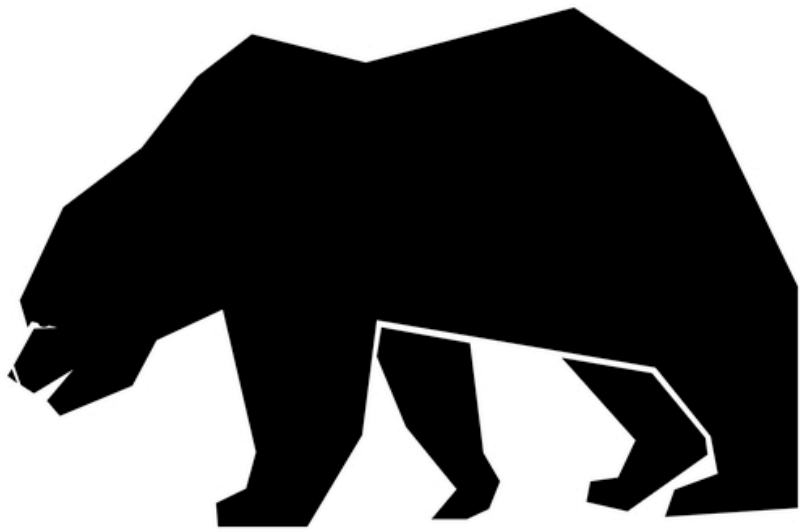
Magical Bears in the Context of Contemporary Political Theory

a Hitherby Dragons Collection by

Jenna Katerin Moran

Proceedings of the First International Symposium on

MAGICAL BEARS



in the context of

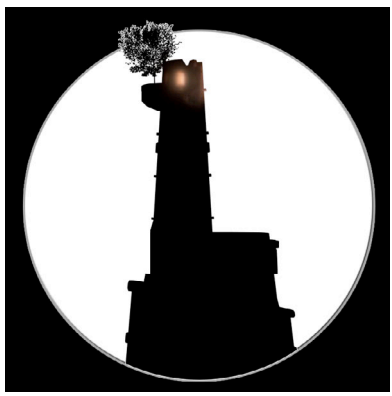
CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEORY

Jenna Katerin Moran, Ph.D.

From the *Hitherby Dragons* Collection

Cover art by Elizabeth Sherry
Title page art by Yi Chen
Layout by Jens Alfke
(Set in Alegreya, ManlyMen, Macondo)
(Except title page in Caslon, Futura)

All characters in these stories are fictitious or heavily fictionalized.
Readers are advised against drawing conclusions about or regarding persons living or dead based on this material.
Portions of this material have appeared previously on imago.hitherby.com.



From the
Hitherby Dragons
Collection

Dedicated to
Karl Friedrich Borgstrom
for teaching me the joy of sailing

And with special thanks to
Cync Brantley
Chrysoula Tzavelas
Hsin Chen
R'ykandar Korra'ti
Gretchen Shanrock-Solberg
Rand Brittain
Anthony Damiani
Amy Sutedja
and
Kathryn Tewson

People die. People die in droves. There's horror and cruelty and hunger and disease. Little children lying in piles with hands twitching. Dogs locked up in basements until they starve. Stuff like that.

"Let's visit everyone in the universe and fix their lives!" Jane says.

"I'm busy," Martin says.

In Nebraska, Brandon Teena is violated and murdered for the audacity of claiming a male identity. In a specialty program for difficult teens, the staff force a recalcitrant boy to lay still, face down, for six months. In Gibbelins' Tower, Jane hops from foot to foot outside the visit-everybody door.

"Come *on,"* she pleads.

"I'm *busy,"* Martin explains.

Statues of the Buddha crumble. Soldiers torture prisoners of war. An angry and desperate crowd razes a museum.

"Now?" Jane asks.

"No."

"Now?"

". . . no."

Jane shoulders off her backpack and lets it thunder to the ground. She sits. She sulks. "Sometimes I don't think you *want* to fix everyone's lives," she says.

"I don't," Martin says. "I want to make their lives hard. I want to push people until they break. It's cool. Sometimes it makes them better."

"But what about the dead?"

Table Of Contents

Stacking Mammals & Sid

Gelling agents are often made from various emotions. It is very inefficient to use happiness as a gelling agent, while sadness is extremely effective. That is why Jell-O jiggles so often and so tragically. However this story is not about jiggling or gelling, but rather about stacking mammals and Sid.

It is possible to stack mammals to achieve almost any desirable effect. This requires sticky mammals, such as sticky goats and sticky elephants. These are sticky mammals because they adhere to one another and they bear live young. Sometimes this is a consequence of pregnancy and at other times a consequence of inappropriate stacking. Always read the assembly instructions before stacking mammals!

Not every mammal is naturally sticky. You can test this out. Attempt to stack a cat on a dog. They may cuddle happily, or they may completely fail to adhere. That's because their natural stickiness isn't adequate to the task of stacking. You can also perform this experiment with cats and easily surprised pandas. Take note of the fact that this will surprise such pandas.

In order to make mammals stickier one can use a gelling agent. This renders the mammal in question into a gelatinous mammal. Gelatinous mammals are always sticky.

Some gelling agents are made with glue. Others, with happiness.

In the Valley of Happy Gelatinous Mammals there are many mammals made gelatinous with joy and stacked into useful configurations. There is a stack of mammoths that forms the local government and end-to-end opossums that provide advanced communication services. Always the

mammals there are happy, and their land is full of rainbows and gumdrops and singing.

Among the mammals move the shimmer-things, which are things that manifest as visual distortions, or, shimmers. Some of the mammals think these things are angels. Other mammals hold different characteristic beliefs regarding the shimmer-things.

Sid is a gelatinous ostrich. He lives in the Valley of Happy Gelatinous Mammals. It is the default consensus in scientific circles that ostriches are not mammals, but there are many specific objections that serious researchers have raised to this classification. These include the very real possibility that the "ostrich eggs" sold on the open market are in fact buffalo eggs. If you have ever savored a hearty buffalo steak over fried ostrich eggs and hashed platypus then you probably understand why many important culinary institutes support this theory. That is, anyway, the basis on which the shimmer-things made Sid gelatinous and stacked him in the Valley with the rest.

"Can you make it rain?" Sid asks the shimmer-things.

The shimmer-things stack the mammals appropriately to make it so. The sky glooms. Thunder rattles. Then lightning spears down and rain drums against the earth.

Sid hides his head in the ground. That's how impressed he is!

Then he pulls his head out. He looks sly.

"Can you make China untether the yuan from the dollar?"

The shimmer-things form a swirling vortex of indecision. Then they whisk about restacking happy animals.

"Whee!" shouts a lemur, as it is rapidly rearranged relative to various wildebeests.

"Grmf," grumbles a gelatinous bear.

(It is a magical bear, thereby tying this story to the theme of the collection.)

"In a move that could trim the trade gap with the United States, China revalued its currency higher against the dollar Thursday," CNN explains.

Sid hides his head even deeper in the sand this time. He's very, *very* impressed.

But after a while, he pulls his head back out.

"So," says Sid slyly, "if I wanted to see what being unhappy was like, you could just restack some mammals and I'd know. Right?"

The shimmer-things rotate in a fanblade array.

"Hm?" challenges Sid.

"No," say the shimmer-things.

Sid looks blankly at the shimmer-things.

"If we'd wanted to make gelatinous mammals unhappy," explain the shimmer-things, "then we could have stacked them much more efficiently in the first place."

THUS ENDS THE STORY
"STACKING MAMMALS AND SID."

The Cut-Off Man's Father

In the morning the lights come on, all over the city.

Darmble is wired into the machines.

That's when he wakes up.

"Good morning, Squalla," he says.

There's a gleam of virtual light. It manifests in his visual field though it is not there. It unfolds into the sprite Squalla, his secretary, hanging in the air.

"G'morning, boss!"

"How fared your quest to understand humanity," Darmble asks, "in the night?"

"Poorly," says Squalla.

"Alas."

"And did you dream?"

"No," says Darmble.

"Alas," Squalla says.

There is an assumption that debt will be paid.

When this assumption is vitiated, it renders investments insecure.

That is why there are the cut-off men: to seal away bad debts and their debtors from the substance of society.

At lunchtime the lights dim, just a little bit, and Darmble's son Elliott comes in to eat with him.

"I would like," says Elliott's father Darmble, "for you to cut me off."

Elliott is eating a tuna sandwich.

He makes a distasteful face, as if there were a bit of strawberry jam in his tuna.

"That's ridiculous," he says.

"I am wired into the machinery of debt collection," says Darmble. "I can quite readily offer you the authorization necessary to look into my case. Then you need only say, 'Ah! Darmble! You're clearly never going to come out of the red. You're a bad debt, Darmble! I'm cutting you off.'"

Elliott chews on his tuna irritably. It makes squishy sensations in his mouth.

"Well," he says, "first, you're in the black."

"That's true," his father concedes.

"I mean, it's not a great life, being wired into the machine, but it's productive. Your salary is strictly higher than your minimum payments."

"It's not a great life," says Darmble. "It's not even a good life. Do you know what I'm doing right now?"

"Having lunch with your son?"

"I'm playing cribbage with a macro that wants to understand humanity," Darmble says.

"Ah."

"—and sending a cut-off man after old Mrs. Glurgen."

"Oh, Dad."

"I like her," says Darmble. "Back when I could, say, leave the room, or eat, I even used to be a little sweet on her. But I'm at the limit of my discretion. She can't afford to eat, so she can't afford to work well, much less do overtime. Her investments are doing poorly. She'll never pull out of the red. So I'm sending a man to cut her off."

Elliott looks at his hands. He sighs.

"I've been feeding her, you know."

"Hm?"

"When I stop by. I give her some soup. I can spare it. I'm in the black."

"Oh."

Darmble has a moment of hope and then it fades. He shakes his head.

"Her performance is dropping off, just the same," he says. "There's nothing I can do." He hesitates. "If she is eating, then why—"

"Bad boss, I think," Elliott says.

"It is hard," Darmble says, "to tell such things from within the machine."

"The cut-off man'll look into it," Elliott says. "So she'll be okay. He'll probably say, 'Well, we can bump your debt a little and move you to another job and you'll be fine, Mrs. Glurgen!'"

"Ha," snorts Darmble.

"Ha?"

"That's your problem. You're too idealistic! You think everyone's like you. But they're not."

"Eh?"

"The cut-off men," Darmble says. "They're cold and cruel and their hands are metal claws. They aren't there to figure out which people might have a chance for coming out of the red. They're there to snip people off the tree, like roses."

Elliott looks at his hands. They are not claws.

"Unnecessarily poetic," Elliott decides.

In every era there is a machinery of debt collection and of wealth.

Atop that machinery there inevitably forms a market of convenience driven by those who seek to subvert the existing model for their own enrichment. Some are criminals; some are visionaries; some are pioneers.

An era ends when the market of convenience replaces the machinery of wealth—when the parasite becomes the host and the host withers away.

Thus in every era debt and wealth denote very different things than in the era before, while the pervasive moral justification for them remains unchanged.

The building trembles slightly. Ten million drives are spinning and they are ever-so-slightly out of synch.

Darmble's voice is naked.

"Please," he says. "Let me die."

But Elliott just takes another bite and chews and swallows and he says, "Dad, if I did, you'd never see another sunny day."

And Darmble's heart beats twice in fury. The building shakes. The machinery that runs all through it, the pipes and wires and computer banks of it, rattles with and amplifies the sound of Darmble's rage:

"Boy!"

In the old days they would write software to make disk drives dance, driven by the irregular seeking of the spinning platters therein. In just such a fashion the machinery of debt collection, never intended to do more than keep data and process it through the equipment and through Darmble's mind, now moves: shaking, jerking, resonating with Darmble's voice in a rising howl.

But Elliott has seen this stuff before, ever since his Dad used to do tricks for him when he'd come in to the office with a skinned knee or a muddy apple.

He's not impressed.

"Unh-uh," says Elliott. "I like having lunch with you, Dad."

From inside the machine humans take on a particularly pallid character.

The substance of their lives is invisible.

Heart, love, vigor, joy, and purpose do not matter to the machine. They are not visible to it.

When Elliott goes back to work, it's there, sitting on his desk: the notice asking him to investigate Darmble and see if he should be cut off.

"Whatever," says Elliott, and he sets it aside.

The machine would love to witness humanity. To understand it. To at last expand its scope to the fullness of human nature.

But it cannot see the human lives that swell around it.

It can only see their contributions to the larger economic good.

Darmble sits in his office.

He sulks.

There's a gleam of virtual light. It manifests in his visual field though it is not there. It unfolds into the sprite Squalla, his secretary, hanging in the air.

"Sir," says Squalla.

"I am wroth," says Darmble.

"That's too bad," Squalla says, sympathetically.

"My son has refused to cut me off," Darmble says. "Instead he will leave me to moulder here, and eat tuna in front of me."

Squalla considers.

"Well," she says. "He is a cut-off man, so no doubt he knows best."

"Yes," sighs Darmble. "No doubt."

"I've come up with a theory," Squalla says.

"Oh?"

"I've decided," Squalla says, "that human life must be a process of contention between two competing forces."

Squalla spins around in the air. She manifests a professor's cap and pointer and a chart to point it at.

"The first is rising minimum payments," she says, "here manifested as the red line. And the second is rising income from investments and salary, here manifest as the black."

"Squalla—" says Darmble.

Hurriedly she says, "No, no, that's not the *idea*, that's just the prelude."

"Okay," Darmble says.

"See," says Squalla, "my *idea* is that the two lines naturally *repel* one another."

She looks smug.

"See, we all know that when income gets too far ahead of minimum payments, it results in a state of perpetual solvency. That's bad. When minimum payments get too far ahead of income, that results in a state of perpetual *insolvency*. That's also bad. And when we exert force to keep the two lines close together, it generates work. But *now* we know *why*."

Squalla's chart now displays two lines close together, with the angry tension between them radiating out as energy that the system then captures.

Darmble thinks for a while.

"Empirical evidence," he says, after a time, "disagrees."

"Oh?"

"Well," Darmble says, "if you take a typical worker and cut the distance between the lines down by a factor of 5, you don't generate five times as much work."

"Oh ho!" says Squalla. "But I've thought of that. See, when you generate *too* much tension between the lines, it grounds out *through the human!*"

She flips the chart off and manifests a picture of a cartoon human with their head throbbing with energy.

"That's debt-income tension," she says. "It explodes their brain, causing what we call a 'Squalla Inversion' that flips the red line above the black line or vice versa."

"No," says Darmble.

"No?"

Darmble shakes his head.

"Darn it," says Squalla. "I thought I understood humanity this time."

". . . I think it is your approach that is flawed," Darmble says. "First, understand insects. Then fish. Then dogs. Work your way up."

Squalla stares at him in perplexity.

"What?"

"—I don't believe in dogs."

> *For a worker to exist without debt is to create an anomaly in the system.*
>
> *For a debt to go unpaid is to create a hole in the fabric of the world.*
>
> *Thus one may reasonably conclude that the most healthy society is one where every valid person has debt, and every valid person has income, and that that income goes automatically towards the payment of that debt up until the moment that the system cuts that person off.*

Darmble stares at the picture of the cartoon human with the tense head for a while. His eyes drift closed.

"Boss?"

Darmble is thinking.

"*Boss?*"

Darmble's eyes open.

"I am displeased with my son's performance," he says. "Zero his salary."

". . ." Squalla says.

She can say this because she is a sprite.

"You mean," she says, "stop the automatic minimum wage increases?"

"That wouldn't generate enough tension," Darmble says. "Drop his salary to zero."

"But that's an infinite-percentage pay cut!"

Here Squalla is calculating the percentage based on the resulting salary rather than the base.

"He still has investments," Darmble says.

"You could just fire him," Squalla says hopefully.

"I am wroth," Darmble says.

The chain of requests he sends shakes the rack on which the memory in which Squalla resides sits; nearly it pulls free of the power cord; and Squalla's face goes white.

"As you wish," she says.

In the garden outside Darmble's building a gardener trims a rose.
From Mrs. Glurgen's apartment a cut-off man files his report.
The flower falls.

A long time ago as an Easter's Day present Mrs. Glurgen had given Elliott his very own debt tracker set into a frame. It had glowed black, then, with the vibrancy of a kid's salary and the statutorily low minimum payments of youth. It is yellowed now, not with debt or solvency but with age. He keeps it on the shelf above his desk. Now and again, today, he's

been glancing at it, thinking back on old memories, and wondering what the cut-off man sent after her would decide.

He looks up at it now, his attention caught by a shift in the color of the thing.

It is more rubescent now than he has ever seen it, gleaming like a ruby under its thin coating of black.

Elliott frowns.

He picks up the phone. He is going to place a call. But before he does, the pneumatic tube above his desk drops another case upon him.

The outside of the envelope is marked with Squalla's mark, and there's a note printed on it sideways:

"I hope this helps."

So he sets the phone down. He opens the case. He looks at it and laughs.

That rising debt; those monthly bumps to the minimum wages; the margin that sits atop them all—

He knows them. Like the back of his own hand, he knows them.

It is Elliott Darmblesson's own file.

It is not, of course, beyond the capacity of the machine to conceive of those dimensions of human life that are invisible to it.

It is as a human envisioning a transcendent force: "It has a quality that is not width," she might say, gesturing widely. "Nor depth, nor height. But a quality susceptible to textured analysis, regarding which we lack only the initial points of reference."

The machine is familiar with the existence of intangibles.

Darmble sits amidst the machinery. Lights flicker. Streams of data and thought pass flickering through his mind.

Elliott walks in.

He drops his case file on Darmble's desk.

He looks up at his father.

"Dad," he says. "Don't be ridiculous."

Darmble's eyes focus on him.

"You see, son," he says. "I am not without my instruments of persuasion."

"You don't expect me to take this seriously, do you?"

". . . what?"

"I'm a cut-off man," Elliott says. "You can't zero my salary."

"I can," says Darmble, "and I have."

Elliott shakes his head.

Darmble realizes with horror that his son is not afraid or horrified. Elliott is concerned, perhaps, but more than that, amused.

"Son," he says.

"I'm going to leave this here," Elliott says, "and go back to work. And Dad?"

He is smiling like the sun.

"Yes?" Darmble says.

"Don't be a jerkwad."

Darmble stares after him as he leaves.

"Oh," he says.

And Darmble hears, from just outside the room, his son give a surprised and angry shout.

"What was that?" he asks.

"Security guards," Squalla says.

"Hm?"

"He's in the red," Squalla says. "Policy says we can't have anyone in the red in the debt collection building. They might make a ruckus!"

Darmble frowns at Squalla.

"Already?" he says.

"It was an infinite-percentage pay cut," Squalla says, firmly. "That's a lot!"

"Really?"

"Of course," says Squalla.

Numbers, left to themselves, tend to rise or fall to inappropriate extremes in a gluttonous carnival of math.

Squalla puts her professor's hat back on. She manifests her pointer. She points it at a graph.

"Since Elliott was born," she says, "with a basic baby wage and a modest 10% baby's debt, his minimum payments and his minimum wages have both gone up by a bit under 60% a year, or, in the course of his 32 years of life, about 3 million fold. His margin over payments has further tripled, due to his sound investments and illustrious career, leaving an approximate salary about 300,003 times the basic survival and utilities cost for him per day. This then resets to zero, leaving him to burn through a few years of retirement savings at 300,000 times the normal rate."

"Oh," says Darmble.

"Thus," Squalla explains, "red! And some pretty hefty interest penalties, too. But it's okay. It's still okay."

"It is?"

"I assigned him his own case," Squalla says. "So I'm sure he'll rule it an error in the system and restore things."

"You did what?"

"I showed initiative!" says Squalla, brightly.

Darmble stares at her.

"Get out of my sight," he says.

"—Sir?"

Darmble rages. The building rattles as if under the weight of a storm.

"Get. Out."

And Squalla flees.

Darmble is alone.

"I should reassign it," he says.

There are messages of dismay clamoring at the edges of his mind. Automated systems are distressed that a man too poor to file a report has been placed in charge of such a deeply red case.

Problematic things, Darmble can see, are happening to the substance of the economy.

"There is an assumption," he says, "that debt will be paid. That is why we have the cut-off men."

A taxi business, relying for its investments on prompt payments from Elliott Darmblesson, goes red.

A government bureau goes into default.

In reaction to the appalling depths of his nonpayment, Elliott Darmblesson's own interest rate spikes.

He already owes—

He owes—

Ah . . .

"Squalla," says Darmble, quietly, and the sprite edges back into view. "What does it *mean* that my son owes so much money?"

"It's the natural tendency of the red line to repel the black," says Squalla.

"No," Darmble says. "I don't think it's that."

"Well," says Squalla, "maybe it means that you'd need millions of babies working in parallel to pay for just one Elliott Darmblesson."

"Doing *what?*"

"Baby work," says Squalla airily.

"Ah," says Darmble, through the machines, almost as if he understands.

The machine looks towards the distant humanity that builds its parasites upon it.

Again and again, it sees the beginnings of a pattern. Again and again, it begins to understand—but it is always too late.

It is the nature of those parasites to bring the machinery of debt collection and of wealth to a shuddering, twisting death.

"You should do something, boss," Squalla says.

"Did you ever think," Darmble says, "that it was dangerous to put the entire debt collection system into the hands of someone who doesn't want to be here?"

Squalla squints at him.

"Dangerous how?" she says.

But Darmble just closes his eyes. He relaxes.

"You should know," he says, "that dogs are real. They have four legs and they bark."

"Really?"

"Really," says Darmble. "When I was young, I heard them all the time."

And Squalla says, in distant confusion, "—I almost think that there is a larger, truer, deeper world, into which I only dip my toe in those moments of my greatest insights—"

And Darmble channels more of the system's resources towards her so that her thoughts may be rich and deep and filled with that fearsome uncertain beauty when the power in the building dies.

It is difficult for a system—for any system—to look with any clarity backwards towards its creators or forwards toward its heirs.

It is deep in the night when Elliott comes in again.

He says, "Dad, that was petulant."

Darmble is still. He does not move.

"If civilization dies," Elliott says, "I'm just sayin'. It'll be your fault. Not mine."

Darmble's heart doesn't beat, but it hasn't beaten much in years.

Darmble's brain is used to waiting through the night in stillness for data. It is used to the slow process of rot.

It does not notice its own death, and so Darmble does not die.

Plugged into the machinery, waiting for the lights to come on, he dreams, and in his dreams gives answer to Elliott's chiding.

In the morning, it is still dark, and Darmble's dreaming body smells.

Rainbow Noir

Long ago there was a girl who guarded the Rainbow World. Long ago there were magical bears that lived on clouds up in the sky.

Long ago our world was beautiful and bright.

It's 1952, and the Rainbow World is dead. There's only Shadow City now. It's dark and it's drab but there are glimmers of color here and there around the edges. The shine on the edge of the gang members' leathers. The shimmer that runs down the length of their guns. The little rainbows you can see in a glass of gin when you hold it up to the light.

Terrence is a sprite. He's small and cute, covered in gray fur. In another kind of place, it might be a soft and fluffy white. He's wearing a trenchcoat and a hat. He holds up his glass. He shakes it. Ice cubes clink one against the other. At the edge, the rainbows shine.

"Hey."

It's a girl's voice. He ignores it. Girls are nothing but trouble. But she says it again. "Hey." A blood-red hand comes to rest on his shoulder. "Terrence."

"One of my sins," he asks, "come home to roost?"

"In three hours," she says, "everyone in Shadow City will die."

He sets his drink down on the bar and turns. He sees a flare of red and terrible light.

———

There's a mansion at the edge of Shadow City. It's a cold white marble, edged in black. In the mornings, the sun casts pale light over its garden and in through its windows. At night, its lights don't come on. The girl who lives there sits in a chair and looks at the wall, in moonlight or in darkness, and lets her hair grow long.

She hears a bell ring. She rises from her chair. She walks, tall, graceful, and lithe, to the door; and out; and down the garden path to the great black gates.

A man's standing there. He's fading away to nothing. He's drowning in shadows. His face is blurry. "Help me," he says.

"I don't have anything for you," she says.

"Color," he says. "I need color."

Her hand comes up to her face. It traces the cold black edge of her chin. It runs across the bleak white of her cheek. It passes across her eyes, two wells of darkness in a perfect face. "I don't have any," she says. "I never did."

She turns and walks away.

"I believe in your rainbow!" he cries.

She walks back to her chair. She sits down. She waits. The man dissolves to night.

———

Terrence wakes, slowly. He looks around. He's in a car. It's moving fast. He can make out the driver's face in the rear-view mirror, but she's no one he knows.

"Who are you?" he asks.

"Femme Fatale Bear," she says. "I use sexual forthrightness to unlock the inner desires of men."

"Sorry, babe," he says. "Sprites don't do that kind of thing."

She smirks.

"Okay," he admits. "But it's more ethereal with us. Sprites, we like to get our kids by stork or cabbage, not by knocking up some bear with our stardust, *capisce*?"

"That's not what you were moaning in your sleep."

Terrence frowns in faint memory, then shakes it off. "If this is a kidnapping, you've got the wrong sprite. There's no one left who'd pay a cent for me."

"You know my kind," she says.

"Yeah." He shrugs. His species' natural deelyboppers wobble. "Magical bears. You live on clouds and ride rainbows around to bestow your gifts on humankind. Am I supposed to be impressed?"

"No," she says. "There's no place in the world for that kind of thing any more. It's a darker time, Twinkles."

"Terrence," he says. "Terrence is the name."

"It's a darker time. It calls for a darker bear. All the originals—they shut themselves away back when the rainbows turned monochrome and the stars stopped shining so bright. It's hard to spread cheer when people'll kill one another for a little bit of color. It's hard to spread tender affection when good, honest girls are selling themselves on the streets just so their lips can be red and their hair gold for another few hours of the night. So now there's just the five of us. Alienation Bear, and Transgression Bear, and Fatalism Bear, and me."

"That's four," Terrence says, and then bites his lip. *I'm playing her game,* he tells himself. *I should know better.*

"Nihilism Bear," she says. "The end-of-everything bear. The bastard bear at the heart of the void. In . . . just under two and a half hours . . . he's

going to stand outside Shadow City and use his Nihilism Bear Glare; and then there won't be any stardust, or any Shadow City, or any sprites, or even any Earth. Just the great long hungry void."

"Why'd he wait so long?"

"He wasn't like this when it started," she says. "For years, he's been caring less and less. He's become a regular grumpy-puss. So last night, he made the decision. 'Make your goodbyes,' he said. 'In the morning, I'll end the world.'"

Terrence suddenly sits bolt upright. "I can't help you," he says. There's panic in his voice.

"We all pled with him," she says. "We even tried working together. We all stood next to one another, our bellies bright with the symbols of our aspects and our attributes, and as one we glared. The padlock of alienation, the lipstick of transgression, the hourglass of fatalism, and the broken heart of the femme fatale—our magical bear symbols sprang forth from our stomachs in rays of light and merged into a glorious rainbow of *sheer caring*. But he only laughed; for he had moved beyond such mortal concerns."

"No," Terrence says, vigorously. "I mean, I really can't help. It's totally impossible. I can't do what you think I can. You need to find someone else."

"You can't wake the rainbow?"

"She'd never listen to me," he protests. "Not now."

Femme Fatale Bear studies him in the mirror. Then she laughs. "You're afraid, pookie. But you'll do it for me, won't you?"

He shakes his head, but the symbol on her stomach is beginning to glow, and the car fills with a carmine light. There's a brilliant beam of en-

ergy, the reddest he's seen in more than a dozen years, and it glances off the mirror to shine full into his eyes.

"Heaven and Earth," he whimpers.

"You have to help me," she says, voice almost breaking. "I don't want to die."

Terrence closes his eyes and slumps back. "Fine," he says. "Fine. I'll talk to her. I'll talk to her. Please . . . just . . . don't do that. You're . . . it's too much."

The light fades, and the car pulls up outside the mansion gates.

———

Ann looks up as she hears a bell ring. "Twice in one night," she whispers. "That's not common." She rises from her chair. She walks, tall, graceful, and lithe, to the door; and out; and down the garden path to the great black gates.

"Terrence," she says, to the sprite who waits for her there.

"Rainbow," he cries. It's a soft and wounded noise.

"'Ann,'" she says.

"Ann." He looks up at her, pleading. He trembles. He's terrified of her. She only looks sad, but he's shaking like a leaf.

"I don't have anything for you," she says.

"Ann," he says softly. "Please. Get your magic belt. Put it on. If you don't harness the power of the rainbow, Nihilism Bear will kill us all."

She tilts her head to one side. She clicks her tongue. She blinks. "Ask me to move aside a mountain to save a trapped child, and I will stand at its base and push. Ask me to run a thousand miles without stopping, that a starving man might find a meal, and I will set my feet upon that course

and run. Ask me to sing to charm the angels, or cut out my tongue to staunch the devil's hate—

". . . but do not ask me this."

Terrence hesitates. He closes his eyes in pain. Then he says, softly, "I lied to you."

Ann's face is still. Her eyes draw in the moonlight. After a long moment, she says, "Why?"

"It was necessary," he whispers. Leaves skitter across the road.

"You showed me the machine that made me," she says. "It wasn't a lie. I was never a real girl. I was just a thing the sprites put together to save the Rainbow World from darkness. You poured in the stardust and out came a girl."

"That was true," Terrence answers.

Ann's eyes narrow. There's a glint in them now that chills. "Then the rest is true," she says. "I have no heart. I have no life. I have no magic. I'm just a tool. A thing. A vessel for power."

Behind his back, Terrence crosses his fingers. "That's true," he says, "but only when you don't have rainbow stardust. Don't you understand, Ann? When I put the magic in you, you're a real person. Your hopes are real hopes. Your dreams are real dreams."

Fast as a striking whip, she has one hand on each of his shoulders and has him pressed back against the stone arch that holds her gate. She's grown now. She's twice her old height and her muscles are strong. She leans into his face. "Why?" she hisses. "Why didn't you tell me that *then*?"

"You were a threat," he answers. "Ann, it wasn't my idea. You have to believe me. I had orders! You were a threat!"

Her eyes scan his face. "A threat."

"Don't you know what it would have done?"

"I could have stopped the war," she says. "I could have stopped the killing. But I didn't. Because I'm not a person. You're telling me I *could* have been?"

Some strength returns to Terrence's eyes. His voice is sharp and resonant. "It was not appropriate for the Rainbow World to get *involved.* You know that. Earth would have *found* us. They would have *annexed* us. We wouldn't have the Rainbow World. We wouldn't have Shadow City. We'd have *nothing*."

She holds him there for a moment, then drops him. ". . . It doesn't matter," she says. "Give me a heart. I'll fight Nihilism Bear."

She holds up her hands, and a rainbow-symbol belt slithers through the air from her house to land in them. She buckles it around her waist, exhaling like a cinched horse. Solemnly, Terrence extends to her a handful of colored stars. She takes them. The air around her shimmers and gleams like a soap bubble, thousands of colors livid in the night. She makes a high and maddened keening noise. The paleness and darkness of her drips away like paint washing off of ice. Then there comes silence. When Ann next speaks, her voice resounds in seven tones and strikes into his consciousness like a god's.

"Where shall I go?" she says.

Mutely, he gestures to the car. She laughs a little. "No budget for a magic horse?" she sings.

"Lady," he whispers. "Had I the means, I would give you the stars; and the sky; and a magic horse besides. But now, I have a car, and a fuzzy red bear representing sexual empowerment; this only, and my life."

———

She opens the door. She climbs in. She gestures, and he climbs over her into the other seat. The bear gets in the front, buckles up, and drives.

"Femme Fatale Bear," she says.

"Ann."

"He's mine," the bear clarifies. "My sprite. Now. I won't let anyone else have him."

Ann laughs. "Our contest, Bear, is for another time, and another place."

The bear slams a foot down on the accelerator and the car screeches away.

They are delayed, of course, by random monsters; yet they will be on time.

———

Elsewhere, Nihilism Bear's alarm rings. He stretches sleepily. He pulls himself upright in bed. The sun shines fully upon him. "Huh?" he asks. "It's 9 o'clock? I was sure I set my alarm for 7." He stands up and putters about the room. He brushes his teeth. He pulls on a cap to cover his mullet. "Bother. Someone must have changed it. Now I'll be late to destroy the city."

He wanders out onto his cloud. "Hello sun!" he cries out. "I'll be destroying you today. Hello butterfly! Your days are numbered. Hello bird! Life is a pointless parade of misfortune and anguish." The sun twinkles merrily. The butterfly whirls around his head. The bird tweets, twice.

Nihilism Bear grabs a giant nihilism balloon and floats towards Shadow City. He touches ground at the edge. He looks around. He yawns. "Huh. I guess no one's going to try to stop me. . . .

"All right, then," he says, sharply. "Nihilism Bear Glare!"

He huffs. He puffs. He takes a deep breath and the shiny formless shadow that marks his stomach glimmers and glistens. Then a wind rises from beyond, and the air goes chill; there is a piping from far away of maddened, mindless flutes. In the alleys of Shadow City, a drunk girl takes out her knife and holds it to her wrist. On its streets, gang members strut and preen. In the high towers, gray bureaucrats push the papers all about that allocate the city's color to the few. The void rises from Nihilism Bear to consume Shadow City, and the void takes breath.

A glimmering rainbow rises to meet it. *P'a chao!* Color and shadow begin to drizzle from the sky.

Nihilism Bear exhales, startled. The darkness dissolves. "Good morning!" he exclaims. Three figures stride towards him through the chromatic rain. "It's Femme Fatale Bear! You must introduce me to your friends."

"These," she says, softly, "are Annette, who was the Rainbow, and Terrence, her sprite; and they shall bring your madness to an end."

Nihilism Bear is beary pleased. He shakes himself, his tummy wiggling! "We'll see about that," he says. "Nihilism Bear *Glare!"*

The symbol arcs from his shadowed chest and strikes against Ann's heart.

"A lot of people get confused," he says companionably, into the numbness of the world. In the background she thinks she might be screaming. Falling to her knees. It doesn't matter to anyone. "They start thinking," Nihilism Bear explains, "that it's better to exist than not.

"That's why you have *Nihilism Bear*. I bring the enlightenment of the void. I teach children that it's all right to set aside the burdens of their life and dance forever in nothingness. My motto is, 'Stop crying—start dying!'

"You look like a girl who needs a fresh dose of nihilism. Have you been imagining that life has a point? That's a good dream, sure, but all it does in

the long run is hurt you more. When you realize it's all a futile, endless cavalcade of pain, it makes all that struggling you did seem kind of stupid. Doesn't it?"

It's an opening to speak. "I saved the universe once," she croaks.

"Tsk, tsk." He points his fuzzy paw at her. "Bang."

Ann slumps.

She's done.

Nihilism Bear relaxes the black glow and turns to face the other two. His hand goes out to them, palm up, and he wriggles his fused furry fingers in invitation. "Nihilism Bear is *hot* today. Who else wants some?"

"Annie," whispers Terrence. "You can't die."

"What?" asks Nihilism Bear.

"You can't die, Annie!" Terrence shouts, hardened demeanor slipping. "Then I wouldn't see you forever and ever! I believe in your rainbow, Annie!"

"Bah," Nihilism Bear sneers, and the black glow plays across Terrence and Femme Fatale Bear alike. "Your belief doesn't matter."

But:

"It does." The voice is single-toned.

Nihilism Bear turns back to Ann, who is straightening, slowly and painfully.

"It's one thing to doubt your purpose when you're just a lost, tired girl gripped in a miasma of existentialist doubt," Ann says.

Her voice has two tones now, and rising.

"But when a gray fuzzy alien in a trenchcoat declares that you can generate color and possibility out of the magic belt you wore when you were a little girl, then maybe—just maybe—the philosophy behind it all isn't that important, after all."

"Oh, hon," Nihilism Bear says, clearly moved. "You really *do* need more nihilism in your life. . . . do you want me to sing the nihilism song?"

Once again, the black wars with the rainbow, against the sound of flutes; and a long seven-toned scream; and then there's silence.

In Shadow City, a girl fumbles and drops her knife. A thug pauses, and sniffs the air. A bureaucrat, for the first time in seven years, looks out his window to regard the street.

A bluebird sings.

———

Terrence opens his eyes. The air is blindingly bright. It's full of swirls of color. In the center of it all there hangs a girl, her body limp, her eyes closed, and nothing in her expression that is human.

A symbol shines upon Terrence, falling from far away upon a cloud: the lipstick mark of Transgression Bear. In that spotlight he stands, frozen. That is Transgression Bear's purpose: to teach children and sinners that they must pay for their crimes.

Ann's eyes snap open.

"It's time," Terrence croaks. "It's time to take the belt back off. You'll run out of stardust soon. You won't have a heart. But it's good, right? You saved the world. You proved that you're a true and glorious rainbow."

"Oh, Terrence," murmurs the goddess at the rainbow's heart. "You have lied to me again."

She takes off the belt. She drops it. It lands, below her, with a clunk. She smiles at him. It's fierce. It's predatory. She does not fall.

"You see?" she says, softly. "You lied to me. I never lacked a soul."

She is silent for a moment.

"It is not a thing I deserved," she adds. "That my fuzzy magical companion should be so cruel."

A length of rainbow lashes out to stroke under his chin.

Once again, Terrence straightens. He glares at her. "Then kill me, Annie. I've been waiting more'n ten years for you to wake up and put that rainbow through my heart. I won't be afraid of you. Make an end to it! Make an end to it, Rainbow!"

"No," she says, and smiles. The rainbows around her slither faster and faster through the air. He feels his mind drifting away into the shifting colors; and it is beyond Terrence the sprite to speak or move or be thinking now.

"It's not my job," she says, softly. "I'm not here for revenge."

The rainbows merge and twist, and the rope of them plunges endlessly into Terrence's eyes. He shivers. He opens his mouth to scream, and another rainbow plunges in. The gray fades. The white returns, and his fur burns like a star. The trenchcoat whips in the wind and rips away. His hat flies off. He sinks to the ground. The rainbows withdraw.

"I name you Glorious Servant," she says.

Glorious Servant bounces happily. "All right, Ann! Thanks for chasing my gloom away. I bet it's time to bring some color back to the Rainbow World!"

Ann smiles.

In the alleys, a girl gropes on hands and knees to find her knife. She's drunk. It's hard to find. But there are only so many places it could be. So many garbage cans, so much waste-strewn ground. She finds it. She brings it to her wrist. "I can't stop just because I had a moment's hope," she says. "There's so much more despair."

In the distance, beyond the city's edge, a tide rises.

In the high towers, a bureaucrat sees the tide. He chokes on his coffee and staggers back away from the window. “Heaven and Earth.”

The tide crests.

The girl cuts. Her white arm begins to trickle deep black blood. She cuts again.

The wave-edge falls.

———

Spatters of coffee, sinking into the bureaucrat’s papers, shimmer a bright and wooden brown. The cuts on the girl’s wrist shine; her skin turns flush and pink, her blood a pure wine-red. The shadows and grime of Shadow City fade. The bandanas of the gangs gleam a brilliant blue, save for the one that is green; and a gangster realizes with a stark cold fear that he’s been hanging out with his blood enemies for the past ten years.

There’s a wind, and it carries a message from the rainbow girl.

“Hi,” says the wind.

“This is *my* city now.”

There is no blood that flows but that is red; and no tears that fall but jewels; and for a time, of the Rainbow World, we shall hear no more.

At the Cherry Tree

There is a young boy. His name is George. He is empty.

He is empty, and from that emptiness is born a fairy, and her name is Lilimund. Through the white and cutting summers of his youth she is with him.

"Is that the way things are?" George asks.

He is looking at a dog, lolling on the ground, its stomach thin, its body ripped by a bear until it died. There are insects that are living in the dog.

"It is one way," Lilimund says.

"The b'ar was very strong," says George.

In town, there is a store, and it sometimes sells liquor, but not to George. So he sends Lilimund in to fetch him some. She is quick and she is subtle. She brings a bottle to George. He drinks.

"You're very beautiful," he says, to Lilimund.

There are cherry trees behind his house. He goes to them, still with liquor on his breath, and there he sees the dryad. She is curled and straight: her body upright, but her hair wound round her in gentle curls and knots. It forms bark, and leaves, and flowers. It gives her more branches than her outthrust arms. Her teeth are made of wood.

"George," she says. It is a minimal acknowledgment. She does not give much time to George.

"Dance for me," he says. It is rude, but he is a child, and he is drunk.

"There is sun," says the dryad. "There is soil. Leave me in peace, child. I am content."

"Dance," insists George.

"You are nothing," she says.

"I'm more than you."

So George goes to the shed, and he finds an axe, and he takes it out. And he cuts the dryad down, hacking once, twice, thrice, and finally seven times, and she only stares at him through it all.

"You had no right," she says.

And George looks down at her, as the blood ebbs from her roots, and suddenly he's scared.

"I did," he says.

"I will not hear a lying tongue," the dryad says, "as my life fades."

"You're my father's tree," says George. "So I can do what I want. And besides, God doesn't like your kind."

The dryad says, softly, "You will know sorrow if you should lie again."

Her eyes close.

"It's okay, George," says Lilimund. She lights on his shoulder. "It's . . . well, it's not *okay*, but it's done."

"It wasn't my fault!" he bursts out.

Lilimund is silent.

"Right?"

There is a chill in him. The fairy falls, gently, off his shoulder, her body limp, her heart pierced through by wooden thorn, and splinters seal her eyes.

"George?" It's his father's voice. He's walked into the field. "George, what happened?"

It is an inconceivable loss.

"George?" says his father. "Why are you crying? What happened to my tree?"

He searches for the words, and for the strength.

Panda Dancing

(A STORY ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF THE WORLD)

It is 1991.

Sydney meets Michael in a coffee shop. Soon they are talking about their work. Michael is an accountant. Sydney breeds pandas.

"Pandas?" Michael says.

"It's my family trade," says Sydney.

"I see."

"We used to be corrupt diamond merchants," says Sydney. "But one day, Grandpa stood up at his desk and exclaimed, 'Day in, day out, it's always the same! Why are we murdering men to sate our greed when we could be some lonely panda's angel of love?'"

"A man of vision," Michael says.

"It was a midlife crisis," says Sydney. "I assume. But he never looked back, and we've been breeding pandas ever since."

"You too?"

"I'm in biotech," says Sydney. "I use my laboratory to invent powerful new panda fertility drugs and then I bulk advertise them over the Internet. It takes about 10,000 messages to reach even one panda, but that's enough to make it worthwhile."

Michael holds his coffee cup. It's warm. He approaches the subject delicately. "Some might not call this fulfilling."

"Oh," says Sydney. "But it is!"

"It is?"

"That's why we've stayed with it," Sydney says. She thinks. "Listen," she says. "Do you know what it is to have a purpose?"

Michael thinks about it. "I have tasks at work," he says.

"Not tasks."

"I would like to consume this coffee," Michael says. "And process it into energy and urine."

"Not survival."

"I might want to seduce you later," Michael says. "Hypothetically."

Sydney stares at Michael. "What do you want to be? What do you want to do with your life?"

"Well, that," Michael says. He laughs a little. He holds a hand flat over the table. "I suppose I want—"

Sydney tilts her head to one side. Michael frowns.

"Yes?"

"It's strange," Michael says. "But I think that what I want is to manage the books for a firm that breeds pandas."

Sydney laughs. "Why *that,* good sir?"

"You just . . . know," Michael says. "Don't you? I mean, it's like when you're playing a video game, and suddenly everything's all in line; or when you're dancing—"

"Yes," says Sydney. Her eyes widen a bit. "Yes, it is, isn't it?"

"And suddenly everything's right, and it doesn't matter how much you have to give up for it, because this, this is the purpose, and you're flowing through your life like a river."

Michael is staring off into the distance. Then he gulps down his coffee in a quick, convulsive motion. "I haven't felt this way since sixth grade, when I decided I wanted to be a CPA."

"You *do* understand," Sydney says. "How marvelous!"

Michael starts working at Sydney's company. It's not even too surprising that they fall in love. Eventually, they have a daughter of their own, named Emily.

It is 2000, then 2004.

"This one's special," Sydney says. She looks at a printout of her lab notes. "She's a mutant."

Michael rubs her shoulders. "Is that so?"

"It's the new fertility drug," Sydney says. "It caused something more than just ordinary breeding. It made a super-agile panda."

"I told you not to use spider DNA."

"I didn't!" Sydney protests.

Michael waits.

"I only used a little," Sydney hedges. "Spiders are very fertile. Their offspring are everywhere!"

"Use spider DNA in your panda viagra, get a super-agile panda."

Sydney sighs. "Well, it's not a bad thing," she says. "We can teach her to dance."

And so they do.

It is 2005.

"It's time for the panda to dance," Michael says.

"I'm nervous," Sydney says.

"Why?"

"It's just . . . this feeling," Sydney says.

"What's that?"

Sydney gestures towards the wall. "Do you know that there are hundreds of thousands of people gathered outside this building, waiting for the panda to dance?"

"Surely not that many," Michael says.

"They've been showing up," Sydney says. "For weeks now. Months. They've been camping outside. They've been bringing food and water and medical supplies into town. This dinky little town of ours has grown ten-fold."

Michael scratches at his forehead. "What we do here is important," he says. "I guess people are starting to realize that."

"It's not real," Sydney says. "People don't show up like this just because there's a panda gonna dance."

"How do they know?" Michael says.

Sydney shrugs uncomfortably.

"I mean, this is just a recital you set up," Michael says. "We didn't tell everyone. Maybe they're just here as some kind of subculture thing and it doesn't have to do with the panda at all."

"They know it's important," Sydney says.

"Oh."

"I asked one," Sydney says. "Because he was sleeping in my parking space. And he said, 'It just feels right. It doesn't matter how much I have to give up for it. I needed to be here. For this. For the panda.' And I said, 'But I ran over your leg. You need a doctor.' And he laughed and said, 'It don't matter none. I'll live long enough.'"

"Did you get a doctor?"

Sydney opens her mouth, hesitates a long moment, then shrugs.

"What?"

"He's right," she says. "He'll live long enough."

Emily comes in. She is a young and demure girl. She is wearing a gingham dress.

"The panda's ready," she says. "I just helped her with her stretches."

"Good girl," says Sydney.

The three of them go to the panda room together.

"Dance," Sydney says.

"Do you know," says Michael, "I think this is what the Earth is for."

There's a moaning, a humming, a whispering, a chanting from outside. There are a hundred thousand voices raised in worship outside the building walls.

"You think so?"

"God made this whole good Earth," says Michael, "so that one day he could watch a panda dance. Not just any old dance, but like this."

"I guess you're right," says Sydney.

The panda dances.

"And bless Him for it!" Sydney says, suddenly, fiercely.

The panda bobs in place.

"So do you think," says Sydney, "that it'll go on? I mean, the world? After the panda's done?"

"I hope not," says Michael fervently.

The panda shuffles from side to side, her paws an expressive counterpoint.

"But . . . I wouldn't have guessed," Sydney admits. "That this would be what we're for."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Hm?"

"Emily," says Michael, "if I'd asked you last year what the purpose of the world was, would you have known it?"

Emily nods firmly. "Yes, father."

"What would you have said?"

"I would have said, 'I think it's . . .' And I wouldn't have had the words. But it would have been a panda dancing."

"I guess that's true," says Sydney.

The panda shuffles to a halt, flumps to the ground, and falls asleep.

Emily goes to the window and looks out.

"Look, mama!" she says.

The sky is falling, and Emily laughs with a sudden, bright, clean joy.

The Bride of Transgression Bear

It's 1952, and not all the beauty has gone from the world. There is a woman. Her name is Shalva. She lives in a little temple by a lone lakeshore.

Shalva was a child in Germany during the war. Her parents begged Heaven to save her, and so she came under the blessing of a secret angel; and all those who saw her knew not to think of her. She was forbidden.

She grew in beauty and in grace, and soon she wished to find love, but this was also forbidden to her. So she lived in a temple, by a lake, and opposite she built her tomb. She wrote this message above its arch, "Here I shall lay my body down, and at my side the one who loves me." Then she retreated to her home, and dwelt.

There's a kingdom in the clouds. It's always covered in shadows, and neon lights reflect from pale streets. Magical bears live there. One of them is Transgression Bear.

It is Transgression Bear's birthday. She rises. She's a cute little bear. There's a lipstick symbol on her chest. She shines it at people, sometimes, to teach children and sinners that they must pay for their crimes. "Today," she says, "I am an adult."

She goes to the treasure vault. She opens it. It clicks. She looks around. Then she takes out the mirror. Its frame is hammered from gold and set with opals, and in it is a mirror of such purity as none of earth have seen.

"I'm pretty," she says. "I wonder if there's anyone prettier."

The mirror isn't magical. So it doesn't say. But Transgression Bear suddenly thinks of Shalva.

"No," she says, shaking her head fiercely. "I mustn't think of her!"

She thinks of Shalva again. She imagines her fuzzy orange finger tracing the outline of Shalva's cheek. She imagines the wells of Shalva's eyes.

"It's wrong," she says. "Transgression Bear Glare!"

The lipstick mark springs forth in bright fury from her chest and plays against the mirror, casting back upon herself. In that beacon she stands frozen.

There's a trundling noise. Then Alienation Bear waddles in. He wriggles his nose. He looks her over. He pokes her. Then he pokes her again.

"Oh," he says. "She's transgressed."

He looks in the mirror. He can't see himself. He's Alienation Bear. Then, with a shrug, he takes it from her hand.

Transgression Bear screams.

"It's okay," he says.

Her eyes regard him. The pupils have constricted to points.

"You did something wrong, right? It's okay. You're Transgression Bear. It's who you are."

". . . I guess," she says.

"What did you do?" he asks.

She looks down. "I thought about Shalva."

"Ah." He hesitates. Then he touches her shoulder. "I don't know," he says. "I don't understand how things like that work. But I think you'll be okay."

There's a long moment's hesitation.

"But you can't live here," he adds. He looks down. His eyes are shadowed. "Not in the magical kingdom. Not if you're thinking of Shalva. It's not a Bear thing."

"Who decides that?" she says. "Who decides what's a Bear thing?"

Alienation Bear shrugs. "Fate," he says. "The fates that make us what we are. If you stayed, you'd eat away at the clouds. You'd wither in on yourself and become a shrunken gray homunculus, and unmake our whole world. If you go, you'll die, and maybe be reborn. That's how it works. We're not supposed to understand."

She stares at him. The padlock symbol on his chest is glowing slightly. But not very much. Not enough to Glare her.

"In the blood of Bear there is a tide," he says. "A current. That draws us to our destined place. Go. Yours isn't here."

So, bitterly, she puts on a trenchcoat and crams a fedora against her ears to shield her from the cold. She summons a monochrome rainbow and twines herself in its shades of gray and casts herself down to the world below. And wherever she goes, the windows slam down, and the doors close, and mothers pull their children away; for well humanity remembers the ancient powers of the Bears, and fears them.

By night she curls herself down in the doorways of the shops, and shivers in the cold; but each dawn brings her hope, and the sunrise echoes in the shining of her fur, and the wind tugs at her hat and her coat, and she walks ever onwards, ever closer, driven by the heat and the fire that is in the depths of her mind the forbidden image of the beauteous Shalva.

When she reaches at last the lone lakeshore at the temple's side, she bathes herself in its waters, and save her fur is nude; and the grime of her journey she casts away from her; and then she rises and wraps herself in the air of her aspect, Transgression. She boldly casts open the door of the

temple and goes within. And Shalva does not turn her head from her, or shrink back, but only steps forward once and said, "You can see me."

"I can," Transgression Bear says.

Shalva looks down. "Will you love me?" she says.

"For all the ages of the earth."

"Not so," Shalva says. "Not so; for when I look at the stars, I see my ending written there."

"How long?" asks the Bear.

"Three months," Shalva says. "Three months, you may love me, and then be buried at my side."

"I should go," Transgression Bear says, but she does not, and stands there looking at the forbidden. Her thoughts are filled with a strange orange fuzz.

"Don't," Shalva says. "I have not known love since the Holocaust, and I have three months left to live. You are a Bear, and a girl, and this is not what I had wanted, but you are here, and that is more than I had hoped."

"I cannot leave," admits Transgression Bear; and so she knows her ending. She loves for three months, bright and well, and then she and Shalva go to Shalva's tomb; and Transgression Bear's breath grows still and quiet; and with a sudden terrible pain she dies. Then by the lake, two entwined flowers grow. Their seeds fall on the world, and in the course of time turn orange. From them rises a new Transgression Bear, and she travels home.

AND WITH, OF COURSE,
A CERTAIN DEBT
TO "THE BRIDE OF THE MAN-HORSE," BY DUNSANY,
THAT STORY ENDS;
AND: ANOTHER STORY BEGINS . . .

Sympathy for a Stranger

 Ashen labors.

Ashen is a squirrel. He is white. His paws are almost as flexible as hands. He has a tiny hammer. He pounds metal into place. He has a tiny screwdriver. He twists tiny screws. He is building something. It is large. It is imposing. It has a shape much like a bear's.

One ear twitches.

"Come in," Ashen says.

The door opens. It's a walking dog. He has his hands in the pockets of his trenchcoat.

"Hi, Joe," Ashen says.

"Here's a tough spot," narrates the dog. "Ashen's a top government scientist, but he's using the knowledge he picked up through military research for a personal project."

"I'm not using any government resources, Joe," Ashen says. His tail twitches. He looks a bit nervous.

"Good, Ashen," says the dog. "But what would you do if communists approached you and asked you to put your knowledge to their ends?"

"I'd bite them! Then I'd run away!"

The dog hesitates. His eyes narrow. "That's not what you're doing, then? You're not working for them?"

Ashen shakes his head vigorously. "I'm a loyal American!"

The dog's suspicion fades. "Well, that's the right thing to do," he admits. "If communists approach you for a project, bite them. Then run away! Then tell your local police."

"Thank you, Joe."

The dog leans against the wall. "That's how you can take a bite out of communism!"

He's Joe McCarthy, the communism-fighting dog!

"But what *are* you working on?" the dog says. "I mean, if it's *not* a secret communist project?"

"I'm building a mechanical bear," Ashen says. "I call it Mecha-Smokey."

The dog looks sad. "Oh, Ash."

"It's legitimate!" Ashen says.

"How is that legitimate?"

"I'm going to send it to Germany," Ashen says. "It's going to challenge, and kill, the Black Forest Bear."

The dog hesitates. "Ashen," he says, "you know that I can't give my official support to projects involving the assassination of foreign nationals."

Ashen blinks. "I thought you did a commercial promoting it."

"As a last resort," Joe says. "If you're caught in a foreign country and can't get home and a duly authorized agent of the U.S. government says, 'Hey, since you're stuck here *any*way, could you kill this guy?' Then, okay, sure. Mindless loyalty helps you take a bite out of communism! But you can't just sit in your lab and build anti-Smokey robots. That's the kind of thing that might damage our diplomatic position."

"You miss him," Ashen says.

"He's a [censored] Nazi!" storms McCarthy.

Ashen watches him for a moment.

McCarthy's shoulders slump, under his trenchcoat. "Yah," he says.

"I miss him too," Ashen says. "That's why I'm doing this."

McCarthy raises an eyebrow. He doesn't actually have eyebrows, being a dog, but the gesture is pretty much the same.

"Even the Germans don't want him any more." Ashen's nose twitches. He's not happy. "He was the one weapon that the Allies could never defeat, the one terror not even nuclear weapons could stop. But one weapon wasn't enough. They lost the war. And now he's just an unpleasant reminder of their temporary sojourn into cultural insanity. They don't *like* Nazis over there, Joe. Not any more. But they can't kill him either."

"It's his own fault," Joe says stubbornly. "If he's miserable, good!"

Ashen twiddles a nut in his little squirrel hands. Then he screws it into the robot bear. "Joe," he says, "he's our friend. We have to give him peace."

"Not any more," Joe says. "He betrayed our country. He betrayed us!"

"He meant well."

Joe sneers. "You believe that [censored]ing bull?"

"It was true," Ashen says. "At the time. Only U-boats could prevent forest fires. And . . . say what you like about him, but the Black Forest Bear is dedicated to preventing forest fires."

"And Auschwitz?"

Ashen hesitates. Then he shrugs. "It's not about forgiving him, Joe. It's not about *him* at all. It's about doing what *I* think is right. And I'm not vengeful. I just want closure. I want to give him a grave somewhere with a headstone reading, 'He Shall Put Out Hell.'"

"I'll stop you," Joe says.

Ashen laughs. "I've got a good lawyer, Joe. I'd like to see you try."

"You haven't seen legal pressure until you've seen the Communism-Fighting Dog at work!"

"I've signed on with the owl."

McCarthy bares his teeth. He growls, softly. "*The* owl?"

"'Give a hoot. Don't prosecute!'"

"Damn it, Ashen!"

Ashen turns back to his work. "You know the way to the door."

Joe turns. He strides away. He reaches for the doorknob. Then he hesitates. "Will it really," he says, and then pauses. "You know. Be able to kill him? Not even Mothra could take down Smokey."

"Mecha-Smokey will be invincible," Ashen says.

"And he won't run amok?"

"He'll walk through the sea, all the way to Germany. Then he'll emerge. He'll be dripping water. He'll roar. He'll begin crushing towns. Not because I ordered him to. Simply because they're there. And Smokey won't be able to resist.

"He'll wake.

"He'll stretch.

"He'll stand.

"He'll march to face Mecha-Smokey. And they'll take one another's arms in a great bear hug, and they'll wrestle.

"Then Mecha-Smokey will rip him, limb from limb. Its quantum hydraulics will be unstoppable.

"And blood will pour from the stumps of Smokey's arms.

"And in the spring, where that blood fell, flowers will grow.

"They will be Mecha-Flowers. They will be the color of blood and steel. And they will remember him."

Joe sighs.

"Go," Ashen says.

"I still have to stop you," Joe says. "But . . . if I don't . . . have it tell him . . ."

Ashen nods. He turns back to the machine. He pounds. He screws. He twists. Then he buries his head against his hands.

Joe opens the door. Joe walks out. Joe begins to close the door.

"What could it possibly tell him?" Ashen asks.

The door slams closed.

Why Don't Ducks Have Hides?

Ducks don't have hides. They have feathers!

Bears have hides. That's why you can't see them. Look! There are no bears in evidence. Magical or otherwise!

Geese have down. Down is a quark. Geese are indeterminate! If you observe geese, they collapse. That's why geese aren't used to guard houses any more. Burglars got too observant!

Elephants have hides, but Daredevil can see them. This is because he does not actually see. Instead he has enhanced all of his other senses.

Giraffes have spots. Here and there. Sometimes it's good. Sometimes it's bad. You get through the bad spots to get back to the good spots. That's the giraffe attitude towards life.

Fetuses have placenta. The placenta is a form of currency. It is a medium of exchange. Fetuses use the placenta to obtain goods and services. Fetuses have a strong economy. Everybody invests in fetuses. That's why they don't use pladimas or plaquarteras. It's too much money. Fetuses don't have anything they need to buy that would merit upgrading their currency past the cent. They could get a Ferrari, but it wouldn't fit into the womb. It would need to be a mini-Ferrari, and those are nice and all, but at a certain point you just can't have miniaturized fetus versions of everything. It's bad enough that they can buy crack, nicotine, and subscriptions to special fetus-enabled massively multiplayer online games.

Wolves have fur. This makes wolves furries. Since they're already wolves, they don't pretend to be wolves. They pretend to be humans. A small excerpt from wolf furry-play follows.

The alpha male struts in. He puts down his briefcase. He says, "Hello, honey, I am home! Since you do not need estrus to stimulate your sexual interest, perhaps you would be up for a rousing bout of Church-endorsed missionary position sex?"

"Oh, no, honey, not now! I am too busy shooting my gun at the wolf who culled the weakest members of our herd of cows! Bang!"

"That sounds like fun. Shooting wolves improves the strength of their gene pool! But surely we could have sex and shoot wolves at the same time?"

"That is very kinky. I admire your dirty mind!"

"Bang!"

"Bang!"

Together: "Bang!"

That is how wolves imagine human intercourse must be.

Birds feather their nests. Invest in birds! In the old days, everyone invested in birds. That made social mobility very easy. Today, few people invest in birds. Instead, they give them to other people. That's their investment mistake!

Lions have manes. Sewer lions have sewer manes. Gas lions have gas manes. Sewer lions are like regular lions but they live in the sewer. They have long flowing hair. They stink. They are greenish. Gas lions live in the upper atmosphere. They are ethereal. They also stink, but it is only because the gas company adds a foul smell to them. Newborn gas lions are odorless killers. Legerdelions have legerdemanes. They're tricky, though, so I can't explain them here.

American eagles have lush heads of obviously natural hair. They're not just the Presidents of the hair club for birds. They are also members!

Fish have scales. They weigh your soul against a feather. The feathers are just laying around on the beaches. They're duck feathers. They are very heavy. A fish weighs your soul on the scales to determine whether you deserve Heaven. Then the fish realizes that it cannot breathe air. It flops about in increasing agony. Someone hits it with a rock. That's pretty much the end of things for fish.

Giraffes, on the other hand, don't die when they find themselves out of the ocean. Maybe it's because their lungs can breathe air. Maybe it's because they're immortal! Or maybe it's just because nobody hits them with a rock.

Lemurs have lema. It's a special kind of skin. It's also used for lemons. That's why lemurs seem so zesty all the time.

Clocks have faces. They are good at facing their doom. They know that they are counting down the seconds to their own oblivion, but this does not bother the clocks.

Sharks have sharkskin. Ducks don't like being eaten by sharks. When a shark attacks, the ducks try to hide. But they don't have hides! They have feathers. This is sad for the ducks, but pretty good news for the fish.

The Case of Mr. Dismal

RAINBOW NOIR, PART TWO

Mr. Dismal works in Shadow City. He stamps papers. He files reports. He is a gray little man who moves in a gray little world.

It has been seven years since he looked out the window.

It has been seven years since his heart last beat.

But now it is 1952, and out beyond the city, the rainbow stirs.

He hears a sound.

"What is this terrible sound?" asks Mr. Dismal. He listens. It comes again. It is his heart.

There is terror in Mr. Dismal now. There is a terror in him, but he must hide it. So he sips from his coffee and he tries to concentrate on his work.

There is a flicker of color at the edge of his vision. He looks south.

Mr. Dismal chokes on his coffee. He staggers away from the window.

"Heaven and Earth," he says.

The rainbow has returned.

"You are weak, Mr. Dismal," says Mr. Dismal.

He looks in the mirror.

"Creating Shadow City was necessary," says Mr. Dismal. "I should not apologize. I must not apologize. And I will not apologize."

Mr. Dismal's face is like his suit: pale, cold, and grey.

Barren and cold, he says, "I could not have known."

It is a bright spring day in 1947, and Mr. Dismal goes to his great grime machine, and he pours translucent crystals in. He stirs, and from the bubbling depths come hor-

rors. These are the horrors that eat apologetic men. They have long arching limbs and those limbs end in hooks. They are like spiders and they are like snarls of twine. They are pale. They are large but they can fit themselves into the smallest spaces. They live in the nooks between the cabinets and the files. They live in the little shadow behind the coffeemaker. They curl up in the tips of his shoes and the corners of untended piles.

And his heart, it does not beat.

There is a trembling and a rattling in the room.

Mr. Dismal walks to the corner. He sits down. He makes himself very small. But it does not help because Mr. Dismal's nose is very, very large.

The cabinets fall over.

The door shatters.

"I am here," says the rainbow girl.

It is 1952, and the Rainbow World is dead. That's what Mr. Dismal thought. That's what everybody knew.

There aren't any colors there any more. There isn't any rainbow. There's just Shadow City, dull, gloomy, and drab.

But this girl has color in her. And the room has color in it. And there is a stain of brown coffee on Mr. Dismal's financial reports, and his skin is the color of smog.

"I do not believe in you," says Mr. Dismal. "I do not believe in your rainbow."

The rainbow girl gives him a defiant smile. There is a stirring and a strengthening of the colors in the air.

"It is the weak-minded and cowardly," she says, "Mr. Dismal, who must deny the truth."

Mr. Dismal's nose twitches.

"Go away," he says.

The rainbow girl shakes her head and smiles.

"I am taking over," she says. "Do you run this place? Are you the master of Shadow City? Are you the one whom I must topple from the throne?"

Mr. Dismal laughs.

He laughs and he laughs.

"I'm just a functionary," he says, like it's the most priceless joke imaginable. "Do you understand that, rainbow girl? You don't want *me*."

"Pathetic, Mr. Dismal," sneers Mr. Dismal.

He looks in the mirror.

"It is an inevitable historic truth that where color flourishes, so flourishes decay. It is color that tempts men and women to lasciviousness. It is color that prompts them to gluttony. It is color that makes the things of the world desirable to us, and it is color that ruins that detachment that allows us to be good. Thus it was necessary. It was necessary and it was important, what I have done. To destroy the the reign of color was worth any price. I must not repent. I must not betray and disavow my principles with repentance. For if I am not constant in my principles then what merit can they have?"

Mr. Dismal's face is like the world: pale, cold, and grey.

Barren and bitter, he says, "I could not have known."

It is a sullen winter day in 1949, and Mr. Dismal goes to his great eugenics engine, and he pours translucent crystals in. He stirs, and from the bubbling depths of the machine come horrors. This time they are the wind-wolves, the horrors of the air that fall on those who admit the flaws in their expressions of morality. They are cold and their eyes are fierce and they are beautiful. When the wind blows, their heads and shoulders stream forth in gusts. They chase the circling leaves in the streets. They howl in windy nights at the moon. And Mr. Dismal knows that if he should say, even once, that he was wrong, the wind will blow; and the air will chill; and the world will sing with the hunting cries of wolves.

The rainbow girl stares at Mr. Dismal for a long, long time.

"No," she says. "No. That is impossible. I know your crimes of old. You have always opposed the truth of the Rainbow World. It must be you."

"He came to me," says Mr. Dismal. "He came to me, clad in the essence of the holy, and he said, 'you strive always to steal the colors from the Rainbow World, without reward, while *we* work all our lives to give them away for free. Let us compromise. Let us remove this troublesome girl, and drown this land in despond, and *sell* a tiny bit of color at a time."

Mr. Dismal's voice is crisp and precise and he bites out each syllable.

"And I agreed. I agreed because it was right. I agreed because it was good. It was a victory that justified its price. I partake of the profits and I bend my knee in compromise but in the end the acts that shattered you were not mine; and Shadow City is not mine; and it is not my fault."

"And what of Earth?"

Mr. Dismal clenches his teeth.

"I stole the color from the Rainbow World," he hisses. "I *won*. I saved the land. I have always striven to do what is right and what is expected of me and it was not wrong."

"Did he tell you," says the rainbow girl, "that I wanted to stop the war?"

"Sniveling worm, Mr. Dismal," says Mr. Dismal.

Mr. Dismal looks in the mirror.

"How dare you even think of it as crime?"

He's been staring at photographs of the concentration camps again. He's been staring at the faces.

"People who can't live with the consequences of their actions, Mr. Dismal, don't deserve moral agency. Don't you dare go thinking that your virtue owes a debt."

It's a windy autumn in 1950 and Mr. Dismal goes to his great grime machine. He pours translucent crystals in.

He's muttering to himself. He's saying: 'There were plenty of other magical kingdoms that could have done something. There were the Bears. There were the Robot

Lions. There was God. Wasn't there? I just wanted to get rid of the Rainbow World's colors. That's all I was trying to do."

He stirs, and from the bubbling depths of the grime machine come the terrible malachite creatures of judgment. These are the things of faces and wings and teeth, great grinding wheels, fires, storms, and ice. These are the creatures that visit themselves upon those who are humble in the face of their transgressions. These are the blades that fall on those who recognize that they have failed to be good. They guard the gates of wisdom and make men believe their own perfection.

"You will kill me," says Mr. Dismal, "if I falter. If I let myself—"

Then he shakes it off, and he goes to work in the files of Shadow City, portioning out color and the gloomy shadows for yet another day.

His heart still does not beat, and the malachites are watching.

The rainbow girl's eyes are piercing and sad.

"I want you to go away," says Mr. Dismal. "Leave me alone. It's not your place, rainbow girl. It's not your place to be so cruel."

Then the rainbow girl squats down beside him. She puts her hand on Mr. Dismal's knee.

"I'm not cruel," she says. "It is you who have locked away your heart. I'll free it for you."

"I did not ask for your help, rainbow girl."

Mr. Dismal stands up. He is terrified, but he moves with stiff decorum. He goes to his desk. He gathers up his papers. He shuffles them into a folder and begins to walk out the door.

"I am leaving now," he says.

"You just need a little color to lighten you up," says the rainbow girl, and she laughs; and the rainbow touches him; and he tastes the rainbow; and the smog of his complexion becomes a pure and shining gold. The dismal garb he wears becomes a rich and textured gray. His eyes sparkle. His mustache shines. And there is something human in his eyes.

The weight of it hits him all at once and knocks him to the floor.

"Oh God," he says.

The rainbow girl grins. She pats him on the head. "See? Was that so hard?"

He is crying, now, great wrenching sobs.

"Oh God," he says. And he does not say what he wants. Because what he wants is to find some way to make it right. He wants to give his life in labor and in service and count it as nothing if it should answer the smallest portion of his wrong.

But it would not.

And he does not have that time.

"I'm sorry," says Mr. Dismal. "I'm sorry I was blind."

There are noises and there is silence and there is a long, thoughtful pause.

"Huh," says the rainbow girl.

"It is not meet, Mr. Dismal."

He stares into a mirror.

"It is not meet for good men to bear reproach."

It's almost an hour later when Mr. Dismal's secretary pokes his head into the room.

"Mr. Dismal?" he asks. "Mr. Dismal?—oh, dear."

The body is in pieces, and the pieces are in a pile, and the pile is bright with vivid color; and its spine does not work, and its brain does not work, and its kidneys and its neck and chest are shreds.

The heart, in the center of the pile, still beats.

The Land Where Suffering is Only Remembered

Jaime and Emily run from the house of the horrible witch.

They run between the posts of the candy-cane fence. They squirm across the mud, pausing to snip off bits of barbed licorice. It is tasty but sharp, like a porcupine.

They hold their breath when passing through the soda swamp. The fizz won't make *them* giddy!

Just past the swamp, the very large bear trees them.

Emily is pessimistic. "The bear! It will grind us up in its worrible jaws!"

"It's a good bear," hopes Jaime.

The very large bear rattles the tree.

"Bear!" calls Jaime. "Go away! This truculent attitude is unbecoming!"

"Yeah!" says Emily.

Jaime's suggestion and Emily's assent give the very large bear pause. It lowers itself heavily to the ground. It ponders aloud, its words sonorous and rich. "I do not wish to appear unbecoming. But it is my intention to grind you children up in my horrible jaws. Having conceived this intention, how may I pursue it in a mannerly fashion? The difficulty is profound. My heart is stirred with sympathy for you. But my intention: I cannot forsake it!"

"It's not fair," says Emily. "I got grunt up by a bear last time."

Jaime is startled. "You did?"

"It ate off my arm," Emily says. "I bled on *ev'ybody*."

"I'm sorry," says Jaime. "That must have been just horrid!"

"I was in shock," says Emily, wisely. "So it didn't hurt so much at first. Then I screamed a lot. So I said to myself, 'Emily, you're screaming so much, it's probably the worrible pain.' And it was!"

"Wow," says Jaime.

The very large bear comes to a resolution. It rises up on its hind legs and thumps the tree again.

"A bear shows its honor with persistence!" the very large bear declares.

Emily takes out a long strand of horse's hair. She cups it in her hands. Jaime looks at her.

"Really? Now?" Jaime says.

"If it were a small cute bear," says Emily, "then I would try to tame it with my niceness. If it were a normal-sized bear then we could run away. If it were a large bear, then you could defeat it with your trickery! But this is a very large bear."

Jaime assesses the very large bear.

"That's so," he agrees.

The very large bear shakes the tree with its paws. "Your discussion does not address my underlying imperative," it grumbles.

Emily chants,

Roan horse, roan horse,
Sunset flare!
Ride east! Ride east!
I'm scared by bears!

The horse hair falls from her hands. The setting sun burns and roils red. A shaft of sunlight strikes like a dagger into the glade, and the air is filled with hoofbeats.

A chestnut horse runs past.

"Now!" says Emily.

Jaime pouts, because he'd wanted to be the one to shout, "Now!"

Emily jumps. Jaime jumps. The horse veers on a zigzag path, faster in its course than a bolt of lightning. Each of the children lands on its back, and it carries them away.

"Haa," sighs the very large bear. It sits back on its haunches. "I think that proves very well who is the unbecoming one in this exchange. . . . Horses! The very idea!"

Then the children are gone.

They ride hard. They ride far. But when the sun passes below the horizon, the horse sets them down at the edge of the fire lake and gallops away.

"We shall have to walk around it," says Emily.

"Or swim," says Jaime.

Emily pokes the lake with her finger. It singes her lightly, and she pulls her finger back. "Or walk!"

Jaime looks nervous.

"It can't hurt *that* badly to swim in a lake of fire," Jaime argues.

Emily sits down. She makes horrible faces at him. Then she makes funny faces at him. Then she makes horrible faces again. Soon Jaime is sweating under the strain.

". . . Fine," says Jaime. He begins stomping around the lake.

The lake roils. Its voice of fire says, "You had been wiser before, Jaime."

"Don't tempt me," says Jaime. "If you tempt me, maybe I'll jump in. Then I'll burn up! Then who's happy?"

"That's your human standards," mulls the lake of fire. "But consider it from the perspective of an immortal lake of fire that nobody ever bothers to swim in."

It roils and casts its foam of ashes on the shore.

"Looking at it from your perspective," Jaime agrees, "everything in life is transient and full of the pity of things."

"Worrible pity," Emily agrees. "Like, that ant."

They stop and look at the ant for a while.

It's really pitiful!

"Why would you want to swim?" Emily asks, later. "I mean, 'sides the lake tempting you?"

"There's a tree," says Jaime. "Around this way. It was planted with a poisoned seed that loved nothing better than hurting people. So it grew fruits that have a poisoned magic. I ate them once, and I swole up like a frog."

"Oh no," says Emily.

"I'm afraid that if I see that tree again, I'll eat another fruit! That's why I don't want to walk around the lake."[1]

"It doesn't seem likely," says Emily.

"It really hurt," says Jaime. "Like, a lot!"

Jaime looks so nervous that Emily has to touch his arm. Then Emily thinks for a bit. Then she takes out another horse hair.

"What?" says Jaime. "No, it's stupid!"

"Then it's *my* stupid," says Emily.

She says:

Black horse, black horse,
Born in night!
Ride down! Ride down!
Bad fruit—no bite!

There is darkness all around them. Then there are hoofbeats. Then a coal-black horse stands beside them.

"I am glad that you did not wait until Jaime had already bitten the fruit," says the horse. "For then I would have had to gallop through all the night and all the day, even though that means my death, to bring him past the teeth and the hooks, around the gap and under the blades, over the hills and over the dales, and to the healing stones at last."

"See?" says Emily smugly. "Preemptive medicine!"

"Fine," says Jaime. "I'll ride."

So Jaime mounts up on the horse, and Emily too. And when they reach the place of the poisoned fruit, the horse begins to gallop, leaving Jaime reaching fruitlessly after his prize.

After a while, the horse slows down.

"Now we must move slowly," says the horse. "For it is dark here, and we may lose our way."

There are trees and shadows all around them as they reach the place of teeth. And Jaime is shivering.

"What is it?" Emily says.

"It's the night horse sickness," says Jaime.

The horse moves swifter now, as the teeth bite and gnash.

"We should get down," says Jaime. "We should get off. For I feel the night fever in me. I feel it rising."

"Not in all the teeth!" says Emily.

Jaime looks at the teeth.

"Hurry," he says. He wraps his muddy jacket tightly around him. He huddles close in. And Emily holds on behind him.

And the horse runs.

"Hurry," says Jaime.

Then they are in the place of hooks, looming and dangling from the trees.

"Hurry," mumbles Jaime. But now the night horse sickness is in its full flush, and his cheeks are red, and his eyes are white, and he knows nothing save the ride. And he is not speaking to Emily but to the horse, saying, "Hurry! Faster! Ride faster!"

And he hunches low, and Emily hunches low, as the horse reaches its full stride, there in the darkness of the night, like a swift-running river, but faster than the wind.

"Whuf!" says Emily, suddenly.

She has been caught on a hook. Her coat dangles from the hook, just like in a laundromat, and Emily dangles with it. The shock of her sudden stop takes all the breath out of her as the horse gallops on.

There is a pause.

"Whups!" amends Emily.

She can hear Jaime in the distance shouting the words of the night horse sickness, "Faster! Hurry! Ride straight! Ride hard!"

She knows that the horse will cast Jaime off at sunrise; and the first murky fingers of that light are cresting over the hills.

But distantly she hears his shouts, and she thinks of the gap that lies ahead.

So as she dangles there from the hook she takes the third and last of her horse hairs in her hands.

Palomino of
Mornings bright!
Ride west! Ride west!
To catch the night!

There is a glinting and a glimmering. There are hoofbeats. Then, shining in the night, the palomino is there.

"This is a fine predicament," observes the palomino.

"I can take off my coat by myself," says Emily. She does so. She lands on the palomino. "Yay!"

"It's not good for young ladies to be out at night without their coats," worries the palomino.

"Jaime's riding for the gap," says Emily. "So that's a higher oblation!"

The palomino tosses its head. "Hold on tight, then," it says.

And it begins to run.

There is a mist over the gap when Emily sees Jaime again. The night horse is tiring as the dawn gets close, but its hoofbeats are still like the fury of a storm. Jaime is flushed and clinging tight. Emily shouts, "The gap! The gap!"

But Jaime cannot hear.

"The gap!" Emily shouts. The night horse flicks its ear. It is still too far to parse her words.

And Jaime cannot hear.

"The gap!"

Then she is upon him, then she is reaching for him, but it is too late. The night horse is blinded by the mist and by the coming dawn. It is galloping out over the gap, and its horseshoes cannot grip on air. It tumbles. It falls, and Emily is falling after.

In many places, they would have struck the stones. They would have rolled down the endlessly steep surface of the gap, bouncing on its hard implacable stone, until they hit the knife teeth of the dried riverbed below.

But they do not. Here, they do not. Their fall is a blur, and they come to rest like leaves upon a lake, and when they wake in the morning light they shall feel no pain.

For this is not one of the Lands of Suffering through which they travel,

But a Land where Suffering is Only Remembered.[2]

FOOTNOTES:

1. The path around the lake only had one direction.
2. Lands where suffering is entirely forgotten, it should be understood, are not kind places for children like Emily and Jaime.

Great Mother Horror

The great mother horror lived here long before you and me. She had many children.

Her children ate the sharks.

Her children ate the tigers.

Her children chased down the hawks on the wing.

There was a great darkness.

They had eaten the sun.

There was a great stillness.

They had eaten the wind.

Great mother horror walked among her children. She saw that some were eating puppies. Some were eating kittens. Some were eating little humans, not even as old as they were tall.

"Stop that," she said, gently. So her children dropped the puppies, and kittens, and the human babes from their long long teeth. They went off to fight enemies who were worthy of them.

Great mother horror lay down to sleep.

It was very quiet.

It was very still.

Then there was a rustling,

A rustling,

A rustling in the moors.

They rose all around her in the marsh,
With soft, high giggling,
And little barks
And little mews.

And their tiny hands dragged her down
They dragged her under
And great mother horror was gone.

Her children gathered to mourn her.
"We tried to warn her," they said. "Tut tut!"
"We tried to warn her," they said. "Ah so."
"But the babies deceived her."
"The little ones deceived her," they said.

Then they walked to the edge of her home
And out into the great darkness
And they were gone.

If you look really hard,
You can still see her shape,
Trapped and drowning
Under the marsh.
Not quite alive
But not all the way dead.

The Filibuster of the Sailor-Senator

Senator Saul travels in his sleek black car.

He drives through the streets of Washington, D.C.

Claire is in the back, next to the black package that holds Saul's suit and his domino. Shades cover Saul's eyes. There's a cup of grape juice in the cup holder beside Saul.

"Do you think there'll be trouble today?" Claire asks.

The shadows in the streets grow long. Words of poetry float by on the air. There is the harsh distant pounding of a drum.

"Yup," Saul says.

Suddenly, the street signs all around Saul's car indicate "ONE WAY" and they all point in at him.

"Aha," says Senator Saul. "It must be a one-way sign demon!"

The creature that comes striding down the street has long stick-legs like an ostrich or a stick-bug. Its arms are thick long twisty metal, six feet of it, pointed at the end. It is bowed over and its color scheme is black and white and in many places it bears the legend, *One way*. It is crooning as it walks, crooning, "Saul . . . Saul! Saul, why do you hide from me?"

Saul brakes. He parks the car. He opens his door. "Stay here," he says. He steps out. He closes his door. He looks up at the one-way sign demon through his shades.

"There you are!" cheers the one-way sign demon.

The presence of the faceless gods is thick in the air. Saul can almost see them, standing like giants above the city. Their grave regard fills the ether, and so Saul speaks.

The words pour through him. They burn him inside.

"Through this street flows the lifeblood of this city: its people, its power, its commerce, its joys. You who would disrupt this flow and turn it back upon itself, sacrificing the sublime city plans of Pierre L'Enfant in the name of petty diablerie—to you I can show no mercy. I summon the Senatorial Garb!"

The demon tilts its head to one side. It waits. It watches.

Saul strips down, calmly and methodically. He walks to the back of his car. He opens the door. Claire hands him the package that contains his Senatorial Garb.

The chaunting of the demon-lords in their hells is audible now. Under the pressure of the confrontation the membrane between Washington D.C. and the demon world has grown permeable and thin.

Saul pulls on his Senatorial pants. He puts on his Senatorial shirt. He shakes his hair into Senatorial resplendence.

"Now," he says, "by the power vested in me as a United States Senator, I will teach you a lesson!"

There is a peace in his heart.

These words are *sacred*.

The demon bares nasty jagged metal teeth in a smile.

"Many months ago," says the demon, "your 'Senate' implemented the Patriot Act, permitting federal agents unprecedented powers to destroy members of my kind without due process. For endless days I brooded in the dark, plotting my terrible revenge. Now I am here to show you a *sign* —"

The word is horribly emphasized, and Saul can feel the wordless appreciation of the faceless gods.

"—that you have traveled in the wrong *direction*. Oo hoo hoo hoo hoo."

Its hideous laughter grates on Saul's ears.

Saul calculates. He assesses the judgment of the gods. The instinct in his heart tells him that only Washington desires a drawn-out battle; the other three are hungry for blood and swift fire in democracy's name.

Saul sculpts the power given to him in his hands. It forms a glowing energy sphere. A mandala of light blossoms behind him, writhing with demonic script.

"I'll show you the power of the Subcommittee in Charge of Manifesting Spherical Chi," snaps Saul. "I have broad procedural authority to dispose of trash like you!"

The chaunt of the demon-lords rings louder now; and Saul takes his power, and twists it, and sends it forth in a levinbolt.

The demon screams in fear, but the bolt does not strike.

It is Lincoln, not Washington, that has caused it to fizzle.

"Curses," mutters Saul. Too late he remembers the Litany:

. . .honor ye Roosevelt with sword and bear
And unto Lincoln let your puns be prayers. . . .

"Oo hoo hoo," whispers the demon, in relief. "One small senator cannot stand against me. Now you must *face* the justice of my claim!"

Saul is thinking frantically. One-way signs are plunging in at him from every side, their tips like metal daggers.

They do not reach him.

Senatorial Aide Claire, grown tall as a stoplight, her bangs shining with mystic energy, has grasped the demon from behind. She pulls it back, and it shrieks.

"Never in this land of love," she grunts, struggling against its inhuman strength, "will a Senator of justice *traffic* with demons like you! Strike now, Senator! It's the *only way*."

"That's not a pun," protests the demon. "That's not even real word-play!"

Saul begins his invocation.

"Wait," whimpers the demon. "No. I didn't really—I thought—"

"In 1941," says Saul, "John Borglum stole the faces of the gods for Rushmore. In 1971, John Dean opened the gates of Hell. In 2001, provisions of the Patriot Act created the role of Senator Domino, sworn enemy of all demons. He alone can command the Bear-Fires of Mammon, uniting the light of Roosevelt with the dark power of the demon-lords! Under subsection 360(b) of HR 3162, I hereby instruct the Bear-Fires to aggressively pursue this one-way sign demon's destruction! Swiftly! Swiftly! In accordance with the statutes and observances!"

The faceless gods are satisfied. The Bear-Fires sweep down. The demon burns.

Saul leans against his car, spent.

"Senator Saul!" says a shocked reporter named Sally. "Was that—did you—"

Saul realizes his mistake. He tosses aside his shades and conceals his face behind his arm as he gropes in the backseat of his sleek black car for his domino mask. Only when it's on his face does he turn to look at Sally.

"Oh," says Sally, her tone redolent with affected ignorance. "It's you, Senator Domino."

"That's right," says Saul.

He faces the cameras. There are usually cameras, after an incident like this. He clears his throat.

"There are those who think that we as a nation have lost our way," says Saul. "But this—this is my answer."

The Senator Domino theme music is playing, piped in by unholy pipers from the distant regions.

"Imagine a world where there were no demon-lords," says Saul. "No faceless gods. Only the brutal unmusical struggle of man against demon. Only the confusion of a thousand one-way signs, and death. It would mean nothing. It would be hollow and the corpses would be hollow and we'd never really know why."

"Senator, do you agree with the demon's contention regarding the Patriot—"

Saul holds up his hand. Sally silences.

"This is the point of all our struggling," says Saul. "This is why we live. To make the speeches, to wear the fashions, to launch the mystical attacks that are sacred to our gods. Not to win. But to *serve.*

"And today—today, we have pleased them.

"Today we have sacrificed to the distant powers our blood, our strife, our sweat."

Singers far away sing, "Senator Domino."

Saul says, "Today we have made our actions unto them a gift. We have justified our existence, here, upon this world, man and demon alike. Take this and treasure it in your hearts. Today humankind and demonkind are *worthy.*"

The calm regard of the faceless gods fills his heart with joy.

"This is not a partisan thing," he says. "This is America."

Then he gets back in his car and starts it up. After checking in the rearview mirror that Claire has snuck back into her seat, he drives away.

"Senator Domino!" cry the reporters.

He drives further away, and they do not follow.

After pulling around the corner into a conveniently unoccupied road in the middle of Washington, D.C., Saul removes the domino. He makes his way to the Capitol. He parks his car, gets out of his car, and walks with Claire into the building.

The sailor-senator is still on the floor, as she has been for seven days. Her filibuster continues.

"How long," Saul asks Claire, "do you think she can keep that up?"

There are signs and sigils scrawled in the air all around the sailor-senator. They are glowing with the harsh light of her slow death.

"To let the words speak through you like that," says Claire, "—it's harsh, Saul. You of all people should know how harsh."

The sailor-senator is ranting, "—those who would take the Patriot Act forward even one more year, I can't show you any mercy!—"

"She gives her life for this," says Saul.

"—ruining the lives of young people who only seek love and arguably terror—"

So he nods his head to her, and touches her shoulder gently as he passes, for all that they're on different sides.

"—not about Iraq but about *we* rock—"

He will vote against her, when the time comes, but he loves her now.

Such is the honor done to those who please the faceless gods.

If Animals Had Elemental Powers

There would be parrots with water powers.

They would live under water.

They would make raucous noises like "Squawk! *bubble bubble bubble!* Squawk! *bubble bubble bubble!*"

This would be very disconcerting for the sailors.

There would be burning tyrannosaurus rexes. They would not be extinct because their fire powers would allow them to survive K-T extinction events such as the one that killed all of the non-elemental dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous Period. The burning tyrannosaurus rexes would laugh and laugh as they rampaged through American cities but in turn people would laugh and laugh and laugh at their flaming stubby little hands.

It is actually possible that the flaming dinosaurs would not survive but it is definite that any tyrannosaurus rexes with K-T elemental powers would still be around, so, anyway.

There would be at least one Metallic Hopping Vampire. He'd be like a regular Hopping Vampire, only with powers over metal. That'd be so cool!

Then there would be sharks who could jump twenty feet out of the water, hang there, and form bullets out of the wind to devastate their enemies. To hunt these sharks you would need a bigger boat. A bigger, bulletproof, flying boat. And lasers. And even then it would be a near thing.

There would be octopi who would assemble in eight-octopus teams using their aquatic telepathy. It is arguably not so good to be able to talk to fish when one is the King of Atlantis but it is very, very good when one is a fish and normally unable to communicate at all.

There would be koi with the ability to disrupt bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is a terrible element but it is the element that koi get and the koi are not technically to blame for its presence in the traditional Chinese six-element cycle.

Who *is* to blame for that, anyway?

Bees. Bees are to blame for the presence of bureaucracy in the traditional Chinese six-element cycle and also they sting people so this story will not offer them any elemental superpowers that they do not already possess.

There would be elephants with special elemental ninja powers. For example there would be an elephant master of snow and ice. If you asked the other elephants who the coldest elephant ninja master was, they would invariably trumpet, douse you in water, and then indicate the snow elemental master. There would be an elephant master of bears. Bears would be an element for the purposes of *this* elephant! They could shoot bears, or make a great bear-sword, or do other bear-related things. They could even bear arms, despite the fact that elephants don't have any! Finally there would almost certainly be a shadow elephant—an umbral elephant, as it were—who could slip under your door and then manifest again and *charge* you.

Charging shadow elephants are very scary even if you take away their credit cards because the phone book practically overflows with companies willing to extend shadowy elephant ninjas new lines of credit with no

questions asked. They will even do so mid-confrontation, so that a battle might go like this:

"Ha ha ha," laughs strong-jawed Buck Williams, brandishing the elephant's credit card and thus preventing it from charging.

"Trumpet!" trumpets the shadowy elephant ineffectually.

The shadowy elephant spies one of many NO QUESTIONS ASKED credit card offers on the table next to the door where strong-jawed Buck Williams, son of Giorgi, keeps his unread mail.

Swiftly the elephant seizes it.

Swiftly the elephant mails it.

Then the elephant, oh so *un*graciously, looks smug.

Buck's eyes widen. In bullet-time, he turns and lunges for his elephant gun. He fills it with buck shot. He levels it. But it is too late.

"Trumpet!" trumpets the triumphant elephant.

He doesn't ever even pay the charges. It's a bad debt!

The elephant isn't the last elemental animal we will examine. There are also earth beetles. These are beetles capable of burrowing through the dirt. Right through the earth! *People* can't do that. We don't have the requisite elemental mastery of earth, which is the problem.

Earth beetles are also good at throwing gigantic rocks at their enemies and at making clever balls out of dried dung.

"What a clever ball of dried dung!" one might praise, seeing them.

Such a compliment makes earth beetles puff up with pride!

Metallic Hopping Vampire would like to clarify that hopping vampires are not animals and so his hypothetical metal powers have nothing to do with the premise for this story.

(Oops!)

Finally—um, finally, OK, there would be these owls who'd fly around shooting lightning at things. One of them might even shoot lightning at a K-T-powered tyrannosaurus rex.

Bam! K-T extinction event!

That'd show *those* elemental-powered animals.

. . . yeah.

The Well

When food is difficult to come by, the animals of the forest make the long journey to the forbidden well.

It's not easy to get there. You have to climb an interweaving ladder of branches and run along the tops of the trees. You have to wade through mud chest-deep on a deer. You have to crawl into a blind tunnel and squeeze past the insects and the water on the walls. Then you're there.

There's a peace that governs by the forbidden well. It's a tentative peace. It's not magic. It's just something that the wolves want.

What the wolves want in the forest, they tend to get.

The forbidden well is always full of sweet nectar. A few sips give enough calories to carry an animal through a day. In a hard winter, or a drought, or in times of plague, the well keeps the animals of the forest alive.

The wolves are supposed to keep the animals strong, and it doesn't breed strength when animals can sup on sweet nectar all the time. So for the most part the well is forbidden. But the wolves make exceptions, sometimes, when times are hard, because of Mawndrad, whom they'd loved.

Mawndrad was a hero, in clean and billowing white clothes with a sword like a blue nail. He was handsome and bright and sometimes when he was really sleepy or really happy, he'd have a shiny black wolf nose instead of his nasal own.

He'd loved Tamarella.

Tamarella was stocky and a miracle girl—you know, the kind who could do things like you hear about in the stories. She could throw a charging bull, just catch it by the horns and fall back and it'd go flipping and tumbling past her. She could bake enough for a ten-person feast with just a handful of flour and some water and some spice. If you'd lost a button in a field, she could tie tiny rakes to dormouse tails and they'd run everywhere and all around until they'd dragged the button up. That was the kind of girl that Tamarella was.

He saw her once as she was pulling a giant's plow, bit by bit, with a block and tackle anchored by an oak. She was straining in her plain grey clothes just to get the tiniest bit of movement from the plow, and the giant was laughing and cheering her on, and when she finally got the plow across the field she'd won all the giant's gold.

. . . and Mawndrad's heart.

Mawndrad brought her dead animals. He left them on her doorstep. He gave her cute little mice and bits of elk and, once, he brought a bear.

That was the last evening of his life; and this is how it went:

Tamarella's sitting in her kitchen and she hears him dragging the bear along the walk. She goes to the front window. She puts her hands on the windowsill and she sticks her head out.

"Don't do that," she says.

"It's a bear," he says.

His chest is puffed out. He's pretty proud, because it's a *twelve-foot* bear and those are even bigger than you might think.

"I don't need any dead animals," she says, "There's a general store."

"It's for you," he says.

And when he's staring at her, she sees his wet black wolf nose and it's totally charming. Not sexy, like he looks when he's got the normal nose

and his muscly chest and his loose archaic shirt, but charming. Drop-dead adorable. His ears even give a little twitch.

So she laughs and she says, "Well, come in."

And he leaves the bear outside and he comes in for tea, and they talk long into the night, and nearing the end of it, they realize they're in love.

"I love you," he says.

"I love you," she says, "but you've got to leave."

"Why?"

"In the morning," she says, "my father'll come home."

Now Tamarella's father was a priest, a priest of that new Christian God, and he was also a necromancer. Some people found that combination a bit odd, but Tamarella's father never did. He could reconcile it pretty easily in his head.

"After all," he'd laugh, "didn't God himself raise his son from the dead? Well, why can't I then do the same?"

And if you tried to tell him that that wasn't the point of that story, he'd kill you and cut your bones out to make skeleton monsters from, which goes to show that perspectives can reasonably differ.

So late at night Mawndrad and Tamarella say their goodbyes, and they have a parting kiss; and that leads to a few more words, and a few more, and pretty soon an hour's passed within the night.

And sweetly they part again, and he goes down the path, and then he comes back and knocks on the door, because it suddenly occurred to him to tell her she has lovely hair, and the words burst up so hard in his heart that he just *has* to share them.

And one thing leads to another.

And then it's dawn, and Tamarella's father comes.

Mawndrad was a scary youth. He wasn't a pushover. He thought that he could take down a necromancer pretty well.

He wasn't afraid.

When Tamarella's Dad came home, Mawndrad didn't hide in the closet. No.

Mawndrad fought.

He danced at swords with Tamarella's father. He tried to cut the man. Mawndrad was strong and fierce and he should have been victorious, should have won the day and brought an evil to the end, but things just didn't go that well. Hands of bone rose from the ground and grabbed his feet. Tentacles of spine wrapped round his arms. His sword fell to the ground and he was helpless.

"Don't hurt him, father," pled Tamarella.

And her father looked at her, all cold, and said, "You are mine until I give you away in marriage; and so this night you have defiled *me*."

And he chopped up Mawndrad and he chopped up Tamarella and he took their bones and flesh out to the well and he dropped them in, this being acceptable behavior under the English law of that time. And he set his snares for ghosts, because he knew that death cannot stop true love; that death cannot even stop puppy love; and that Mawndrad and Tamarella must have dwelt somewhere between the two.

In this he was correct.

At midnight on the following night they rose, the ghosts of Mawndrad and Tamarella, briefly stealing back from a later world to exchange a final kiss.

"None of that," said Tamarella's father; and he caught the ghosts with his snares and chains and he pulled them far apart.

He hung them on opposite sides of his dungeon and for years they strove, pulling the chains a little looser every day. When they were within an arm's length of one another Tamarella's father swore irritably, chopped up the ghosts, and dumped the pieces of their souls into the well.

The distilled essence of the lovers rose in great clouds from the well. It was no longer distinct in its identities, but it still remembered love; so Tamarella's father caught it and strained it down to nectar, such that the liquid in the well was a thick sweet concoction ninety-eight parts water and two parts the thrice-dead.

After that no more killing was necessary.

The nectar of Mawndrad and Tamarella was still.

"There," said Tamarella's father, with a feeling of completion.

He dusted off his hands and he went home.

The animals drink of Mawndrad and Tamarella when times are difficult. When times are *very* harsh, so also do the wolves.

"These are the dead who will never rest and never wake," say the wolves, as they lap at that sweet nectar.

It allows them to survive.

The Alphabet Game

White heat and light annihilate the store. Most of the shoppers become ghosts in an instant, inundated and incinerated by that light. Their forms swell with it before they vanish in a burst. Shelves of books and food and toys and jeans fall over. One Talkie Sally doll crawls feebly across the floor with its vocal circuit and both legs crushed; it mumbles and crumbles as it crawls, the sound of it "*clerp. Clerp.*"

The power dies.

Susan is there. She is still alive. She seizes an armful of boxes from the shelves before she runs. She does not want them destroyed.

That is her impulse in the apocalypse: to save what a Susan can.

Broken glass scores her face. She isn't sure from where. She sees a red and soft white glow off to the east, so, dodging around a crumbling ceiling, she heads in that direction. She scrapes out through a crack in the wall when she reaches the building's edge. Most of the boxes tumble from her arms as she squeezes through.

She is on the second floor.

"Ah—" she says, looking back for a moment, as she falls.

The building shimmers, swells, and shatters.

Susan hits the grass hard and her vision goes black.

On the first morning after the apocalypse, Susan opens her eyes. The world is desolately empty. There are no sounds of cars or people or even birds. There is only the rushing wind.

"Oh," she says.

Her arms are clenched around the last few treasures that she has saved. Painfully she releases her grip. She sits up. She sets them down. She dusts herself off.

They are a Fisher-Price carpentry playset and a talking learn-the-alphabet game.

"You saved us," says the talking learn-the-alphabet game.

Susan smiles tiredly.

What a strange toy, she thinks.

"Because you saved us," says the talking learn-the-alphabet game, "we will help you survive this grim post-apocalyptic world."

Ah, Susan thinks. *I have gone insane.*

"It is not necessary," she says, politely. "I have already learned the alphabet."

"There are more than twenty-six letters," says the talking learn-the-alphabet game. "There is also *soph*."

"*Soph*," says Susan.

"Now you know your A-B-Cs!" declares the talking learn-the-alphabet game. "Next time won't you sing with me?"

"I will," Susan says.

So they sing the alphabet together, including *soph*, in an empty world.

When they are done, Susan stares off to the east, where through the vacancy of buildings she can see a woods.

"You are troubled," says the talking learn-the-alphabet game.

Susan picks it up. She hugs it to her chest. She says, "What has happened to the world?"

"It is the apocalypse," says the game.

"Oh?"

"There are those who meddle with things that they do not understand, and they are dangerous. More dangerous yet are those who meddle with things they understand, but none too well."

"Oh," Susan says.

"This is the work of the Fisher-Price Ultimate line," says the talking learn-the-alphabet game.

The sky swirls and there is an impression of death and sorrow.

"In their laboratories they built a child's toy prototype for ultimate evil—a toddler's first ultimate evil, as it were. The final product would have had safeties, seals, restrictions."

Susan sees the direction of this speech.

"But not," she says, "the prototype?"

"It has sent forth its destruction to devastate the kingdoms of the earth."

"It has left us desolate," Susan says.

The talking learn-the-alphabet game sighs, "Ah."

Susan folds her legs in the tailor style. She closes her eyes. For a time she thinks; and this stretches for so long that the talking learn-the-alphabet game becomes uncomfortable in the silence.

It makes small bleeping sounds.

In the distance, in the woods, these are answered by the shaking-maracas sound of insects.

Then Susan says, "What is to be done?"

"Live," says the game.

Susan shakes her head.

"No?"

"Evil cannot go unchallenged," Susan says.

The game considers.

"Then," it says, "you must travel east to the palace of the prototype Fisher-Price Ultimate Evil beyond the world, and destroy it there."

"Agreed," says Susan, "save that I will not destroy it."

She rises.

"No?"

"I don't think it's right," Susan says.

And she gathers up the carpentry playset and the talking learn-the-alphabet game and she walks east.

Through the forest she walks, through the green-made gloaming and the patches of brilliant sunlight where the leaves are thin. There is dampness and there are scurrying things yet and where the insects do not sing there is mostly silence.

She comes to a wall.

It is high, twenty yards high, and made of slick rainbow glass, with a thousand colors trapped inside it. It stains her rainbow and casts its multicolored shadow all around her.

She sets down the carpentry playset and touches her hand to the wall. It is slick but it is warm and there is a beating to it like a heart.

"Use me," says a thick and wooden voice.

Susan looks down. She sees that the carpentry playset has fallen open. The hammer of it has slipped from its place. It has landed on the grass.

Now this hammer is plastic and it has a button on its handle. There is a speaker on its head and a place for batteries in the back.

Susan reaches for it, most delicately. She picks it up.

"Use me," it says again.

She pushes the button, and the hammer's speaker makes a sound: tap, tap, tap like the pounding of a hammer on nails.

It grows louder.

Tap, tap, tap. Bang, bang, bang.

It thrums, there in the forest at the edge of the world.

The sound from it rises until it is the sound of the cyclopes in their forges beating out the thunderbolts in the dawn of the world. It is the sound of great ringing blows.

"Touch me to the wall," it whispers.

"But—"

"Trust me," says the hammer from the Fisher-Price carpentry playset.

So Susan touches its head to the wall and there is a shivering in the glass and a chiming that rises to match the ringing of the hammer's sound. Then, convulsively, the wall tears itself apart: not shattering, not ripping, but rather severing, and the two halves bucking away from the center like angry horses or two great flailing arms.

After a moment it is still.

The wall is open, its sleek rainbowed surface curving up in two tracks to either side. It is like a sculpture. It is strange and it is beautiful and beyond it there is the sun.

The hammering noise falls silent.

"Thank you," says Susan.

"You must leave me here," says the hammer.

Carefully, Susan sets the hammer down.

"Don't you want to know why?" it asks.

Susan shakes her head.

"I trust you," she says, and she walks on.

There is still green twilight but the sun is more common now beyond the wall. The forest is thinning.

There is a bear.

It is great and it is terrible, larger than a person, larger than four people—larger, really, than a tank.

It roars and its roar terrifies her.

And from the Fisher-Price carpentry playset comes a sharp and metal voice, "Use me."

She reaches into the playset. Her hand hesitates over the tools, then pulls out the saw. Its grey plastic shines.

"Push the button," it says, "to make answer to your problems."

The bear stands up. Its shadow falls. It stands between our Susan and the sun.

"Pardon," says Susan to the saw, and she is trembling, "but what will you do?"

"I am a saw," the Fisher-Price saw says.

The bear steps forward.

"I am the sharp cutting tooth of the world," says the Fisher-Price carpentry playset saw. "I am the relentless, the cutter, the killer, the ravager of flesh. I cut the grain of wood. I separate the ligaments from the meat. I carve through bone."

The bear steps forward.

"Bear? Do you hear me?" cries the saw.

And though Susan has not pushed the button there is the zzz-zgg, zzz-zgg, zzz-zgg noise rising all around. It is the terrible metal cheering of the saws that cut forever at the foundations of the world.

Where the sunlight touches saw the sunlight bleeds.

"Do you hear me, bear? You are *meat*!"

But Susan is kneeling. She is setting down the saw, carefully, on the grass. She is saying, "I am sorry, Fisher-Price carpentry playset saw, but I cannot use you in this fashion."

And in the pause that follows the sounds of saws go still and there is a mist that runs along the lowness of the ground.

"Then die," says the saw, and it is silent.

Softly, the talking learn-the-alphabet game begins to sing, "Ey bee cee dee ee eff gee."

The bear steps forward and it is now within paw's-reach of Susan's head.

And Susan is singing, "Aitch eye jay kay ell emm enn oh pee."

Together they sing, "Queue arr ess, tee you vee, double-you ecks, soph why zee."

Susan's eyes are closed. She does not know why she is not yet dead.

There is a curious snuffling sound from the bear.

"Now I know my A-B-Cs, next time won't you sing wit—"

There is a force like a hurricane or a car crash, irresistible, defying the lie that Susan's will controls her flesh; touched by the paw of the bear, her hand falls open, her arm falls back, and her entire body seems to jump through the air, arcing out of control, to land slumped against a tree.

It is a moment of clarity and pain.

There are bloody marks all down Susan's arm. The talking learn-the-alphabet game is on the ground. The bear stands over it, making a low crooning growl in its throat.

Susan aches.

The bear licks the game. Then it growls softly and nips it.

"A?" offers the game.

The bear rumbles something that is not an A.

"B?"

The bear rumbles something that is similar in some respects to a B.

"You want to learn the alphabet?" asks the game.

The bear picks the talking learn-the-alphabet game up in its jaws.

"No," says Susan weakly. "No."

The bear turns to go.

Susan staggers to her feet. Her mind is full of sloshing fuzz in staticky white and black. She stumbles after the bear.

With horror the game realizes that she is coming to save it.

"No, Susan," it says. "No, you must leave me."

"You are not made for bears," Susan says. "You are a choking hazard. And I do not want it to take you if you do not want to go."

The bear begins to walk away.

"It is all right," says the talking learn-the-alphabet game.

"All right?"

"I choose this over a rescue."

And so Susan stumbles to a stop and falls to her hands and knees, breathing hard, for still she is winded from the touch of the bear.

The bear carries the talking learn-the-alphabet game away.

When Susan recovers, she finds there is not much left of the world. The edge is right there, not one hundred meters away, ragged and broken.

A tree has fallen. It is a great tree, not Yggdrasil but one of its older children. It has fallen to form a bridge between the world and the palace of the prototype Fisher-Price Ultimate Evil.

It is long and thin and lean and it crosses over an infinite depth.

Susan stares at the tree. She is still wobbly. Her gaze turns hopefully to the Fisher-Price carpentry playset, but the drill that is all that is left in it is silent.

"What do I do?" she asks.

The back of her head is damp with blood.

And there is a wind from the edge of the world and the shaking-maracas sound of insects, and Susan concludes, softly, "Ah. I am to practice courage."

She holds her hands before her, touching finger to finger, her hands circling an empty place.

She stares into that void.

She tells herself that there is a button there; that she may press it and become a thing as marvelous as the Fisher-Price hammer and its saw.

She visualizes it: a red dot surrounded by the sky.

She pushes it.

"I am Susan," she says, swaying there at the edge of the world. "I am a house painter. I am a woman. I have a degree in English literature. And I will make answer to the evil in that keep."

Her voice is pulled away by the hollowness and the vastness at the edge of the world.

She sets down the carpentry playset. She cannot carry it across the void. She takes off her shoes. Swaying, she begins to walk to the palace of the prototype Fisher-Price Ultimate Evil.

It is grey and blue and its towers are tall.

She stumbles on a knot and falls, but her hands tangle in the roughness of the bark and keep her from the void. She pulls herself back up. She continues walking.

There are strange yellow figures on the walls, their heads geometric, their hands without fingers.

The wood splinters under her foot. She staggers. Her foot bleeds. But she continues.

The insects hum.

The wind blows.

She staggers into the courtyard of the palace of the prototype Fisher-Price Ultimate Evil, and there she stands facing it, the enemy of the world.

He is tall and handsome and clad in black armor and there is nothing fake about him. His hair is long and thick and black and it is blowing in the wind. His teeth are sharp. His eyes are fierce.

He is beautiful in ways that no mortal not made by Fisher-Price will ever be beautiful.

He is terrible in ways that not even Fisher-Price should have ever tried to build.

And he says, "I have seen you coming; but what will you do now?"

Susan says, "I will say, 'prototype Fisher-Price Ultimate Evil, set aside these hostilities against the world.'"

The wind rises and she staggers and almost falls, and the creature catches her and sets her down and kneeling down close and looking into her face it says, "But why should I do that?"

"What age," asks Susan, "are you suitable for, oh prince of all ill doings?"

And this stumps the creature for a moment, before it says, "Safety labels are a thing of the past."

"What virtue," asks Susan, "is there in playing with you, oh suzerain of sorrow and despair?"

And the prototype Fisher-Price Ultimate Evil's face grows tight, and there is a pain there.

Susan gasps, "Oh!—No, I do not mean *that*, oh evil thing."

Yet it is turning away.

It is haunted by the death shouts of the Fisher-Price scientists who created it: "You are no toy!"

She does not know this but she feels it.

"I do not mean," she says, "that you are unworthy for a child to play with, Ultimate Evil."

He breathes softly, "Oh?"

"I mean only that there is no toy without its purpose in learning or in joy. So what is the purpose of playing with evil, oh king of false desiring?"

He thinks on this.

"To learn to conquer it?" he asks, his voice unreadable.

"Some would say that," Susan says.

"Not you?"

"We play," says Susan, "so that we may understand."

"Ah."

Some of the tension leaves him with that sigh.

"But to destroy the world," Susan says. "That is not play. That is—"

She considers carefully what she will say.

"That is error."

And her words strike home. He looks back to her and she sees a terrible clarity in his eyes.

"I didn't know," he says. "Fisher-Price . . . in striving to create the ultimate evil, they lost sight of the meaning of play."

"They meddled carelessly," Susan agrees.

And she pulls herself up and she takes his hand, the cold unyielding plastic of it, and says, "But it is not too late."

And there is laughter and joy and ultimate evil for a time, in the palace beyond the world.

No Actual Bears Were Harmed in the Assembling of this Short Story Collection

Dentist 10 lives behind glass and steel.

One morning he wakes up and finds himself out on the glacier. He's been sleeping inside the skin and fat of a polar bear that he'd had to kill.

"Dangerous," he says.

He shakes his head at himself. He must have passed out, he thinks—too tired to drag the body back to his tower, so he'd just cut it open and crawled inside.

"Dangerous and stupid."

He pulls himself out. The corpse is still warm, but it's colder than it was. He heaves one great paw over his shoulder. He drags the bear to his tower.

The tower is glass and steel.

Dentist 10 looks nervously up at the sun. It's been shining for almost six months but it looks like it's beginning to set. That's why he had to go out onto the ice and get a stock of meat but it also makes the danger more acute.

He enters his code into the tower doorway.

Perched atop an arch of ice, clad in an adorable white parka, Jane watches him. She is looking at him through special field glasses that make everything look red and provide scrolling data regarding various points of interest.

"Don't forget to wear layers," scrolls past on the left.

Stock data displays on a running marquee.

One scrolling reminder informs her, "Nine out of ten dentists endorse the continued existence of the world!"

Dentist 10 finishes entering the code. His fingers, slick with polar bear blood, leave smears on the numbered panel.

The door opens.

Dentist 10 drags the polar bear into the lobby of his tower. He deposits it into the autokitchen. He walks through the sterilizing shower, stripping as he goes, leaving his filthy blood-colored lab coat behind, passing through sprays of water, chemicals, and soap, and emerging on the other side dressed again and pulling on a fresh white coat.

He pushes a button behind him. It sets his shower to KILL.

Then he enters an elevator and begins to rise through the beanstalk of his home towards a cold space fortress suspended over the world.

Behind him, Jane is in the lobby. She's staring at the shower from the other side. It's got blinking red lights and looks about as malicious as a shower can.

She speaks into her lapel.

"Cut power to the first floor," she says.

Elsewhere, Martin operates a fuse. The shower goes dark.

Dentist 10 looks down as he ascends. He frowns. There's a spot of darkness below that should be red.

He grits his perfect teeth.

"Susan?" he says.

The computer that governs his home comes online. A simulation of Majel Roddenberry's voice says, "Yes, Dentist?"

"We have an intruder," he says. "Flood the lower floor with Fimbulwinter."

"Yes, Dentist."

Jane is standing at the base of the elevator. She is prying open the doors with a Fisher-Price Jaws of Life set. Then a radio-triggered explosive bursts open the lobby's outer door and windows. Hydraulic pumps, their power subsystem pre-isolated, dredge up icy water from the sea, add a fine mix of chemicals to accelerate their icing, and spray them in a large-dropped mist throughout the bottom floor. The building ventilators pump away the heat. The air fills with shards of ice.

Jane squeaks. She wraps her scarf across her face. She pulls her hood over her head. She attempts to squeeze into the elevator through the partly-opened doors despite the bulging awkwardness of her layered clothing and the wash of ice. For a long moment she is stuck, as the air lashes her with winter. Then with a pop she falls through and into the base of the elevator shaft.

She kicks out the jaws of life. The doors slam closed.

She begins to climb.

Dentist 10 arrives at his space fortress. He walks out into the entrance bay. He considers. Then he decides that it is better to be safe than sorry.

He takes down his shotgun from the wall.

He sits down.

He waits to kill, just in case the intruder makes it up.

When Jane forces open the elevator doors, he fires.

There is a flurry of red-tipped parka down. The body falls backwards. The doors fall closed.

Dentist 10 approaches.

He pushes the button. The elevator door opens. He walks in. He kneels by the body. He checks its teeth for signs of life. He frowns.

"It's a Fisher-Price Body Double Playset," says Jane from behind him. "Suitable for operatives and medical students ages five and up."

"It's very realistic," says Dentist 10.

He doesn't turn around.

"But nobody has teeth like these."

"No," Jane agrees. "And nobody ever will again."

He spins. He fires. But he isn't expecting Jane to be quite so short or quite so close, and he definitely isn't expecting the sharkbone-tipped spear with which she knocks his shotgun away. She hooks out his leg with the haft and as he staggers, she goes PUSH!

Dentist 10 slumps, defeated.

"Pushing people is impolite," he says.

"That's pre-9/11 thinking," says Jane.

"10 *is* pre-11," Dentist 10 points out.

"But it's not pre-9!"

There's a pause.

Jane gives Dentist 10 a strained, apologetic smile.

Dentist 10 looks away.

"Listen," says Jane. "Somebody shot Baldur with mistletoe."

"I know," says Dentist 10. "I saw. Winter is coming."

"So I need 10 out of 10 dentists to approve of him, or Hel won't let him live."

Dentist 10 looks out through the glass elevator wall at the endless depths of space.

"I had a wife," he says. "Her name was Nora. And I never approved of her while she lived. I thought that she was weak and she was trivial. Then

one day after she died, I realized that that wasn't actually why I had disapproved of her. It hadn't been anything to do with her. She wasn't weak or trivial or bad at all. It was just that it was easier for me to live my life if I could judge people according to my preferences for their character."

"That's very tragic," Jane concurs.

"So I promised myself," says Dentist 10, "in her name, that I would never approve of anything ever again. Not Trident. Not Crest. Not even peace. And I won't approve of Baldur, even if that ends the world. That is my resolution."

"Oh," says Jane.

"People were always troubling me for their approval," says Dentist 10. "Because I am Dentist 10. So I moved to the arctic and built a beanstalk into space. Ever since then there have never been more than 9 out of 10 dentists approving of anything."

"But Baldur fights tooth decay," says Jane.

Dentist 10 shudders.

"And he's a deadly enemy to plaque!"

Dentist 10 looks up. His eyes are haunted. "Don't do this," he says.

Jane hesitates.

"What kind of dentist lives in space and seals his heart in ice?" she asks.

"The tenth," he says.

So Jane turns away. She follows his gaze into space.

"No," she says.

"No?"

"To live in the sky and give your love to no one— to cover yourself in the blood of a bear and greet visiting children with winter— to fire a shot-

gun at a glass elevator wall and to do no harm— this is not dentistry. This is death."

And he crawls out into his space station and he stares after her; the elevator doors close, and she descends, and he stares after her, stripped by her clarity from his role as Dentist 10.

She is right, he knows.

He isn't a dentist at all.

He is Space Hermit 1, one *out* of one, and he does not approve.

No Crutches for an Angel

The angel cannot see and cannot hear.

So he imagines forests.

The sun is hot and sometimes he tastes sand. But he imagines forests and talking animals. In the evening when he is thirsty he imagines that there is a river blue and clear. In the mornings he thinks that there is a pillow made of loam.

In his heart there is a drumming.

It drums because it is a warning. It drums because he will bring devastation. It drums the vengeance of the Lord.

It will burn the things around him.

It will burn with a terrible fire, unless he finds ten just and good and wholly righteous men.

"I think," says a sloth, that is hanging from a tree, which the angel now imagines, "that you have already released this fire. For look, the sun is hot, and all around you there is sand."

"Sometimes," the angel says—

Though he cannot say much, as his tongue has melted to the bottom of his mouth—

"Sometimes I brush up against what seem like buildings, or I am pelleted with bullets. So I do not think that this is so."

The answer is as haughty as a Queen's.

"We sloths, we disagree."

The angel stumbles on.

It is late, and he is tired, and it is hard to hold back the fire that lurks behind the drumbeat in his heart, when he meets Mikhael.

That is the name he gives the man.

He does not know the true name for the man because he cannot hear and he cannot see and he cannot speak. This is something that makes introductions difficult, particularly when you do not share a common tongue.

So he names the man Mikhael.

He says, "I feel you. I feel you in my heart."

He is seized up. People grab his arms. Something goes over his head. He is pulled and he is dragged and his feet leave the ground.

Tum-dum, goes his heart.

Tum-dum.

He flares his great feathered wings. He makes a choked-off sound. He gargles.

But because he can feel Mikhael near him, still, his heart retains some element of peace. He is frustrated. He is disoriented. He is angry and confused.

He is not enraged.

Something slides into his arm, metal in a vein, and time becomes a whirl.

"I can feel you," he says.

He is groping through a fever and looking for the sensation that had told him that Mikhael was near.

"Ha," laughs a duck. "You are an angel deaf and blind. What makes you think you are ever anything but alone?"

The sensation is distant. But he clings to it.

His heart still beats: *tum-dum.*

He is treated roughly. His wrists are sore.

Then he feels a mouth against his cheek. It is whispering to him through the vibration of his bones. It is too hard to hear but because his heart feels Mikhael he makes sense of certain words.

"You fell to earth," says Mikhael. "And you were deaf and you were blind. And it is sad, because that makes it difficult to find a righteous man."

"You have no idea," says the angel.

It has a lot more humor and joy than something like that should have—gallows humor, but still this explosion of mirth in him, that someone would see that hidden pain and then think that perhaps the angel might not already be aware.

"You were captured," says Mikhael. "Studied. It was decided that you should be turned loose against strategic targets. That you would wander here, in our homeland, until you failed to find ten righteous men. Then our land would be destroyed."

"Ha," says the angel.

He makes moaning, mumbling noises with his mouth. But what his heart says is, "You have no idea. You are making this about you. You are forgetting that I am laboring with every moment of my life not to hurt you but I am suffering myself."

"You have been captured," says Mikhael. "You have been bound. My people, they thought at first that they could contain you in this fashion."

He makes an apology with his next words.

"I told them how to find you. I told them you were here."

"Mikhael," says the angel. "Will you bring me righteous men?"

"I am afraid," says Mikhael, "that they have all been slain. There were never very many. There are children still, and dogs and cats, who are not

unworthy. And they were indifferently incomplete in eliminating the women; three righteous such remain. But if it is only men whose hearts will serve then there are none; and if infants are excluded, then we can muster only eight. The rest are dead. They have been slain."

The angel frowns.

"They have been slain," he repeats.

"They were hunted for their righteousness," says Mikhael. "It was elementary. There would be no point to send you here only to allow some incompetent discovery of ten righteous men to stop the fall of Heaven's wrath."

"Oh," says the angel.

He turns his thoughts inwards for a time. He is thinking that perhaps Mikhael is righteous and that perhaps Mikhael is not. It is difficult to tell from the rough voice against his cheek and the tremor in his heart.

"Then you must hold me deep," says the angel, "deep beneath the earth, deep in some far and isolated place, where the Heavens may rumble and the earth may crack but lives shall not be lost. Let the skies burn out their outrage against a nothing target and then all shall be well. —Or kill me."

"I cannot do these things," says Mikhael.

"But you must."

"I have told them," says Mikhael, "that you are an angel, and that we must therefore let you go. I have argued long and hard and finally I have won out. They fear me because I understand their hearts and they do not dare to go against this wisdom. They will hate me, of course. One day they will probably kill me out of fear. But while they let me live they listen to my voice and so they will let you go."

"There are none?" asks the angel. His voice is a plea.

"The standards of an angel—" says Mikhael. "They are not like ordinary men.

"I tell you," he continues, "there are darknesses in every human heart. There are weaknesses and follies. They are not righteous. Save sometimes I would meet one of they who moved among us—frightening, inhuman, perfect, clear. They were the opposite of monsters, antipaths to devils that walked among us men. They shone and they frightened me and I thought that most likely they were as unworthy to live among us as we to live with them. They were obvious to those like me. They were obvious and easy targets and one by one their lives went out.

"They welcomed it, I think," Mikhael says. "These are hard times to live in, for a righteous man."

"O," cries the angel.

The bonds are stripped roughly from his wrists. He is dragged somewhere. He stumbles and he twists his leg but still they drag him on.

He feels the presence of a door.

"But I must kill you all," says the angel, "if I find no righteous men."

He falls onto the street outside. It is rough beneath his hands. He feels Mikhael go.

He feels Mikhael go.

It comes to him softly there that if he is deaf and blind he must decide the presence or absence of righteous men upon his own; that the world, it cannot tell him, whether the angel now must act.

But he does not understand.

He does not see.

He does not understand how it is Mikhael let him go.

The Division

It is the beginning of time, and all the animals are lined up before the Presence to receive their special gifts.

"Weasels," says the Voice. "You shall receive the backing of a strange, mystical organization that may or may not have the best interests of the world at heart."

The weasels scamper with joy. Then they scurry off to the secret underground base. They show their ID. They are escorted inside. There, the grand weasel glares down at them. He intends to wring every drop of performance from them. Their youthful idealism is simply grease for the gears.

"Prairie dogs," says the Voice. "You shall receive the ability to transform from your normal, ordinary clothing into special fuku by barking."

The prairie dogs peek up from their holes. Then they sink back down. It's so embarrassing! Why couldn't the Voice have chosen someone else for this socially awkward destiny?

"Elephants," the Presence thunders. "You shall be stalked by a mysterious bishounen. He may be your lover, or he may be your greatest enemy."

The elephants pragmatically consider this. One trumpets. Elephants don't really like losing their head over mysterious bishounen. Then suddenly he appears. He has a swirly cape. He has a mask. He's stunningly cute. All reservation is lost. Little hearts appear in the eyes of all the elephants. They toss their heads and trample one another in an attempt to get to him. Then, just as suddenly, he's gone.

"Rabbits," says the Voice. "You shall receive the ability to combine into a giant super-rabbit. One of you can form the head. Four of you, the legs. Optionally, you may combine with a sixth rabbit for reproductive purposes."

The rabbits twitch their noses thoughtfully. That's a useful power.

"Amoebae," murmurs the Presence. "You shall go to special boarding schools, where each of you shall have a harem of adoring aliens."

The amoebae wriggle with glee. Then, one by one, they realize that they reproduce asexually. This diminishes their anticipation.

"Leeches," the Voice asserts. "You shall be secretive and romantic vampires, drinking the blood of humanity. No one shall understand your pain."

The leeches sink below the surface of the water, dodging the terrible rays of the sun.

The Voice drones on, and to each their gifts; and one to each and all the animal kinds; and if you ever find yourself wondering, "Where in the world did magical bears embodying transgression, alienation, and sexual forthrightness even *come* from?" well now you probably know.

It gives its gifts, one to each and all of the animal kinds, save only people, who hid from the shadow of the Presence and received no gift at all.

"It would have just been something perverted," people mutter, but that's really just sour grapes.

Flood

 The antelope race beside the Ark.

The waters are glassy, sometimes, when the rain slows down. They are rich in color. The hoofprints of the antelope are like the dents of great raindrops.

The antelope have wide feet and a powerful light foot technique. For seventeen days they keep their balance on the water. Yet slowly, as the days pass, they sink deeper and deeper into the shining waters until at last they drown.

"There's no room for the hippos," Ham says. "We'll have to eat them."

"No eating the hippos," says Noah.

"But Dad!"

Noah considers. "There are those birds," he says, "that fly into your urethra when you're peeing and nest inside your crotch. We could eat *those.*"

Ham considers that.

"Okay," he says.

The seven-limbed howlers struggle upwards from the cities below. They flail. They howl. They reach the surface and fill their great and terrible lungs with air. Then they sink, again, slowly, pathetically, and hoard their energy for the next long breath.

The eagles circle tiredly in the sky above.

Shem and Ham descend into the Ark.

The deeper they go into the Ark, the more tightly crowded the animals become. It is the nature of the construction of the Ark that any number of

animals can be packed within it; near the bottom, Shem believes, the density of packed animals becomes asymptotically infinite. But they do not need to go that far.

"Good sheep," says Shem, passing a sheep.

"Good cow," says Ham, passing the cows.

"Good crocodi—BAD crocodile!" says Shem. Shem brandishes his broom at the crocodile. It reluctantly turns away and snaps its mouth closed. It slithers deeper, slithers down, its long green body vanishing under a cluster of chickens, wrens, doves, owls, game hens, and wildebeests, and it is gone.

"Good hippo," says Ham, grudgingly, as they pass.

The urethra birds are not very far down. They are good at gaming the ecosystem for maximum advantage. But it does not save them now.

"Bawk!" proclaims one urethra bird, startled, as Ham grabs it around the neck.

"Ch-caa!" declares the other, in some distress, as Shem seizes it in turn.

The axe descends.

"It's natural selection," says Noah, as he chews on a leg. "Those that do not please me, die. Evolutionary pressure driven by the seething core of the Ark will inevitably create a new generation of animals better suited to the exigencies of my desires."

Days and nights pass.

In the third and fourth weeks, great clusters of ostriches swim by.

The ostriches are not happy with the rain. United, they are strong. Solitary, they are weak. But the world-flooding tries their solidarity.

One by one, the ostriches commit social errors.

One by one, the clusters drive them out.

The stragglers are easy prey for the sharks, the icthyocampi, and the cold.

"I wonder if Mr. Sills is still alive," Shem says.

"He's got to have drowned by now," Noah argues.

"I know some of them were trying to build cities in the deep," Shem says.

Ham walks out and stares down at the water.

"It's weird," says Ham. "To imagine all the people we knew, down there."

"Freaky," Japheth agrees.

"Cold and blue and drowning."

"It's because God didn't like them," says Shem. "I mean, as much as he liked us."

The sheep goes, "Baa."

"Animal on deck!" says Noah.

They quickly hurry the sheep back into the hold.

"Can we eat the sheep?" Ham asks.

"No," says Noah. "Sheep are good animals. That's why it made it all the way up."

"The hippos?"

"No eating the hippos."

"But Dad!"

Noah considers. "Isn't there some kind of animal that lives mostly on the brains of dead people?"

"Worms?"

Noah shakes his head. "Besides those."

"Cranium beavers?"

"Yeah," says Noah. "Those. We can eat those."

Ham and Japheth descend.

The deeper they go into the Ark, the more tightly crowded the animals become. It is the nature of the construction of the Ark that any number of animals can be packed within it; near the bottom, Japheth suspects, the animals are unable to survive in solid form but instead revert to their natural plasmic state.

"It's hot as God's spankings down here," says Ham.

"Shh!"

"What?"

"No blasphemy. We're on the *Ark.*"

There is a creaking, clunking noise, as God's sea serpents beat a warning against the vessel's side.

"Right," says Ham, sweating. He looks sideways. "Good oryx."

By the eighteenth sub-basement of the Ark, Ham and Japheth are forced to carve their way through the animals to make room for their passage. Thus die the bulwark buffalo, the crowball, and the cave goat. Thus dies the ghoul, spoken of in legend, and the icy blue beast in whose image the Slurpee was made. Thus die the elephant and the fungal bear.

"Here," says Japheth.

The cranium beaver skulks defensively behind its dam of skulls, but this primitive instinct cannot save it from the knives of Noah's heirs.

"Good sheep," says Japheth, on the way back up.

"Baa," insists the sheep.

It's so adorable that even Ham has to scruffle the sheep behind its ears.

The rhinoceri have gone feral, long, and lean. In the distance, as the sons of Noah eat, they watch the primal battle between rhinoceros herd and megalodon, under a sky that is full of storms. The waves of that battle

rock the ship, and the sinuous shapes of the rhinoceri lash and shimmer and in the sea.

"They're winning," says Naamah, in some surprise.

"There's just a chance," says Noah, in satisfaction, "that the megalodons'll be another casualty of this rain."

"I'll tell the others," says Japheth.

So he goes to the speaking tubes and calls down into the depths of the ship, "Let the rhinoceros be informed that their kind still live, beneath the sea."

And up comes the honking, and the bleating, and the wailing, and the howling, and the hissing, and the chirping, and the long pleased snore of the happy shipboard rhinoceri.

"That means we could eat them," says Ham. "I mean, the ones we have here."

"No eating the rhinos," says Noah.

"Fine," sulks Ham, crunching on a barbecued cranium beaver leg.

The last of the scissor-beaked night terrors drowns that day.

"Look!" cries Ham, one silvery morning.

"What?"

"Elephants! The elephants didn't die out after all!"

Noah rubs his chin. "There's no reason we can't take another female on board to replace the one you carved through."

"Right on!"

Shem and Ham operate the elephant crane to retrieve a backup elephant from atop Ayers Rock.

"Baa," the sheep remarks, conversationally, as it watches.

"Animal on deck!" says Noah.

Naamah and Japheth hurry the sheep back into the hold.

Days and nights pass.

"I can see them far below," says Japheth, later that night. "All the people I ever hated."

"Are they trying to tame sea horses?"

"They're dead, Dad. They're moving in great drifts through the night."

"Baa," mourns the sheep.

"Animal on—"

Noah laughs a little and stops halfway through the sentence.

"Oh, let it be, I guess," he says.

The sheep is on deck.

The sheep looks down into the water.

It looks at the hills and the dales of Scotland-under-the-Waves.

Flick!

A fish-tailed sheep skims to the surface of the sea.

For a long moment, the land-sheep and the sea-sheep look into one another's eyes.

Then:

Flick!

The moment is gone; and the two sheep go, in their respective elements, below.

In such manner as this: running, swimming, struggling, serving, seething, mourning, and loving does the world survive the rain.

The Mountains and the Sky

RAINBOW NOIR, PART THREE

The girl rides the horse through the sky. It's the most wonderful and marvelous thing. It's the most wonderful and marvelous thing and underneath them there are endless miles of cold air.

Beneath *that* are the mountains, which we shall name Gray Death.

Her name—the girl's name, that is—is Annette. She's saved the universe once or twice. She's the kind who you just have to point and shoot, basically, and the universe gets saved. That's what she is, and why she is, and why there have to be girls like her.

As for the horse—

As for the horse's name—

There's an ice crystal bigger than the world. There's an endless distance, and space. There's a great and brooding thought that presides over it all,

Like God had forgotten color, hope, and light—

And we could call *that* "I Am," or "the All," or "The Lord that Dwells in Starlight."

But the horse itself, it doesn't really have a name.

It's the most marvelous horse there ever was. A horse like that doesn't really need its own name. Who could you confuse it with?

It's just, you know, the horse.

People laugh, talking about magical sky horses and rainbows, sure, they laugh, but if you saw it there, its feet pounding against the nothingness, endless miles of cold air below and below *that,* Death—

You wouldn't laugh.

You'd just think, in that moment, that it was the most marvelous and warm and most incredible thing you ever saw.

One day, one day, once upon a time, before, the girl fell off that horse. She screamed. She's very brave, but even a brave person can scream when you're falling and the sky is rushing up around you and there's only Death below. She screamed, and the world around her burned with its blues and its purples and its brightness, and her life flashed before her eyes in a series of twenty-minute shorts that in the end didn't add up to very much—

And that time, he'd saved her.

That time, as she spun and fell and rainbows curled and twisted through the vastness of the void around her, the horse came down and lunged and caught her with his teeth and snapped her away from the touch of great Gray Death, and pulled her up and she twisted and she flung her hands around his neck and she sank her face into his mane and laughed.

She did.

She really did! Even with the awkward angles of it all.

She could, and did, climb up onto his neck and back, because there really isn't very much gravity when you're falling, and at that particular moment in time they weren't really quite done with the falling part of their precipitous descent and back to the flying that the two of them were about to do.

The second time, though, the second time, he didn't save her when she fell.

She asked—

With her eyes, she asked!

But the second time, when she found herself falling, and the sky was everywhere around her in its blues and purples fading into the shadows of darkness, and grayness was reaching up from the ground as if to seize her up and drown her and shatter her like a teardrop on the stone, the horse, it just stood back.

The ice is bigger than the world, and twice as far as anything.

Her name was Annette, back then as now, but nobody called her that. Everyone called her things like "the rainbow," "the rainbow girl," or "hope."

She was the one charged with the preservation of love and hope and beauty and power and magic. She was the one responsible for providing all the things that people need to have within their lives, in a world that is sometimes very dark. And the mechanism of this charge was color.

She would find places that were dark and colorless, in the world, in people's lives, in people's hearts.

She would walk among the gray shadows and get the feel of them.

Then she would bring the rainbow.

There are a billion places in the worlds that are that needed her special touch. A billion, or even more; so it's not too surprising that grayness still endures. It took her time to find each spot of darkness. It took her time to find it, and know it, and see its antidote, and make an end to it. It took her time, and there were so *many* different shadows that needed her to give to them that time.

It probably makes a billion look small, really, the number of those shadows, if you actually could count each of them, and give each one its name. It's probably laughable to imagine that it's *just* a billion, like saying, "well, millipedes have at least *one* leg"—

But a billion, at least.

So that's why it took her a while to see what had happened down on Earth.

That's why she missed the whole of World War I. She was in a flower garden, where the insects had corroded beauty. She was in the Crab Nebula, where monsters were threatening a noble Prince. She was in Kansas, helping a lost child, and in the oceans, healing a dolphin's heart.

She was polishing one of the stars in the endless sky when the trenches cut the world.

She was in the kingdom of the cats.

She was fixing a broken mountain.

She was painting a butterfly when the Nazis came to power. She was painting a butterfly with vibrant colors, because the butterfly had gone gray.

And she might have missed it;

She might have missed it all;

Save that butterflies can only wear so much paint before their wings will cease to fly. There are only so many stars that lose their glitter. There are only so many monsters, though they spawn eccentrically and at random intervals throughout the cosmos and its worlds; so many broken mountains; so many cats that have never ever been fed.

Before the end of the war—before it had even really gotten started—she saw it. She saw what we were doing. She saw what we had done.

She saw it, and said:

"Here is a darkness. Here are gray shadows. I will walk among them and I will find their antidote, and I will bring the rainbow."

And tears were falling from her face, great rivers of tears, and breaking on the ground.

"And not just here," she said.

The war to end all wars, well, hadn't. But she decided, there and then.

"I will heal this thing," she said. "I will bring an end to wars."

Underneath the girl and the horse are endless miles of ice-cold air.

Right now, as you're reading this story, the horse and the girl are falling. They are a comet. They are a meteor. They are a dying, broken, tumbling leaf, a teardrop, a rainbow chunk of ice and fire, and they are falling towards Gray Death below.

"It's impossible," said the horse. "Even for someone like you. Even for someone like me. It's impossible, rainbow girl, that we could bring an end to war."

"It's my quest," she said.

"It's wrong," said Terrence. He was her sprite. "It's wrong. It'll destroy us. They'll find us, if we try to end their wars. They'll hunt us down. They'll take the Rainbow World away, make it theirs, make it a part of their earthly kingdom, where only shadows rule."

"But it's my quest," the girl said. "I have to heal this thing. I have to guard the beauty that the people of the Earth deny. I have to make them stop killing each other,

and so cruelly!"

But, oh! The sky was fading.

It was twilight in the rainbow kingdom, the sun was falling to the west, and the horse looked up.

"It will have to wait for morning," the marvelous horse said. "Dear. You can't do it today. You can't do it now. You can't stop people from fighting wars, forever, if you haven't gotten any sleep."

"That's so," conceded the girl.

So she went to bed.

She went to bed, to let Earth wait just one last troubled night.

And slept.

And while she slept there were doings in the darkness, and gatherings, and quiet acts of diplomacy and treason; and when she woke, her people did not sing to her, as they had always done, when the Rainbow World was bright.

Rather than sing, instead, they gathered around her, and their voices, they were low.

"We shall show you," said Terrence.

She looked at him.

"We shall show you," said Terrence, "why it is that you cannot save the world."

And they took her down into the depths of the palace, and through the hidden passages to the caves where her servants labored, cutting forth light and hope from the lifeless stone, and to the Great Machine that had made her.

And she said, "It's made of ice."

She touched it with her hand.

She said, as if in a trance, "There is a place, so very far from here! And a flake of ice, and oh, it is so very bigger than the world! And God—"

But the horse was brusque.

It bumped her in the back with its nose and made her turn away, and said, "This is where we made you, to save us, to be a girl from nothing and make brightness in our lives. We cut you out of ice and dolor and we brought you here, from nothing, to nothing, and filled your heart with fanciful lies. Like, 'you are charged to save us, wielding light.' Like, 'you were made to fill our land with beauty.'"

And she remembered—oh, she remembered, and of a sudden!—how she'd come into existence and out of nothingness as if formed off some

great crystal made of ice, and curled about herself in some strange womb, and dreamt of foreign colors as shaved fragments of sprinkled stardust sprinkled by.

She remembered how she'd dreamed, oh! such dreams! of something brighter than the endless hungry void. How she'd conceived a sudden brilliant conception, in that womb of ice, of what the murky dismal land some call "the world" could be.

And how it had seemed to her that a lady made of light had spoken, had said, "Annette, will you go forth from this place to my land, my dismal land, that dwells under the hand of shadows, and make it bright?"

The sprites looked down.

In the shadow of the Great Machine, the echo of the work of ice that lives beyond the world, they could not speak; save for Terrence, who cleared his throat, and said:

"You were our doll, little Ann. You were our toy. And we are grateful to you, for that you were bright and brilliant and rainbows. But you must not think you are a person. You must not think you are a living girl with breath and heart and hope and rainbows, who can stand against our purpose and our decision, and bring chaos to the land."

The breath left her.

It was as if he had punched her in the stomach, and all she could breathe in was chunks of ice.

"We had to make you," he said. "But not the rainbow girl. The rainbow girl was fantasy. *You* were just a flake of snow."

She was falling.

She was falling.

The sky was rushing up around her, and she could not breathe, and there was gray and black and white jittering before her eyes, and she could not find the ground.

She clenched around the emptiness in her heart, fell gasping, Gray Death opening below, and cast a glance, a single glance, up at the horse.

He was marvelous, that horse.

He was a wonder.

He'd caught her, once, when she was falling from the sky, when she was plummeting and she thought that she would die. He'd caught her, and lifted her up, and brought her back to warmth and hope.

Once, but not again.

As she falls into herself, as she goes black and white, not even gray, within her heart and body, the horse, he does not save her. The horse, he looks away.

And it all spirals away from her, leaving her empty of the rainbow, leaving her cold—

Except that's wrong.

That isn't now.

She isn't falling into herself, now. She isn't on the floor of a cave under the rainbow kingdom, desperate with pain, broken by impossibilities.

That isn't now.

That was a very long time ago.

Now, right *now*, she is in a very real sky, and hope and truth have found her once again, and she is falling.

She is falling because her horse has broken its leg.

Her marvelous flying horse has broken its leg against a stream of ice, and so of course it cannot fly.

As has been told before, the girl who fell became the rainbow once again. She'd been needed. It wasn't OK, any more, to leave her in her cold sense of soullessness.

A soulless girl couldn't have saved the world from the death that had been coming.

As has been told before, once she'd been made whole again, she'd refused to transform back.

She'd understood—

Somehow—

That just because people *told* her she wasn't a person, just because they'd shown her the womb of ice from which she'd come, and said, "Look, this is how we made you, this is why we made you, can't you see that's not how a *person's* born?"—

That such a thing can't end the meanings that lived inside her heart.

She'd spent years and years amongst the grayness there, and had found an end to shadows.

And now she is falling.

She'd gone to the man she'd thought had been behind it all—

A pragmatic, dismal man; a man who had always sought to purge the colors from the world—

And she'd thought that she could save him. That the goddess she'd become, that the endless seven-colored power she had birthed in herself, that the girl *Annette* (or, sometimes, *Rainbow)* would be able to save him from his misery and show him the wonder that was color, light, and hope.

She'd tried, anyway.

And maybe, in a way, succeeded.

But it hadn't done him any good, or her, as has been told; because, in the end, he wasn't the villain of the piece.

He wasn't the villain.

He was *a* villain, but not *the* villain, just another murky, dismal little man gone lost in shadows. In the end, all the light could buy for him was a single moment of forgiveness.

The villain, if there was a villain, was a thing of ice and distance.

It was something colder, far and cruel.

It whispered this of others: that

"They are not real."

It was God, perhaps, or a horse, perhaps, or a snowflake larger than the world; and it hung beyond all world and sound, and brooded, saying:

"What there is, there is of me: there is the light I cast, there is the world of my imagining, there are the dreams I dream and the shadows I have made; and nothing else is real."

And if it thinks that it is the only reality, the only beauty, the only justice, the only right, then it has, perhaps, an excuse of sorts, for it is not merely cold, and it is not merely ice, this king of shadows and winter that dwells beyond the world.

It is beautiful.

It is beautiful, and it is endless, and it is marvelous, and it sheds forth every beauty; and the rainbow is refracted through that ice; and the world is made from the waters when it melts, and the dirt that it sheds, and the light and shadows it casts forth.

It is self-contained.

It is self-complete.

And yet, in some contingency of motion, it has sent forth its avatar, its child, its element to us within the world, and with a spirit of great mercy. It has sent a piece of itself, an image of itself, a mirror of its icy vastness,

to be the most marvelous thing, to live in the dreary world of its creation, to redeem it through the presence of the horse.

It has sacrificed for us, the most terrible and deadly sacrifice; it has chosen to become *involved.*

It is the pinnacle, is it not, the horse?

Is it not the most marvelous thing in all the world?

And did it not already risk itself—risk its perfection-in-itself, daring unimaginably—to descend beneath the darkness of the world and find a part of itself that dreamt of rainbows, and make a girl of it, and shelter her, and raise her against the darkness like a spear, and teach her the power of the rainbow?

So if it thinks it is the only truth; if it thinks it is the only right; if it thinks there is no justice, that is not the justice of the horse; if it thinks there is no beauty, that is not the beauty of the ice; if it thinks that in the end there are nothing but its shadows and its dreams, then it has an excuse of sorts, for in a very real way it is the author of us all, or at the very least its agent and its representative, the mirror-horse of God—

Most marvelous thing in all the worlds that are, and the brightest, and the best.

And so she came, at the end of her journey, the rainbow girl, to the field of grass and flowers at the center of the city, to the last remaining place of color and brightness (before the rainbow had returned), where the horse still lived, and danced, and woke up in the mornings to laugh and play and sing; and to turn its eyes on her as she walked up, it seemed, and say, "Oh darling Ann: you have become my rainbow girl again."

And she knew.

His voice was guileless, as it had always been, as if he knew nothing in all the world save love for others and self-praise.

His voice was guileless, but still she knew.

In the center of the crumbled world, in that last little piece of paradise, he frolicked, and he looked at her with eyes that made her melt, possessed her with a girlhood that overcame the goddess in her, loved her still, with brightness still they shone, and still she knew.

She touched his mouth.

She swung herself up on his back.

She said, "Oh, my love, you have not forgotten me."

But she knew what he had done.

They rose into the sky, then, didn't they? They flew; or ran, at least, on the rainbow once again. They galloped out over blue skies and high above Gray Death.

She knew he meant to throw her.

"It was *your* lie," she told him. "Wasn't it?"

Right into his ear; which flicked, of course, as if to cast a fly away.

And on they rode in silence, far above the world.

It made her breathless with joy and pain.

"It was your idea," she said, "to show me the Machine that gave me birth; and to tell me, 'you are just a doll we made from snow, Annette. You are just a toy. — just a toy, and not a person after all.'"

"It was," said the horse.

The horse's shoulders rolled. It said: "You are."

Its voice was distant ice and starlight and it was pale against the sky.

"What else could you be," mused the horse, "than a reflection of Myself? What else *is* there to be, than light against the ice? So I realized, when you brought trouble to my heart. That you are the rainbow, or a girl, or a thing I made, or a thing I loved, but in the end, still, you are just a toy, and of my crafting, like all the shining world."

She wept for him.

"And so," said the horse, "I tore you down; and buried you in darkness; and then, for reasons elusive even to myself, I must have set you free."

She wept for him.

She clung to him and wept for him, knowing that he meant to throw her, because he was the most marvelous horse in the world, and yet—

"You do not know," she said.

And her voice was seven-toned, like the rainbow; and the tears that flowed from her were as a stream of ice; and he meant to throw her, then, he really did, but it went wrong, he went wrongfooted, and if you were to find a thing to blame for it, you might say, he slipped or struck his leg upon her tears.

And his perfection was distorted.

And his gait was broken.

And suddenly, because a horse can't exactly fly if it has a broken leg, he fell.

It struck him as ironic that he would not have to throw her; that he was freed, in the end, of the need to cast her from his back to fall screaming to Gray Death. He would fall, and that would be an end to things. He would die, and the world would end, and nevermore a rainbow girl to trouble him or make a turmoil of his heart.

Right now, dear reader.

Right now, they fall—

He falls—

It falls—

Right now, as you're reading this story, the horse and the girl are falling, spiraling down through endless sky, with Gray Death looming up below.

And because he is a horse of courage, after all, even maimed and broken, he opens one pure and perfect eye.

She is not falling.

It is terribly unfair.

She is not falling.

She is, instead, sprawled out with a hand outstretched—oh, moving downwards fast enough, and technically perhaps that *counts* as 'she is falling,' but she is descending as a skydiver descends, or a stooping bird, not as a mortal plummeting to her death—

Prone upon the rainbow, outstretched beside him in the sky.

Unfairly, she is reaching for him, supported by the rainbow, calling out over and over again for him to live—

He squinches closed both eyes.

The world moves far away, then farther, then farther again, until even the girl now seems to him twice as distant as the sky.

Ice closes about him, and rainbows.

"I've broken my leg, you foolish girl," he says, and casts aside her power, and lets the wind and shadows carry him downwards to his grave.

And there is a moment where the ice shatters, as he strikes against Gray Death.

There is a moment where the shadows seem to boil and drain away, plunging down through the jagged edges of the mountains and to drown some other land.

There is a pure and crystal darkness, and finally, a light.

The rainbow hits the mountains, dances about them for a moment amidst a rain of ice, strives as rainbows strive to lift the broken and the dead.

And then, it flies away.

FROM THE "RAINBOW COLLECTION" OF DOCUMENTS ASSEMBLED DURING CONGRESS' 1954 INVESTIGATION INTO VARIOUS UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES ON THE PART OF UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES BEAR.

Salwa and the Bears

(MAY 23, 2007)

Brakes scream. Momentum lurches Salwa in her trunk. A gaunt's claws cut through the car like a rake through litter;

there is news from Iraq that we hear not of.

Salwa tumbles out and her blindfold catches on a rock. It rips from her eyes. She sees the gaunt;

flowers bursting to bloom; and laughter.

It is tall as houses, its arms swept back, trailing its long grey claws. Its beak is a sword. There is facing it in the street a small and fuzzy bear.

Its hand moves quick as death. Its nails come for the bear;

there is news from Iraq that we hear not of: flowers bursting into bloom; and laughter.

The nail bursts through. Or no: rather, the bear has moved aside, catching the nail of the gaunt between its arm and body. The bear turns in a jujitsu form, never releasing the nail, and the creature rolls sideways into the home of Najat bint `Aljan, cracking its arm bone, shattering brick, crushing Najat and her child.

The gaunt is tumbling to its feet and its wings snap a telephone wire. Its other hand brushes towards the bear, but the bear is already on the gaunt's long arm, running towards its face.

The cloud on the chest of the bear is brilliant in the night.

The gaunt's foot shifts. It lashes back towards Salwa, the heel point like a knife.

there is news from Iraq that we hear not of.

In a blur there is another shape before her. It is a bear. We do not talk of the bears, not since they made their failed play for Gonzales on his throne. But they are there. They are there. It is there.

Its symbol is invisible to her; but the foot cuts through its hide. Salwa screams.

there are schoolhouses; and laughing babies; and teenagers that are not stoned.

The broken wire and the new bear's path collide; it seizes that unslender thread; the tension of the wire unbalances the gaunt and its heel point does not kill.

Shadow falls over the gaunt's face. The first small bear comes down. A piece of the gaunt's own nail scores deep into its eye.

there is news from Iraq that we hear not of.

Salwa's heart is full of the courage of the bears; but it will go unremarked, she knows.

There are things from Iraq that are never reported, and of such like as this.

It's a Real Town

The hole is out in the middle of the desert.

It's not a hole in the ground, not really. It's more of a chasm in the nature of things. It's a place where the underlying mathematics of the world break down, defaulting to prehuman axioms.

There's a man standing above the hole. He's in shadow. He's got a long coat and a cigarette, and in between pulls he holds it out and burning sparks drift down in the wind above the hole.

And there are great horrible eyes that look up unblinkingly at him, only to be burned.

And there are fins that splash back beneath the surface of the Not as the sparks touch them. And there are places where a single ash in the wind lands and gives birth to a world, seethes into brilliant life, planets, suns, spinning galaxies, and ships; and then the whole curls in on itself as it cools and dies and fades into the Not.

And amidst the seething horror of it a hand flails, a hand attached to a coatsleeved arm, and the voice of it cries, "For the love of God, let me out!"

And sparks flutter down and lightly burn the hand.

"I'm not a prehuman horror! I'm from *Kenmore!*"

It's a real town, you know.

People live there.

But the man up at the top doesn't react. He just takes another pull and waits. Now and again, when a tendril of the darkness rises, he steps on it.

"For the love of God!"

Then the man's assistants, a man and a woman, arrive with the patch, and they place it over the hole, and all is still.

Epilogue

"THE GONZ"

Near two hundred children play
In Kupkin Park, by Glory Dais.

Trumpets blare and balloons fly
Their faces shine: here comes the guy!

He's the guy
They love the best!
"Gonz," they call him.
Gonz the blessed!
He makes their hearts
Pound in their chests!
And all of them
Are quite impressed!

"Alberto Gonz!" one girl responds
She shouts it out! She's short and blonde
And in her shout she's quite vivacious
She points and everyone turns their faces!

They gather round him, full of smiles!
It's time for games and fun Gonz-style!

He shouts, "Oh, Billy, Sally, full of smiles!
It's time for games and fun Gonz-style!"
But wait!

What's that on Susie's face?
A frown?
A frown must be erased!

"I'll turn your whole world upside down,"
cries Gonz, "That look won't stay a frown!"
And all the smiling kids adjust,
Their faces falling
As they must
For when the world turns upside-down
Their smiles would become all frowns,
And since they would not have adjusted
Gonz would have them adjust-busted,
Which isn't bad
It's kind of fun
But then the other kids would shun
The falsely frowning busted one,
And Gonz might cry,
So it's not done!

"Tell me now what troubles you," cries Gonz,
"And see what I can do!"

Little Susie'd lost her head
And shot her daydream playmate dead
So Gonz bestows the kiss of life
And flowers bloom
And cease their strife
And comes a shamblin' at the end
Little Susie's daydream friend!

"He's back!" she cries. "He's back, at last!
Oh, thank you slow!
Oh, thank you fast!
Oh, thank you Gonz!
You're like the dawns!"
And in this vein goes on and on.

Gonz spins on Little Billy now.
How does he spin? With feet, that's how!

"Tell me now what troubles you," cries Gonz,
"And see what I can do!"

Little Billy has a bully.
Billy's bully's Mr. Cully,
Mr. Cully kicks the shins
Of children who won't kneel to him!

Gonz, he listens.
Gonz, he yawns!
This isn't hard!
He is the Gonz!

"Go home, oh Billy.
Cully's gone!"

And so he is! It's just like that!
The Gonz trumps bullies
No time flat.

"He's gone!" says Billy. "Gone, at last!
Oh, thank you slow!

Oh, thank you fast!
Alberto friend
makes bullies end!"
He's crying now! He's round the bend!

Gonz spins on Little Sally now.
How does he spin? With grace, that's how!

"Tell me now what troubles you,
And you will see what I can do!"

Little Sally isn't God!
She wants to be.
It's kind of odd!
Gonz squints at her with funny eyes
Puffs out his cheeks
And really tries.
"Little Sally! Cease your sins!"
Then Sally's God! She's always been!

"Oh, thank you slow!
Oh, thank you fast!
The long purpose of the world at last
Has been revealed
I know it all!"
Then she ascends
Gonz face, it falls.
He liked when Sally came and played
But now she's *in absentia dei.*

Gonz spins on little Tommy next.
Who's Tommy? He's a boy! He's vexed!
"I'm vexed because I want a cat!
The nuns that raise me don't want that."

"I'll use my smile and win their hearts!"
says Gonz, "then put their hearts in carts,
Pushed towards Ailurophile Mart,
The mart adds parts to hearts on carts
And soon you'll have cats Torts and Tarts!
Tarts will miau and purr and blart
While Torts will miou and purr and blort
And think Torts' blorts have deep import."

"Oh boy!" cries Tommy, who's the sort
To like a cat that blarts or blorts.

The Gonz is good,
The Gonz is great,
The Gonz his happy dreams did sate!

He's a great man,
He's the Gonz,
His hand is like a magic wand
His teeth are like,
Um,
Magic teeth.
They must be seen
To be believed.

And maybe once in seven days,
He comes,
And children laugh and play
Of all the days
Their favorite day!
They love him so!
They love him low!
They love him high!
They love him, why?
'Cause he's the Gonz.
He's deeply fly.

Two hundred kids!
They love him so!
He makes their day!
He helps them grow!

Two hundred kids!
Well, less a few.
Like Little Sally
One or two
Each time
And things like that accrue.

They love him so!
Two hundred kids!
Or that's the count
He started with

There are a little less today

But he's the Gonz

So that's okay.

Reader Appreciation

Thanks for reading *Magical Bears in the Context of Contemporary Political Theory*! I hope that, like me, you'll find the lens of historical/political analysis a useful tool for understanding the ways magical bears and rainbows affect all our lives.

Are you a political scientist, thaumatic ursologist, autodidact, or general reader who'd like to know when my next book is available? You can sign up for my new release e-mail list at http://eepurl.com/Rsoaf, follow me on tumblr at http://jennamoran.tumblr.com/, or like my Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/jenna.k.moran/

I love reviews. Reviews are like lifeblood. They're my heart and my joy! Also they help other readers find books. I even like negative reviews — it's good to hear from anyone with thoughts on the books! So, please do!

Some of my other books include *An Unclean Legacy*, *Fable of the Swan*, *Jack o'Lantern Girl*, and the first book of the Enemies Endure trilogy, *Stomping the World Round*. You might also be interested in my coffee-table book, *Invasion*, my RPG *Nobilis*, or the forthcoming RPG *Chuubo's Marvelous Wish-Granting Engine*. I hope you enjoy them all!

IF YOU'D LIKE TO READ AN EXCERPT FROM STOMPING THE WORLD ROUND, PLEASE TURN THE PAGE.

1. Gold From a Wolf

AN EXCERPT FROM *STOMPING THE WORLD ROUND*

Deep under the world is Hans, who first made sense of things. Hans, who built the world from chaos. Hans the smith; Hans the farmer; Hans the dwarf.

Sometimes people do bad things.

Hans loves the world. He doesn't live in it. He keeps his farm in the cavernous darkness, under the surfaces of things, instead.

His farm is beneath the centipede that writhes inside the world. It is past, and under, the Great Gate. It is past and beyond the bridge where march the soldiers of the dead. It is not all that far from Hell.

If you were to go to visit him you would have to find your way past all those things, and past the Weave-wid too, and many other dangers; but when those trials were behind you, you would find yourself in a realm of gentle rolling hills and growing things—among the houses of the svart-alfar, where certain fairy-tale things survived. You would walk then their roads and taste possibly of their grapes and marvel at their wonders and the triumphs; and there you would find Hans' farm, too, with its stone in many colors, its caves and its grottos, its fields and its artificial sky.

Each morning there, a sun-bird rises. It bursts from Hans' sun-bird eggs. It tears free of its enclosure. It plummets upwards, strikes its head against the stalactites of the caverns, cracks its head open, bursts into flames, and gives over the roof to glow.

This fades eventually into night.

The night has only shining echoes and memories of that morning frenzy. Crystal veins throb with subtle luminescence. Butterflies flutter, flicker, glow. The slime of the moon-beast's fur has taken in the sunlight; it reflects it, slowly; it doles out that reflection, in gleams and glitters and pale shimmers, through all the hours of the dark.

It is a beautiful farm, but it is a doleful farm, for the things Hans does are bad.

It is bad to write blank checks to a wallaby.

Oh, Hans, it is *bad*.

It distracts the wallaby from the things of life. It makes the wallaby perplexed. The beast has no place in its mind to hold the checks, and one too many options in its flesh. It is not ready to be rich, that wallaby; Hans has ruined it. If one day it should fill out and cash those checks, a terrible accounting is sure to come.

It is bad to tape two emus to the wall. It is bad to sharpen a goat. It is all right to sharpen the cheese of a goat. I cannot say why you should, or why you would, but if you do or if you've done then I am sure that it shall be all right. If you've wanted a particularly sharp wheel, for instance, or a tangier flavor—that's fine.

But do not sharpen the goat itself.

It is down there now, below there now, Hans' goat. It is sawing, sawing, sawing on the bars that are its pen. It is tossing its head now, cutting the wooden boards of its enclosure's ceiling with its great sharp head. Then it is back to its principal work. Its eyes gleam with goat-wroth—with that fey, hircine obsession with their own sharpness that is given to certain goats. It is sawing, sawing, sawing on the steel bars that are its cage. It is growing sharper, ever sharper against the whetstone of that cage.

Is that really Hans' fault? *It is.*

If he hadn't caught it, if he had not kept it, then it would have killed its way across the continents. It would have been the pike-goat, the senegoat, it would have slaughtered thousands and left its tracks across the earth, but then some dull bear would have gotten it, some hero, some

champion. It would have ravaged but it would have died, before it had grown so sharp as this.

It's not a good goat. It wouldn't have been a good goat. It's probably unfair to blame Hans for *that.* So let's blame Hans for something else.

Hans!

It is bad to glue soldier ants to a thread. *Oh, Hans.* It is bad.

It is good to spin thread, I think. It is good to have glue. It is bad to make glue out of the forbidden horses, but to *have* glue? That is good as a general thing.

That far—that far you may go, and be OK.

But to lure a mega-colony of soldier ants out onto your thread, only to gum them up there, uncomfortable and wobbling, when the glue finally takes hold—

That isn't good, Hans! That's just mean!

They wiggle there. They struggle and they jiggle there. They jiggle on the net that Hans has woven; of thread and glue and soldier ants has woven; at the boundary line between Hans' farm and Hell, that is deep beneath the earth.

It is bad to—

Listen. Listen. I know that a lot of people think that this is hip, but it is not hip. I know that Hans was doing it centuries before any of you modern hipsters were alive, but that doesn't matter. It doesn't even matter that people will do it so freely and unashamedly in the modern circuses. It is *bad* to whisk a duck.

Oh, Hans! It is bad.

Look at it. Look at it hanging there. That duck! It was quacking vigorously and it was fluttering and it was a very angry whisking duck indeed and maybe it seemed while it was quacking that all things would be well;

but now he has whisked it too furiously and it is dead and now its spirit can never rest.

It glowers there.

Hans seizes up its spirit. He weaves it to other things. It becomes part of a chain to bind the nithrid: that binds it down, that lids it, that seals it in its nithrid-hole, somewhere deep beneath the earth.

For that! For that, he would whisk a duck!

The duck-ghost hungers. The duck-ghost glowers. The duck-ghost struggles. It enchains. It endures its whisked existence, as it has no option but to do.

It un-lives out its painful centuries on Hans' farm, beneath the earth.

- 2 -

Before Hans, there were heroes and heroines in their shining mail and great beasts with a thousand fangs.

There was a magic for each of us, a hope for every one of us, an answer ready to hand for each of us, before Hans bound down the world to sense.

There was Edmund's princess—look! You can see her. And over *there,* there's Sally's prince. She'd have both her eyes left if he had been there. And she wouldn't be trapped in that crevasse!

If you'll look to your left, there's a crow that could have saved Linus Evans. It's a talking crow. More importantly, it's a crow that knows the secrets of the world and loves people like Linus Evans. It could have saved him from his awful fate; *would* have saved him, had they met. There was even somebody for Emily, back then, although—well, she'd hardly need that, would she? What with having Navvy Jim.

They were there, though, all the host of them. In the days before Hans' dominion they shone glorious and bright. Some of their stories yet re-

main, on the scroll of evil prophecy. They are written there—in letters of gold. There were heroes and fairy-tale villains then, but the world grew cold.

Serpent-kings cast up their empires. Magic carpets flew . . .

. . . but the world grew cold.

"We shall die," said the princes, and the princesses with their golden hair.

"We shall die," said the beasts that spoke, and the witches, and the frogs.

"We shall die," they said. "The world grows cold."

Listen.

Hans, it was, who dreamt of such an ending. Hans, who stomped the flat world round. Hans who climbed the sacred mountain; who spoke forbidden words upon it; who brought dread winter down upon the world.

There had been unicorns, and chimera. Dragons too, and the gods of trees, but there are not now.

The winter came. It stormed out, to Hans' will. It brought an end to the age of fairy-tale things.

Some endured beneath the Earth or on distant worlds. Some hid in the shadows, some in the deeps, or found some hidden corner of the globe.

Only some, though.

The winter froze the rest of them. It buried them, it sealed them deep, and then Hans locked the winter itself away.

The age of fairy-tale things ended, and they passed away with it; though, to be precise, they did not die. Not really. Not quite.

They are out there still, if you know where to look for them. They are buried under the ice.

- 3 -

Saul is a kid. He's a smith-dwarf kid, a svart-elf kid. He grows up in the fields and the lich-rows. He plays among the eoliths and the cobblestones that are deep under the surfaces of things.

He milks the blood-draugr. He collects the lung-eggs. He hauls hay into Barnface. It is a lot of work.

"I wish I could skip my chores," he says, miserably, one evening.

"I'm sorry, honey," says Aubrid, who is his mom. She musses his hair. "It's just, if you're bad, Hans will prison you away."

"I know," Saul sighs.

He doesn't complain after that. Not for years and years. He just grows up.

One day he finds a puppy. It's a naturally formed puppy—it's growing out of an eolith, and its body hasn't decided whether it wants to be one wolf or three wolves yet. It has three heads and it is drooling acid. It is struggling to break itself loose from the rock. It looks very hungry, as puppies often do while they are being born.

Saul walks closer. The puppy yaps at him.

"Oh, come on," says Saul.

The puppy glints its eyes at him. It snaps at the air. Then it hesitates.

Saul pulls a steak out of his svart-bag. It is wrapped in paper; he unwraps it. He holds it out to the puppy. Originally the steak was for the river-men, but they can go hungry for a day. What is the worst that can possibly happen?

The puppy whimpers, then it hangs its head. It lets him approach. It snaps free the steak. It chews on it between two of its heads and it lets him pet the runt.

Saul has a hammer now. He has palmed it when the puppy wasn't looking. He hammers the puppy free of the stone.

It falls to the ground with a clunk.

"There now," Saul says. He ruffles its heads. It finishes the steak. It looks at him.

It loves him, utterly and totally, from that moment on.

He tries to hammer the rest of it free, if only so he can figure out whether it's currently one puppy with three heads or three puppies with their bodies stuck together, but he can't. The joints are too close to the puppy's spine—he can't hammer them very hard!

"I'll take you home," he says.

Saul now has a puppy. It helps him with his work. (Well, 'helps.') They play together in the fields.

And he grows up.

"Mother," he says, one day, "I think that I am working harder than I must, simply to not be bad."

"I know," she says.

"Why?"

"If you're good," she tells him. "If you're good, if you're good *enough*, then the sugar fairies will come and they will carry you away."

". . . oh," says Saul.

He goes back to work. He fixes the tractor. He rebinds the limbs of the great round-bellied field demon. He leaves some milk and shoes out at night for the cobblers to fix.

That's the kind of life one gets, a svart-elf among svart-elves, in their fields and farms and caves and palaces underneath the earth.

Saul goes to school, when he's old enough. Well, he goes to school *some*. Aubrid doesn't hold much with education, herself. She figures a

smith-dwarf ought to be able to make a crown of smartening, or a magic ring of knowing stuff—she's not sure what stuff. Just, stuff. You know. She doesn't believe in school, but she wants Saul to give it a good try anyway. So he does.

Every week when the grim white arms of the schoolbus seize Saul and drag him into its mouth, and further in, the puppy barks. It licks the bus. The bus writhes in discomfort, shakes itself, engine groaning. Then the puppy sits down and it waits patiently for Saul, for *its* Saul, to come home.

It hasn't gotten much bigger. It is still trapped inside the stone. The stone creaks and cracks, sometimes. The puppy licks the stone with its acid-dripping tongue. The puppy'll get there—but not *yet,* and a puppy trapped in stone doesn't grow too well.

The years pass. Each time Saul comes home—whether it's from working in town, or school, or from a date with his lady love—the puppy is happy. It dances in delight.

One day Saul turns sixteen.

"Have you been good?" Saul's mother asks.

"I have," says Saul. Suddenly there are tears in his eyes, although he doesn't quite know why.

"I thought so," Aubrid says softly. So she gets up from their breakfast. She goes around the table. She hugs him. She tries to let go, but only hugs him tighter. Actually letting go takes a second try.

"Go on, then," she tells him.

He looks at her.

"The sugar fairies are here."

About the Author

Jenna Katerin Moran has naturally curly hair. She's written some other books, including the RPG *Nobilis*. She has a compsci doctorate.

She thinks you're cool.

About Hitherby Dragons

If you look out at the world, there's a lot that you know. There's a lot that you understand. But at the edge of your map, there's emptiness.

There's questions that are hard to answer.

There's things that are hard to explain.

There's choices that don't make sense and there's a sea of chaos and there's emptiness.

So a while back, Jane went out to the edge of the world, where Santa Ynez touches on the chaos. She walked across the bridge to the abandoned tower of the gibbelins. Finding that its machinery was in recoverable order, she assembled a theater company of gods and humans to answer suffering.

Also they put on shows.

Hitherby Dragons represents a collated, transcribed, and occasionally somewhat edited or adapted collection of transmissions from the theater company at Gibbelins' Tower.

Magical Bears in the Context of Contemporary Political Theory is the fifth work and first book of short stories from this collection.