



The Fantastic Other

Issue 03

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

For our third issue, we witnessed an effluence of new submissions, bringing about greater diversity in genres and backgrounds. In this issue, you will read works from established authors, authors seeing their first publications, and everything in between. Our contributors will bring you to new worlds, distant planets, and to the furthest and darkest recesses of contemplation. I hope you will enjoy them as much as I have.

Sincerely,

G. E. Butler, Chief Editor

ABOUT THE COVER ART

The cover art to this issue is a piece entitled “Hangdog Hangdogged 2,” graciously donated to us by Edward Michael Supranowicz. Edward is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a graduate background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and other journals. Edward is also a published poet.

First Place Winner of our 2021 Flash Fiction Contest

THE THINGS YOU WILL SEE

BY RHONDA EIKAMP

Everyone in my neighborhood is a private detective. It happens. With three-fourths the country pursuing only one profession, you get these clusters. No one doing anything all day except hiring each other to watch each other. The women with their powers of disguise, the men with their equipment. Each paying for knowledge with knowledge of their own, a kind of advanced mutualism, my daughter Casey called it, before she ran off to study privacy law, hoping to put a stop to it someday.

At night I drink on the front porch and watch the binoculars in the windows swivel my way. All hired by each other to discover why I quit the business. I'd tell them if they asked.

After awhile Darnell slides onto the swing beside me. Darnell's out of it too, for different reasons. Had to sell his equipment when the economy tanked.

"Quiet night," I say.

"How many they got on you?"

"Six."

Darnell nods toward a lit window across the street. "Mann's home."

Joe Mann's our resident wackadoo, which probably means he's the only one with no secrets to hide. Taciturn, single at forty, a broken-down Citroen in the drive. Moved in a few months ago. No one ever sees him leave his house, yet he's often gone. My house is perfectly angled for a side view into his bedroom, and I see what Darnell means. Mann's forgotten to close the curtains.

My veins rock with fire. Jonesing to know.

I'm not sure when it got like this, when curiosity about others became a drug for us, as if something in the air changed, but I know I can fight it. It's why I quit.

I look away.

Darnell shifts. "Tanya Maynard sold intel on you today. From the florist's."

"I know. I made her in the line behind me. Stupid disguise."

"Really? She's pretty good at disguises."

"She had a moustache."

"Said because you bought roses it means you've got a lover." The last word wobbles. Darnell wants. He's good and beautiful, but I'm not there yet.

"It means I like roses." I hope the microphones pointed our way pick it up.

"Man," he whispers. Is he that relieved I'm not seeing anyone? I realize he means Mann. "Look."

Oblivious to the open curtain, Joe Mann is undressing. There's something wrong with his skin. He's peeling it off—bursting open starting with his scalp—and we watch aghast, my thoughts screaming, until the skin-suit falls, revealing his secret. Joe Mann is nothing but a giant eye. A Mann-sized eyeball, cavernously dilated pupil surrounded by red-veined sclera. I can feel the moist surface, the urge—exposed now—baking the street. See. Watch. The eyeball shimmies, delighted to be free of its disguise.

Darnell's moaning and I grab his hand, prepared, because perhaps there's millions of Manns, drawing this sap from us street by street. Because soon we'll be spying on who's spying on who, no one left to go out and live and make secrets.

About the Author: Rhonda Eikamp is originally from Texas and currently lives in Germany. Her short fiction has appeared in *Lackington's*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, and *The Dark and Lightspeed*, among others. When not writing fiction, she translates for a German law firm.

Second Place Winner of our 2021 Flash Fiction Contest

CHOOSING A NEW FACE

BY GEORGIA COOK

On my twelfth birthday, my father brought me into his workshop to choose a new face.

The face I had worn for most of my childhood was small and blank, with tiny pinprick eyes and a round open mouth—a child’s face, an unfinished face. My father had made it for me, and although I was grateful for the gift, I was equally as excited for a new one.

The walls of my father’s workshop were lined with faces, some as blank and unadorned as my own, some large and beautiful, inlaid with shells and Mother Of Pearl, their lips curled into snarls or sneers or wide grins. I loved these masks most of all; I’d never had an expression before. Not even a frozen one.

“...and I can pick any of them?” I asked.

My father nodded. His own face was set in an expression of thoughtful reserve, as if perpetually on the verge of some great revelation. He’d crafted it himself from a piece of grey-tan wood, inlaid with swirls and knots more familiar to me than the stars in the sky.

I gazed around in awe.

“...When I take it off,” I asked, suddenly unsure, reaching up to touch my own face. “What will I look like underneath?”

“Nobody knows, lad. That’s the point o’ havin’ a face.”

“But surely you know!”

My father shook his head. “Doesn’t work like that. People change beneath.”

My heart fluttered. Faces That Changed! Faces capable of multiple appearances, multiple expressions! No wonder we kept them hidden.

I could lunge forward now; grab a face from the wall—any face. Slide it gratefully over my skin and breathe the comforting scent of wood and paint. Be protected. Be safe. Never have to look or know...

...but what was a face without a mask? What was my face, beneath the sanctity of wood? If I looked, would I recognise myself? And what would happen if I didn't like what I saw? Could I bundle it away out of sight and forget? Or would it always be there, hidden but not hidden, leaking out around the edges.

The real me. Eternally exposed.

There was a mirror on the wall of my father's workshop, made for examining one's new reflection.

About the Author: Georgia Cook is an illustrator and writer from London. She is the winner of the LISP 2020 Flash Fiction Prize, and has been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize, Staunch Book Prize and Reflex Fiction Award, among others. She can be found on Twitter at @georgiacooked and on her website at www.georgiacookwriter.com.

Third Place Winner of our 2021 Flash Fiction Contest

Rebellion

by JP Relph

The water is oily, always tepid, metallic. It batters my stubbled head, scours my face. I long to rip my scalp like a satsuma, dig fingers hard into my skull's suture-lines, crack it like a novelty egg. The nesting prize is broken, spoiled. The water sluicing, would grasp the infiltrated core with slippery fingers, disrupt it. My corrupted brain bobbing in the waterlogged cranium like a wormy apple. I'd be uncoupled, lost to perpetual darkness, in peace. But I can only hug my knees, let the water pound and close my eyes.

The sun beats hot drumsticks on our faces. The river canters over large flat stones. We try to outsmart it, a wobbling bare foot on each eel-slick surface. Mayflies whirl, chill-water froths at our sun-pinked legs in agitation. We grip with limpet-toes, windmill arms like hydra. Our laughter fresh as the breeze that chases us as we leap, battle grabby weeds to the bridge. An arc of weather-beaten wood forming a grinning ogre's mouth with its own reflection. We play Poohsticks off the midpoint, drop paper birds into the gurgle. We lay with our backs curved over silvered planks; eyes lost to the infinite blue. The roiling, toiling river rushes beneath. Ever moving, ever cleansing, ever free.

My eyes shoot open to bellowing claxons. Shift change. My ten-hour stretch in the rendering plant looms. Endless rivers of fallen stock for processing. Enduring in my nostrils: greasy-foul, sharp-sour. Boiling extracts valuable fat to lubricate robotics, feed livestock, fuel ships. Steam-heating dries the crackling ground to bone meal for field-crops. Nothing wasted. Nothing lost. Except the sanity of those who must reduce other humans to their component parts. Or join them.

In the early weeks, many refused to perform the hideous task. Choosing the instantaneous disassembling of slave-masters' weapons. Plant efficiency plummeted. New cadres of workers were neurologically altered with nanites. Purging all free will, defiance, the ability to speak or feel. Muted and lobotomised. Perfect slaves.

Quietly over many years, brains rebelled, rejecting alien neuro-pathways. A new battle waged on a nano-level. Our humanity returning, so covertly that nanite readings appeared unchanged, brought an agonising torrent of memory, a reminder of melancholy, love, joy. Fear. We fought to hide this onslaught, continued to render our brethren. Despite our returning will, our rage reborn, we cannot overcome our enslavers. There is no way off the slave ships docked in deep space. There is one way out.

The shower sputters and I stand, let out a long fetid breath, reach for the others. Bruised hands connect and squeeze. Three milk-pale humans, ropy muscled from hard work, eyes fearless in tarry hollows. I don't know their names. The blades secreted amongst our clothing are blood-crusted, our tears moisten the stains. We're masters of where to cut, how to bleed. We close our eyes and slice.

We lay with our backs curved over silvered planks; eyes lost to the infinite blue. The roiling, toiling river rushes beneath. Ever moving, ever cleansing.

Ever free.

About the Author: JP Relph lives in North West England and uses knowledge from a forensic science degree, a passion for bugs and botany, and a dogged determination to make people laugh in her work. JP has flash fiction published on the NFFD 2021 Write-In and was longlisted for Free Flash Fiction's Competition Four. You can follow her on Twitter at @RelphJp.

When Flowers Sleep

by LJ Ireton

Come fairies, come fireflies
The groves are most beautiful
At the setting of the light
When select slivers of Sun
Paint the bark for you to sit on
And mark the pebbles
For your small steps.
Dip your fae hands now in
The slow, swirling stream
As the stars appear like fish
And the frogs and ducks
Wait to transport their
Tiny night passengers.
Watch the earth greens deepen,
Moss carpets and vine curtains
For twilight wings
And things that hover
While the humans leave -
Only those who carry their own light
Can dance in the woods
When flowers sleep.

About the Author: LJ is an emerging poet from London, especially inspired by nature. She has a 1st Class B.A. Honours in English Language and Literature from The University of Liverpool. Her historical poetry was published in the April 2021 *Marble Poetry Broadsheet*. Her nature poems have recently been published by *Minnow Literary Magazine*, *Eucalyptus & Rose Literary Magazine* and *Chasing Shadows Literary Magazine*, with fantasy poetry soon to be published by *Noctivagant Press*. You can follow her on Twitter at @literaryvegan and on Instagram at @thepoetryofj.

For Girls Who Think They Are in Fairy Tales: A Guide

by Shaun Byron Fitzpatrick

How do you know that you're in a fairy tale?

It always seems so obvious in storybooks, but in real life it can be rather tricky to know for sure. You might think you're on some grand adventure, with enchanted princesses and talking bears and all that, only to find that actually you're just on your way to pick up milk.

Of course, the opposite can be true as well.

So, how can you know? Begin by taking a look at your surroundings. See anything that looks like it could be magical? A key that you found in your closet as a child, one that doesn't fit in any of your locks. A rose, dry and shriveled, that someone who was not your father gave your mother a long time ago. An old cloak that you paid too much for at a thrift shop because you were sure it was enchanted. Any of these will do.

Do you have your item? Good. Here's what you do next.

Walk into your back garden. If you don't have one, the nearest park will do just fine. The location doesn't need to be anything fancy, just some grass and a few good rocks. There absolutely must be a tree, though a large shrub will work in a pinch. A stream or lake would be ideal, but there's no need to get too picky.

(If you absolutely cannot get to an outdoor location, you can substitute a large wardrobe or a grandfather clock. However, these can be highly unpredictable, so they really should be used only as a last resort.)

Make sure you're holding your item. If you've managed to find a body of water, scoop some up and put it in a bottle. Make sure you keep this with you at all times; it could be important later. Now,

approach your tree. Lay a hand on it and close your eyes. Concentrate with all your might on where you'd like to go. Not an exact location, just a feeling. Think of where you believe you belong and paint the image with broad strokes in your mind. This is extremely important, do not lose your focus. Who knows where you'll end up if you do.

If you've done all of this correctly, something should... happen. A door in the bark, perhaps, or an opening in the roots. Maybe your wardrobe no longer has a back, and there's the faint scent of smoke and the first snow of the season. If you want, if you dare...go through.

So, you're in a fairy tale after all. What now?

You might be tempted to start exploring. After all, you're in a magical world! But take a minute to become aware of your surroundings. Most importantly, your passage home. Is it still there? Good. You always want to have an escape plan. Is it gone? That's not great, but you'll have to worry about that later.

Take a look in the distance. Can you see any buildings? (Castles, villages, burnt-out ruins, etc.) What about signs of life? No matter what type of world you've turned up in, it's unlikely you're there all by yourself. This could be a good or bad thing. Let's hope for the best. Start walking.

Whether you're in an enchanted forest or a mermaid's beach or a monster's castle grounds, you're going to come to a fork in the road. All fairy tales hinge on a choice. To your left, you'll see a man-made structure. Let's just call it a castle, to keep things simple. To your right, a wild, untamed landscape.

Now, one of two things is likely to happen.

If you walk towards the castle, you may encounter a prince. That's where they typically lurk about. Be on your guard, because he will be handsome and charming and gallant. He may even be kind. He will fall in love with you the moment he sees you. Don't let it go to your head, it's just his nature. He will insist that you come to his palace with him.

"We'll be married before sunset," he'll say, and it will sound like a command.

You might as well go; he won't take no for an answer. The castle will be lovely, and you'll be married in a gown the color of his eyes. Things will be good for days or weeks, a year if you're lucky. And then suddenly they won't be. It is best to read the signs and leave before that happens. Let's talk about escaping in a bit.

On the other hand, if you walk towards the wilderness, you'll find yourself wandering for a full day and a full night before you come to a small cottage. You will knock on the door, and a woman will answer. She may be young or old, depending on her mood. She will invite you in and make you a cup of tea. The tea will be poisoned, but that's to be expected. She'll ask you a riddle while you are writhing on the floor. If you manage to answer it, congratulations! You're a witch's assistant now.

Here's what you do when you want to leave your fairy tale.

Things are getting a bit strange, aren't they?

Your husband, the prince, has been acting funny. He doesn't tell you your eyes are moonlight and your lips are roses anymore. He seems to watch you out of the corner of his eye and keeps leaving apples and spindles in your path. You touch the needle once and jerk back in pain, and he leaps to his feet as though excited. But nothing happens, and he looks so disappointed that you know you have to leave.

Or maybe you're still in that little cottage. Things have gotten much better for you now. The witch is actually very kind, and after the initial poisoning, you've found you quite like working with her. You're learning about herbs and potions and can even cast a spell or two. But it just isn't home.

In fact, you're starting to think of home a lot. And you wonder if anyone has noticed that you're gone. Does time pass differently here? Will you go back and find that it's only been a moment since you left? Or will you return to an empty house, with old graves for everyone you once knew? You'll become a cautionary tale about a girl who walked through too many doors or peered down too many rabbit holes and one day never came home.

It's time for you to get going.

You will need to retrace your steps and return to the place where you arrived. Hopefully your passage home is still there. If it's gone, try closing your eyes, holding your magical item, and spinning around three times. That should do the trick. If it doesn't, you've messed something up quite badly. You're on your own. But, if your passage is there, it's very simple. Just walk on through the way you came.

(If you entered through a wardrobe or grandfather clock, this process is a bit trickier. You'll need blackbird feathers that have fallen on water, a crown of lilies still dripping with dew, and a walking stick made from the branch of a yew tree that has been struck by lightning at least twice. You were warned not to enter through an indoor portal, weren't you?)

Now you're back where you started, and barely any time has passed. You'll try to explain what you've seen to your family or your lover, maybe, but they won't believe you. And soon you'll stop believing yourself. It will fade, faster than a dream. You'll put your rose or your key or your cloak in your closet, and that will be that.

But perhaps one day your daughter will find your item. She'll find her own tree or clock and hold tight to the thing that used to be yours, and a door will appear, and she will step through.

And perhaps, unlike you, she will not come back.

About the Author: Shaun Byron Fitzpatrick (she/her) lives in Philadelphia with her husband and black cat. Her fiction has appeared in *Maudlin House*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *New Gothic Review*, and *Coffin Bell Journal*, among others. You can find her on Instagram at @shaunyfitz or on Twitter at @shauny_fitz.

A Throw-away Character Left Behind After Chapter Two

by Kathryn Ordiway

During the drought, the kiddie pool becomes a portal to some other time or space or world and the summer is ruined, all because Jax wanted to play with a Ouija board in the middle of the night under a full moon. Not that we know this is what did it, but it certainly wasn't playing cornhole or grilling steaks or stringing up lights around the back patio to sing Happy Birthday to Charles three days late.

We figure it out when we lose Abigail. She comes sprinting out the backdoor, joking about cannonballs even though the thing is way too shallow, and she puts one foot in the water and then isn't there. Which is terrifying, by the way, when your roommate just up and disappears into thin air without a sound. Not even a friendly little pop or gust of wind or anything. Just Abigail, then no Abigail.

I tell Jax to get in and see what happens, but he doesn't, because he's smarter than that even if he is an idiot, and we throw rocks and sticks and a rotting tomato off the vine into the water and boom, all of them gone.

The water looks the same as always. Clear, immediate line of sight to the bright blue of the plastic bottom. Cleaner, because no bug or blade of grass can actually get into it, but there is nothing to suggest magical transportation.

Charles goes into the house. Starts yelling "Abby, Abby," like the pool tucked her into bed real friendly like. Then he runs into the front yard, down the road, looking in trees and under bushes and shouting her name with increasing intensity so that neighbors start coming outside to see what he's screaming about. And what are we supposed to say to them? Hey, yeah, sorry we had that super loud party the other night and didn't warn you or anything, and oh, by the way, our friend just got into our inflatable pool and disappeared, have you seen her?

Right, no. Not great.

So Jax wrangles Charles into the house and I sit cross-legged on the cement patio and wait.

For dinner, we order Chinese and eat it in the yard. I feel like blaming Jax. Like telling him straight up I know it's his fault, even though I don't. Ouija boards aren't supposed to mess with the space-time continuum.

We scroll through our phones while we shovel various noodles and vegetables into our mouths. I send a text to Abigail: "Where did you go?" Through the open window, I hear her phone buzz. Of course, she wasn't going to take it into the pool with her. I send another anyway: "Please come back." Just in case.

We don't empty the pool. Nothing can get in the water so nothing can make it gross. We don't know if the water is part of it, if she needs that specific water to still be there in order to return.

"It's not the same water," Charles tells me as I sit beside the pool, watching and waiting. "Evaporation. If it was the water doing it, it would be in the air now and we'd all be—"

But I put my hand up. Science does not apply here. The water stays.

I keep vigil. I light candles I know she likes and I lay her beach towel beside the pool. I play music from her favorite artists. When the guys leave to get groceries, I kneel as close to the pool as I dare and I speak to her. I ask her to come home. I ask her to contact me. I ask her at the very least to send some sort of sign as to where she is. Italy? Japan? Medieval Europe? Some sort of parallel plane, where perhaps I never existed, or the Roman Empire never fell, or vaccines just didn't happen? I can't stomach any of the possibilities. I tell her about the weather.

The boys make dinner most nights. One will cook, and the other will sit on the couch with me, glancing my way every time I sniff or rub at my eyes. They use Abigail's cookbooks, the recipes she saved online. We keep eating her flavors, her

thoughts, and sometimes she's at the table with us, a vestige of herself, misty, with puckered, gulping fish lips. And then Charles will bump his elbow against the table or Jax will sneeze and she's gone again, just as fast as she disappeared the first time.

I devour books. Fantasy, where usually a beautiful but not too beautiful protagonist gets sent to some other time where she falls in love. I imagine Abigail wandering through Scotland or riding a longship. I try not to imagine myself doing the same, which is infinitely more pleasurable.

Charles and Jax begin to move on. We have to buy things for the approaching semester, we have to get ready for school. They tell me there's nothing we can do, literally nothing, because we have no idea how the pool works and it's not like one of us is going to sacrifice ourselves by jumping into it. They say we'll just tell everyone she left. Charles throws out a bag of her clothes. Jax suggests the car, the lake. There's no one who would believe what actually happened, and I have no better story to keep us safe. I can't risk us leaving this place, disturbing the water. I nod, and when her parents call me, I say, "Isn't she with you?" and wait for the boys to come home from the water.

The drought breaks. You can practically hear the last green blades of grass screaming for joy. It catches me off guard, the pop-up storm. I force the boys to help me cover the pool with a tarp.

They roll their eyes and chuckle, but help. And they sit with me, backs pressed up against the house, to watch the rain and lightning. Jax even puts his hand on my knee, and for all I can tell he means it purely in comfort.

"Maybe," he says, tapping his thumb against me, "the rain didn't even enter the pool. Maybe it went wherever Abigail is and she has our rain."

I imagine her in a castle, queen of some vague kingdom, face turned up to an isolated downpour, the taste of the American Midwest on her tongue.

There are holes in the tarp. The pool overflows.

I field the phone calls from her parents, her closer friends.

We talk to the police. Multiple times. It goes nowhere. We go nowhere.

The university sends uplifting emails every now and then. The story dominates the local news for a while, flickers on the national, blinks out of existence.

I learn that the boys are right. I have classes and extracurriculars and I volunteer at the soup kitchen pretty regularly. And I have to feed myself and work and study and apply for jobs and think about the world and myself and the future. I have to move on.

I still read novels. I think about the characters who are left behind. Husbands. Mothers. Friends who probably waited at a coffee shop for a get-together, who felt jilted and hurt, then scared. I wonder about their stories, where they might have gone, how much it hurt and for how long.

I go to school. I graduate. I get a job, and maybe a partner, perhaps some kids. For a while, I'm the girl whose roommate disappeared, and then no one really cares. I keep living, but that's not much of a story, is it?

About the Author: Kathryn Ordiway is a technical editor and fiction writer. She lives in Oklahoma, where she enjoys kayaking, trying craft beer, and watching storms roll in. You can follow her on Twitter at @KatOrdiway.

Poison

by Hugh Behm-Steinberg

The witches are bored, so they decide to hold a poison drinking contest. Stacks of coins in precarious piles, meat-shaped stones and quarter ounce bags are staked, as well as somebody's pair of well-behaved six and eight-year-old kids. Each witch brings a poison, enough for everybody and their little dog too. Worst poison wins, and nobody brings antidotes – antidotes are for princesses.

The youngest witch, Martha, ambitious, always wants to be the winner, whispers in her big sister Stephanie's ear, "Do we all drink the same poison at the same time, or do we each drink different poisons separately?"

"Martha volunteers to go first!" Stephanie announces. The other witches laugh as Martha grinds her teeth.

"I hate you," Martha says, and she downs a Dixie cup filled with something green and frothy, the consistency of turtle milk.

It is delicious; she promptly drops dead.

Her forehead crushes the cup flat, leaving bits of poison to ink the wrinkles above her nose. The well-behaved brothers drag her corpse outside, dividing up whatever they find in her pockets.

One by one, the rest of the witches drink poison. Hours pass; some die, others laugh off the effects. Limbs are lost and gained; the not quite so well-behaved brothers sneak away to join a pack of wolves. Martha wakes up on an ice field with just the clothes on her back and vengeance to keep her warm. She turns her pockets inside out and takes back everything stolen from her, losing a finger in the act, then sets out to destroy her big sister, but whichever way she goes she only finds more ice and her own eternal death. That, plus the heads of people buried in the glacier. Strangers, mostly, some former lovers, and one or two people she recognizes from Twitter. But among them is her mother, who sold both of her well-behaved at the time daughters into witchery to cover gambling debts and

keep her Lazy Boyfriend happy and in love with her (and only her). Mom still has her earrings on, and she's wearing her sad *I want something* face too, which infuriates Martha even more.

The air around them warms with reasons and pleadings. "If only all this ice would melt, you could forgive me," her mother says. "I've never stopped loving you," she says. "Stay with me, please," she says.

In the distance she sees Mom's Lazy Boyfriend, always bigger than he actually is, laughing and gloating wolfishly, covered in fur, radiating warmth, surrounded by women, as if even here he could convince all those mothers to fall in love with him, again, and again, and again. It's happened before; it happens all the time. Martha hates him.

But Martha is resourceful. Out of her pocket she pulls a jar of enchanted mosquitoes and unscrews the lid. The insects shiver around her, crying, "It's too cold to eat! Where's our jar? At least it was warm in the jar!"

"This jar?" Martha says, and she smashes it upon her mother's head to everyone's lamentations. "Find us a way home or freeze to death," Martha commands.

"We hate you," the mosquitoes cry.

"Get in line," Martha says. Vengeance is terrible at keeping a young witch warm, but it has other consolations.

So the mosquitos go to work finding a way out of Martha's death. They fly off; they fatten on Mom's Lazy Boyfriend's blood. He's slapping at the bites, the buzzing inside his ears, the itches that will never, ever go away. It stirs up winds that make it even colder than it already is. Martha's mom curses her for hours, spitting jagged little bits in her direction, and everything she says is true.

Eventually the air bruises with mosquitoes. It's time to go.

Martha has further adventures; she suffers, she makes it back. At the cabin all the witches are exchanging gifts, repaying lost bets.

"How was your death?" they ask each other.

“Most refreshing,” they lie.

Martha storms in, the last to return. “Stephanie?!” she roars.

But Stephanie isn’t there. Instead, it is their mother who looks up from the gift-laden table, pausing a moment before greedily shoving as much as she can into Stephanie’s sack. The same earrings, only this time Mom has her happy face on, and there’s not a speck of ice anywhere. Her resemblance to Martha is uncanny.

“This is all mine because I survived, without help from anybody,” Mom says, her hand touching each of the jagged coins in her sack. “I’m going to buy new clothes and a car and children who will love me.”

Then she notices Martha, the missing finger, her poison-stained face, the smell of death, her favorite perfume. “So,” she says. “Did you learn anything on your trip, sister?”

“Stephanie drank your poison,” one of the witches tells Martha. “The kind that turns people into their parents.”

“We guess that makes you the winner,” another witch says, carefully. “You should go ahead and collect your prize.”

The party’s definitely over, but some people don’t know when to leave.

“Martha thinks she’s the best witch in the world, and everyone loves her,” says Martha’s sister, again and again, pausing sometimes to spit. Every word she says is true.

It’s enough poison to fill a tiny little cup.

Outside the brothers howl with their wolves, and the mosquitoes buzz angrily.

About the Author: Hugh Behm-Steinberg's prose can be found in *X-Ray*, *Grimoire*, *Joyland*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Atticus Review* and *Pank*. His short story "Taylor Swift" won the 2015 Barthelme Prize from Gulf Coast; a collection of prose poems and microfiction, *Animal Children*, was published by *Nomadic Press* in January, 2020.

That Dull Blue Planet

by Joshua Fagan

They say it's Home
But how can that be if I've never
been there before? A cold sapphire gem
in midst the black-diamond wastes
billions of light-years away
That's all it is to me
They say I'm their last Hope
But how can that be when I don't know
what I'm supposed to Hope for?
Thrusters ignite, blue and white flames
Landing would be the hard part, they said
But $E=MC^2$, so they're all dead
Twelve years here, twelve hundred there
Splashdown, and a crushing weight
as I stagger to the shore
Gravity's demoniac spell
They say the cold sapphire gem
is beautiful, and they're right
Shimmering shore-dirt, emerald plant-stalks
Sunlight-draped miracles, but
not a soul to share them with.

About the Author: Joshua Fagan is a writer and critic currently residing in Colorado Springs. His work has previously been published in venues including *Daily Science Fiction*, *365 Tomorrows*, and *Plum Tree Tavern*. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the literary speculative fiction publication *Orion's Belt*. His YouTube channel has received over 1.2 million views.

Tusk Hunter

by Logan M. Cole

Arkadi held the fragment of fossilized ivory in his left hand and cried silently to himself. A tear rolled off his face onto the small, ragged-edged, column-shaped fragment. He rubbed a calloused thumb over the droplet, smoothing it into the fossil. None of the men around him paid him any mind as they dug away at the wall of dirt set into the base of Mount Rog. The men—some with beards far longer than even Arkadi's, and all dressed in layered sweaters or flannels against the sun-shepherded winds of the continent of Protsvet and against swarms of mosquitos—bustled in and out of man-sized holes in the dirt wall. The holes had been hollowed out by a makeshift pressure-washer pumping water from the Pozvonki River through a boat motor. The men had taken to calling it “The Flood” after the disaster of biblical infamy.

He placed the precious bone fragment into his red and black checkered sack. He knew the tusk piece would make a wonderful necklace in the hands of Gervasi Lagounov, his buyer. The sack was filled with an abundance of fossils and fossil fragments. His biggest haul, a six-foot-long Indrikken tusk in near perfect condition, was kept within his netted tent. Arkadi began to return towards this tent, feeling that the small fragment he had found in the morning had been a great enough excavation for the day. He did not want to be in the caves any longer if he could help it.

It had been two weeks since Simeon had died and had been put to rest in the Pozvonki River and two weeks since Arkadi had begun grieving. There had been a cave-in in the water-carved caverns. The delicate wall-linings, as soft as garden soil and just as malleable, collapsed as Simeon pulled on a piece of bone. He was at the mouth of the cave, the yolk of the sun still in his sight, when the dirt fell on top of him. Arkadi and the other men shoveled the dirt as quickly as they could, but it had been too late. Simeon choked on the earth. He was centimeters from the light of the sun, and he was still too far, too deep, to be saved.

At what passed for Simeon's funeral, Arkadi watched as two men he had never bothered to learn the names of push Simeon's body—which was wrapped in spare tarp and frayed rope tied to a dinner roll-colored boulder—into the Pozvonki. The men felt it just wasn't right to bury Simeon in the dirt when it

had been the dirt that had suffocated him. Mosquitos swarmed as they always did, looking for chinks in the layered flannels and insulated sweaters the men always wore. Arkadi stood beside Anatoly Munk, a bald man whose hair loss was almost surely linked to the perverse thoughts that festered below his scalp. To Arkadi's left slouched Benedikt, one of the youngest "tusk hunters" in the encampment. Arkadi looked at the young man then back at the bank of the Pozvonki and saw Simeon, his love, wrapped undignifiedly in that baby-stool colored tarp and being dragged through the dirt—the dirt that had killed him. Arkadi had wanted to do nothing more than to turn back towards Benedikt and tell the young man to leave, to head back to the Spleteniye colony from this life of digging and scraping in the soil in the illegal search of long-dead things and to instead find a profession where the threat of death and the law weren't ever present. But Arkadi knew that if he tried to speak, he would've cried, and then Simeon's loss would become real, and then all the other men would have known what he and Simeon had been. He also knew he should've been telling himself what he had wanted to tell Benedikt.

But that had been two weeks ago, and now Arkadi was retiring to his tent with his tear-spotted tusk. The tents, all thirty-something of them, were placed in a clearing in front of the Pozvonki. The trees that surrounded the encampment were pointed towards the sky like green, feathered torpedoes. At the edge of the river were nearly thirty-something boats of various sizes. Some were equipped with Old Rock outboards, some were airboats, and some were fashioned with patchworks of metal that, miraculously, served as propellers.

Arkadi zipped his blue and white tent open and shut quickly to ward away the hordes of mosquitoes that flew from the river into the green of the forest. Arkadi felt surrounded by the makings of the apocalypse, with their Flood and the blood-sucking locust stand-ins at their necks. He produced a nearly empty bottle of vodka missing its label from a blue backpack and chugged it down straight from the bottle, cursing whatever idiot brought Old Rock mosquitos to Novyydom. The drink rolled through his throat and pooled into his lungs where it lingered and burned. Arkadi sighed and he could smell the booze on his breath, just as he could with all the other men in the camp.

Simeon had once said, in the very same tent over a different bottle of vodka and a calloused palm over Arkadi's fat knuckles, "We are just like the cavemen from the Old Rock, aren't we? The Neanderthals, the early humans, the whole fucking lot of them."

"How do you figure?" Arkadi said. The lamp on the tent's workbench—which illuminated their intimacy—dimmed and brightened at an uncertain pace that others would have considered an annoyance. Arkadi considered it the closest thing to candlelight.

“We’re hunting, searching for these giant things, like the cavemen hunted the mammoths, and bringing their bones back to feed our families. Except our families aren’t eating off the bones, but you get it. We’re out in the wilderness, in the danger. On the hunt.”

“You make it sound so glorious.”

“Is it not? We’re fucking giant slayers.” Simeon had taken his hand off Arkadi’s to mime a sword swing.

“Or the gravediggers of the largest graves in the galaxy,” Arkadi had said, jutting his eyes in the direction of Mount Rog which yawned towards the moon just outside of the tent’s walls.

“You make it sound so inglorious,” Simeon had said. He had leaned forward and put his hands onto Arkadi’s inner thighs, his mouth an open cavern of imperfect teeth and booze breath. Arkadi had remembered Simeon’s breath that night as the first time the smell of alcohol on another person’s tongue had ever not repulsed him. In fact, it had been one of the most attractive things he had ever sensed, and it had made every part of him burn and ache like a tired muscle. The taste of alcohol on another person’s tongue had been even better.

On the left side of the tent sat the small wooden workbench that the lamp belonged to. Two of Arkadi’s fossil bags sat beneath the foot-tall bench and on top was the sporadic lantern covered in smeared fingerprints, a notebook, a dull pencil, a dull knife used to sharpen the dull pencil, and a picture laid facedown. Arkadi picked up the photograph and saw a young boy, his boy—who looked just like Arkadi’s brother had at the age of seven—with a thorn bush of brown hair. The boy sat on the lap of his mother, whose smile of perfect teeth seemed so beautiful and incongruent with her wrinkled face. Arkadi wanted so much to be in his mother’s lap, too. To be back in what passed for a home in Spleteniye with his child and mother and to replace his mourning with their company. But then he thought of empty bowls and stomachs emptier still. They were the very reason he was out in the wilderness playing his part in a black-market trade of bones, a system that spanned beyond the planet of Novyydom. He knew that if he left, he would be taking the selfish path. He wondered, though, if he did not deserve a moment of regressive immaturity after digging through cold earth with his bare hands to find the face of his love, his Simeon, with dead eyes and frothing from the mouth with dirt? He wondered if he did not deserve his mother’s comfort after he saw two strangers toss Simeon into the water, water polluted with the same dirt that had killed Simeon?

Arkadi heard the whistle of his tent's zipper. He looked up and saw Anatoly Munsks's bald head crowning through the tent flaps. Anatoly stepped in and smiled his chip-toothed smile before looking down at the photograph in Arkadi's hand.

"Ah, is that your son?" Anatoly pointed at the photograph. He plopped himself down to the right of Arkadi, where Simeon had always sat. "And that's your mother? That's a fine-looking lady, I just know she knows her way around a—"

"What do you want, Anatoly?" Arkadi put the picture back down on the workbench. He held his nostrils shut against the smell of sweat and 140-proof alcohol clinging to Anatoly's person.

"Well, some of the boys have decided to put on a game of sorts, a bit of gamblin'," Anatoly said. His eyes were wide, and they always seemed to look through those he talked to, as if he was always undressing some imaginary woman in his mind's eye. "I thought it would be a little, you know, fucked up to ask you for your participation but the boys said this thing would be better with more people. A bigger prize pool and all that."

Arkadi nodded his head for Anatoly to continue.

"Well, we've been placing bets on who is gonna' die next out here. I know, I know, it might be a little soon for you, what with you and Simeon—"

"What do you know?" Arkadi said. He had often wanted to punch Anatoly, but now he wanted to beat a boulder into Anatoly's stupid bald head and watch the mosquitos find oasis within his exposed brain. Why did men like Simeon die and men like Anatoly not just live, but prosper? "Tell me, what the hell do you know? Because I'm not sure you know anything."

"I know more'n most," Anatoly said. "I know what you and Simeon were doing here in this tent," Anatoly slapped both his palms on his knees, "and I ain't ever told a damn soul, not even God, until just now. Now how about you be grateful for my asking if you wanted to have some fun instead of fucking screamin' at me, huh?"

"Leave," Arkadi said. He was angry but he was tired more than anything else. "Please."

“Alright,” said Anatoly. He turned halfway through zipping himself out of the tent. “This is what bein’ the nice guy gets you, huh?”

As Arkadi watched Anatoly leave his tent unzipped, he realized Simeon had been wrong. They were not the successors of the lionized giant slayers from the Old Rock, they were the jackals following in the hunters’ wake. They were scavengers pawing and scrounging in the dirt for scraps of dead things. But there was no carrion still clinging to the bones they sought, no sweet marrow still in their centers, just rock. Rock that had been given artificial value because of its subjective beauty. Rock that had sagged the chains of Arkadi’s manacles, tethering him to a life he no longer wanted. Rock that was hardly any different than the one that had pulled Simeon’s corpse down to the depths of the Pozvonki River.

Arkadi grabbed the sacks of fossilized ivory shoved beneath the workbench and stepped out of his tent. He saw the sun beginning to cower behind Mount Rog, casting a purple theater for the encampment’s latest fireside combatants. One of the men who had taken Simeon into the water, whom he did not know the name of, was shirtless and throwing punches at young Benedikt. The rest of the men—Anatoly among them—cheered the two fighters on as they sat around a fire. They called for blood. Arkadi turned his back towards them.

He walked to the riverbank and stared at the murky water between the scraped boats and he tried to imagine Simeon’s face as it had been—dotted with the sun’s intensity and dashed with scars from life’s tribulations—but all he could he conjure was the image of the meat rotting away from Simeon’s bones until all that was left was his bones staring up at the water’s surface. A pure dew of the forest tainted with the fires of man filled Arkadi’s lungs as he took a breath. He tossed the sacks of fossils into the water as far as he could; the sacks plunged out of his sight into the murk of the Pozvonki.

Arkadi nodded to himself and walked back to his tent as the men continued to cheer on the drunken pugilists. He wanted one of the men to try to stop him, to act as a friend, to look away from the brawl and wonder just what in the hell he was doing. But Arkadi knew they wouldn’t, and he knew he wouldn’t stop anyways. Hoisting his six-foot-long Indrikken tusk over his shoulder, Arkadi returned to the riverbank and tossed the tusk, too, into the river. As Arkadi watched the river’s surface fall into disarray as the tusk broke it, he imagined the Indrikken as he had seen them illustrated in colony textbooks, standing on the edge of what would become the Pozvonki, the tusks at the end of their long furred heads pointed towards the stars with no knowledge, not even the slightest comprehension that their species would one day become nothing but carved trophies and trinkets for small, two-legged

travelers from the stars. He waited until the ripples stilled and the Pozvonki looked as though it had never been disturbed.

Arkadi hopped into his boat, a green and white vessel hardly bigger than a man, with a motor hardly smaller than a man. The boat was full of cracks and haphazardly plugged holes, but it had done good by Arkadi. He pushed off the riverbank with a rusted wooden pole he kept in the boat before starting the boat's engine. The tip of Mount Rog's shadow pointed him towards Spleteniye. As Arkadi moved up stream, the purple sky began to blacken and the sound of fluttering mosquitos and screaming men began to fade away.

About the Author: Logan M. Cole is a writer of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and all things weird. He is also a prolific freelance writer, having written content for many businesses in the Tampa Bay area. You can find out more about him on his website at www.loganmcole.com.

Interview With Award-winning SFF Author, F. D. Lee

With our goal of promoting more indie authors, we reached out to award-winning SFF author, F. D. Lee, and she answered! In this exclusive interview, we asked Lee about her background, her relationship with her work and her characters, and advice she could offer burgeoning writers. She replied with fantastic and nuanced answers, all of which can be read below.

If you would like to check out F. D. Lee's novels and short fiction, you can visit her website at fdlee.co.uk.

You write in both the genres of Fantasy and Science Fiction. Do you feel these two genres have any correlation? Is there a large difference in your mindset when you set out to write a Fantasy story versus a work of Science Fiction?

“I think there is a strong correlation between Fantasy and Science Fiction, yes. For me, they both offer opportunities to explore situations and characters outside of what is ‘normal.’ Though, of course, we all have different ideas about what normal means! One of the things that has always drawn me to SSF is that worlds and societies can be, and often times are, wholly different from the world as I experience it. The ability to explore these different places is at the heart of my love for the genres.

As a writer, I always start with my characters. They are the centre of everything, so in that sense, my mindset remains the same whatever I’m writing. It is imperative to me that the people my readers and I spend time with in my books are real. Whether you love them or hate them, I want you to know them, understand them. That’s where the real joy comes from, I believe. I certainly can’t finish a book, whatever the genre, if the characters aren’t complete.

Still, there are differences when I write two genres. With my fantasy series, *The Pathways Tree*, the story begins as a retelling of Cinderella, told from the point of view of a wannabe fairy godmother, Bea. Bea makes decisions in the first novel, *The Fairy’s Tale*, which lead to huge political and social fallout in the later books. So, things start off relatively ‘safe’ in this series—we are within a known story. The struggle comes from Bea and the other characters’ behaviour within that original Cinderella setting and, later, other fairy tale tropes. In my SF novel, *In The Slip*, everything is new—the world,

the characters, all of it. There isn't that level of familiarity; everything is more ambiguous. Kong, the protagonist, and the reader have to unpack the world he lives in and come to their own conclusions about whether it is 'good' or 'bad.'"

You have an intriguing collection of short fiction available to read on your author website. Do you feel that offering "samples" of your writing lures in possible readers?

"Honestly, I'm not sure! But I enjoyed writing them and wanted to share them. I find them an excellent way to explore different writing styles and genres, so you'll see that some of them are pretty... experimental... shall we say?! Short stories are also a kind of release valve; I find that writing helps me balance my head and, if I'm struggling with one of my novels, short stories are my go-to therapy. I might publish the ones on my website and in my Dropbox one day as a collection, but for now, they exist for myself. In fact, the idea for 'In The Slip' was generated by a short story I completed as an assignment for a writing MA I audited. I haven't included that one on my website because I wrote a whole novel about Kong, but perhaps that might make it into a collection one day. For now, if people read them (and everyone is very welcome to!) and enjoy them, that is wonderful."

You have an impressive educational background, with a PhD in Literature and Creative Writing. Do you believe your thorough education has enhanced your writing and helped you become a better author?

"Absolutely! My academic life has allowed me to explore new ideas and theories, all of which make their way into my writing to varying degrees. I'm lucky enough to lecture at a University in London, which means I have access to a vast range of academic journals and experts in various fields who I can ask for help when I need it. I think that this adds an additional layer to my writing; it makes it more believable. As a reader, I really enjoy books that weave in real-world facts and theories, as Terry Pratchett did so adeptly, so I write that way, too. Though I certainly make no claim to being as expert at it as Sir Terry was!

"There is a lot of research related to the climate emergency in In The Slip. When I was writing the novel (around 2016-2018), many of the things I included were discussed in the literature as dire future indicators of collapse, yet in 2020 many of them happened. Not only is that really scary, but it also makes me look much more prescient than I am! I just did the research. In the same vein, for the Pathways Tree series, I've spent a lot of time researching fairy tales and how these stories have come to affect cultures and beliefs. This has really helped me weave in the sinister elements of storytelling

as the series has progressed. I also like to share all this background reading with my readers. I offer special access to the research and ideas that informed each book, along with unpublished material, to my mailing list. I think that for those people who are really into my work (enough to sign up for my newsletter!), these additional insights are a lot of fun.”

In your novel, *The Fairy’s Tale*, the protagonist, Bea, wants to be a Fiction Management Executive so much it becomes an obsession and drives many of her decisions. Do you believe there’s any correlation between Bea’s obsession with this dream and your drive in your early career to become the successful author you are today?

“LOL! Yes, almost certainly. I love Bea, but she is very stubborn and, yes, obsessive. That definitely correlates to me. When I get the bit between my teeth, there is no stopping me. I completed my PhD in under three years and wrote and published *The Academy* in that time. I was totally obsessed!

“To be honest, all my characters reflect me in some way. I draw a lot on my own emotions when I’m writing and let those emotions feed into the characters. They may not behave as I would (I certainly hope not in the case of some of them—looking at you, Julia!), but that emotional grounding helps me to find them. I studied drama and theatre for many years, which has proven invaluable in terms of finding the core ‘I’ of each person I write.

“True story: when I write from Julia’s point of view, I often have to shake myself afterwards. Jump up and down or busy myself doing some chores around the house, anything to get her away from me. She is an awful person! But there must be something in me that resonates with her to have been able to create her and get into her mindset. That thought shakes me up a lot!”

Lastly, what advice would you offer a fledgling author who is just now wading into the big, wide world of the internet and wants to find a platform for sharing and selling their work?

“Make friends with other writers! Writing can be a very lonely and insular process, and it’s easy to get lost. You need people around you to cheer you on, read your work, offer you feedback, discuss your ideas with, and vent your spleen at when your story or your characters aren’t behaving.

“More than that, though, other writers will be able to help you find those platforms that are right for you and can guide you through the processes of getting your work out there. Whether you want to

self-publish or go the traditional route, other writers are your friends. Don't be shy or embarrassed; get yourself out there!"

About the Author: F D. Lee is the author of the internationally bestselling fantasy series, *The Pathways Tree*, and the award-winning SF novel, *In the Slip*. A lifelong Fantasy and Science Fiction fan, Faith is an advocate of self- and indie-publishing and has a PhD in English Literature and Creative Writing. She has been featured in *The Independent*, appeared on Radio 4 to talk about her research into genre fiction, and has given a mini-TED talk on why stories matter. Faith is online and always happy to chat! Facebook: @fdleeauthor; Twitter & Instagram: @faithdlee. Visit her website, www.fdlee.co.uk, to read her work!