outside of town, and surrounded by hundreds of strangers, the travelers knew better than to resist.

The uniformed men took them to a brick building with a small office on one side and an open bay on the other, separated from the office by an iron grate. In the corner, an old man lay asleep, while two younger men sat on a

bench chatting until the newcomers were ushered inside and the grate closed behind them.

Kristoforo looked around, terrified. There was nothing like this at home, but he knew it was a prison. The others looked as frightened as he felt: Johano and his wife, Severo, even Espero. Fatino was nowhere to be seen.

How had she evaded capture? Kristoforo had not seen her escape, and neither had their captors, apparently. She'd been with the party when they first reached Nueva Mendoza, but Kristoforo couldn't say when he last distinctly remembered seeing her. The others seemed to be reaching the same realization, but no one said anything.

A few minutes later, another uniformed man, perhaps the leader of the group, came up to the grate and addressed the travelers in a strange language, different from Hispana. Kristoforo only recognized the word "*English*."

Espero responded in her halting Angla, and she and the man exchanged words for several minutes before he walked away.

"What is going on?" Kristoforo asked when he was out of earshot.

"The Hispanoj and the Angloj are at war," she said.

"War?" Kristoforo remembered the term from Espero's lessons about the outside world, but he could not wrap his mind around it. Apart from schoolboy fights and the near-mutiny on the ice, he had no experience with violence.

"Yes," she said. "They are fighting over land for their crops and sheep. The soldiers think we are spies for the Angloj."

***

They were in prison for two days, the boredom and fear punctuated only by fruitless interrogation by the soldiers, before they got their chance to escape.

Early in the morning, when the early autumn sun was barely over the horizon, there was a rumbling, crashing sound, like thunder, but each clap shook the building like an earthquake.

"*¡Los ingleses!*" shouted one of the native prisoners.

The travelers had learned enough Hispana by then to understand what that meant. The Angloj were attacking. War had come to Nueva Mendoza.

The handful of soldiers who always lounged in the office throughout the day rushed out to join the fight, leaving only one of their number to guard the prisoners. When they'd been gone a few minutes, the outside door squeaked open, letting in a shaft of morning sunlight. The remaining soldier squinted and got up to close the door, but then there was a single gunshot and he toppled over backward.

It was Fatino. She searched the dead soldier for the key to unlock the grate, deflecting Kristoforo's questions with, "Not now."

Once she'd unlocked the grate, she led the travelers through the mostly deserted streets, taking care to stay out of the view of the soldiers running here and there, until they reached the spot where their gear was stashed. The local prisoners had disappeared.

As shells exploded around them, the travelers half ran, half crawled until they'd put a kilometer between themselves and Nueva Mendoza, and taken cover behind a low ridge overgrown with brush.

"Where were you?" Kristoforo asked Fatino once they were out of immediate danger. "What is happening?"

"The Confederation asked me to protect you," she responded. "To protect all of us. This world is no place for our people. We have to go home."

They all nodded, except Espero.

"We can't just run back to our hole," she said. "There's a whole world out here, and we can't pretend it doesn't exist. Hasn't the Confederation done that for long enough?"

Scared as he was, Kristoforo knew she was right. The world wouldn't go away just because they closed their eyes. His people had tried that once, hiding away in their polar paradise, protected from hunger and war by vast expanses of ice, but no more. He faced Fatino, staring her down, ignoring the pistol she pointed at his chest.

There was a loud whine in the sky behind him, and Kristoforo couldn't avoid looking over his shoulder to see what it was.

High in the air flew some kind of vehicle, birdlike in shape but clearly artificial.

It was Espero who spoke, naming the strange object. "It's an... airplane."

The airplane circled over Nueva Mendoza, releasing little black droppings that fell to the ground and exploded in balls of red flame.

Only Fatino spoke. “Let’s go home.”

Kristoforo closed his eyes.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jibril Stevenson graduated from the University of Puerto Rico more years ago than he cares to remember and, after a couple decades in government service, is currently pursuing graduate studies in linguistics. He lives on the East Coast with his wife and children, a lizard, an aging guinea pig and a brand new kitten. His short fiction has appeared in *Toyon Literary Magazine, New Maps, Cosmic Horror Monthly, Frontier Tales* (as Gabriel Stevenson), and elsewhere. Look for him at jibrilstevenson.wordpress.com or @jibrilstevenson on Twitter.