

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #20



Poetry by Bruce Boston

Stories by J.F. Peterson
Edward W. Robertson

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September

Table of Contents

Cover Art - Anselmo Alliegro 4

Editor's Letter 5

Stories:

Salt Ice
By J.F. Peterson 6

Every Song Is a Love Song
By Edward W. Robertson 14

Poetry:

I Have Lived Without The Sky
Bruce Boston 12

Cover Art: *Invaders* by Anselmo Alliegro

Anselmo was educated at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where his work with some of the best artists in the country earned him a scholarship to Parsons School of Design in New York City. He has recently published in *Space & Time*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, and graces three of our past covers.

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Editor's Letter

In a minute the door is going to open up. I am going to step out into heat that will suck the air from my lungs. There will be a press of people so thick and so loud, and none of them looking like me, that I might think of getting back on the plane. The feeling will pass quickly as my adventurous spirit takes over. The differences are why I wanted to come in the first place. And there will be many, ones I can't even imagine now.

When it is time to eat dinner, I will pick a place that looks clean with menus that have pictures. I will point and nod and hope that it is a picture of chicken and not a local delicacy that just happens to be taboo in my culture. I will smile the entire time I am here, hoping that smiles will make up for not being able to speak the language.

At night I will sit on the balcony and stare at strange skies and try to find familiar stars. During the day, I will forget home and enjoy the unique buildings and the strange customs and the new sounds and sights that greet me at every glance and every corner.

I am only a traveler on my first journey to India, but I imagine that this is what any space traveler would experience on his first visit to another planet. There would be hope and excitement, but nervousness too and hundreds of questions.

I often wonder if Christopher Columbus felt some of the same emotions when he took off for the new world. Was he just thinking of spice? Was he thinking about landing in strange India and trying the skewered chicken and curry rice? And what did he feel when he saw shore after so many months on that boat?

I wonder about Lewis and Clarke too, those famous mappers who explored the western reaches of the U.S. What was going on in their heads as they loaded up the wagons and headed west?

Of course, there is a difference between my situation and these others. These men were heading out into the relative unknown. A space explorer would be going where no human eye had ever gone.

In our age our world can seem small. My nation has cable TV and the internet and I can see pictures of India, and watch shows from India, and download Indian music. It takes away some of the questions.

But I am still fascinated. When that door opens, I will encounter something glimpsed, but never experienced.

-SC

Salt Ice

by J.F. Peterson

J.F. Peterson's fiction has appeared in New Myths, Postscripts, Absolute Magnitude, the I Am This Meat Anthology, Aberrant Dreams, and our own magazine among many others. A former first place finisher in the Writers of the Future Contest, J.F. also had his story "Catch Me" as one of the Million Writers Award Notable Stories of 2007 with several more nominations over the years. He is currently working on a fantasy novel tentatively titled The Strength of Stones, in which the American Revolution comes late to a world of industrialized magic. In this story the ice is both a sign of death and of hope.

Wind blew across the sand. Blue and red lights swept frozen waves. The rescue machines trundled back to the ambulance, and their medical cousins took their places around the inert figure dragged from the ice, onto the concrete-hard beach. They made no attempt to warm or shelter the body in its soaked clothes; they had arrived too late for that. Neither did they attempt to keep the woman away who pushed between them to lay a hand on the still chest. Instead, nets of machinery enveloped the skull in a ceramic and plastic embrace, and threadlike needles intruded into the cold flesh, punched through the bone with little pop sounds that barely carried over the wind.

The machines sang. Filaments far more delicate than human hairs spread and quivered inside the man's skull, against axons and dendrites, the vibrations returning a trembling sensitivity to the cell surfaces, giving, for a moment, a semblance of life.

Memories and thoughts stirred. The machines sang, and, faintly, the cells sang back.

* * *

"Grandpa! No!" The icy wind blew her words over me, her voice pulling me back the way only love can. I hesitated. But I didn't let Abby stop me. I ran out after Marco onto the gray salt ice.

The surface flexed beneath my feet, so I hunkered down. Harder to make progress that way, but I wear crampons in the winter. You take all the advantages you can get at my age. I sort of skidded along on my belly, face-first toward him, toward the hole.

The ice shivered when she stepped out after me.

“Stay back Abby!” I snarled the words, scared and protective both. “It won’t hold any more weight.”

I know what she was thinking. I know. She’d heard the story about my papa a hundred times, how the ice killed him. There she stood remembering and wanting to keep me from the same fate.

I called back over my shoulder. “Get the rope from the trunk! Get the tarp!”

I’d spread out pretty well, but salt ice is tricky stuff. You can see, out beyond Indian Island Park, waves lapping at the ice’s edge where Flanders opens up into Great Peconic Bay. The crumbly surface doesn’t freeze consistent-like. It’s gray-white, and rough. The currents eat at it like rodents, making soft spots.

Papa loved to sail on the ice. He built a machine, a cross between a sailboat and a sled. He would set it down on the ice at the Corwell landing, the wind would fill the sail, and he’d skate down the Peconic out into the bay, laughing all the way.

I asked him once if he worried about the salt ice, the soft stretches worn by the current. He’d said, “Weight distribution, boy,” and pointed at the long metal runners. “Weight distribution. Don’t forget it.”

Scrabbling out after Marco, I stretched out and remembered.

Marco’s hand thrust up from the hole ahead. Twenty-five yards or so away, a pool length, not far. Once I could swim that in ten seconds. Now, crawling, I felt bones grind in my knees as I pushed forward, each step a flash of pain flaring up through my thighs before settling in my hips. The wind spat salty bits into my eyes. And maybe I cried from the pain some too. I felt tired. I felt old.

Behind, I heard the chirp of my car being unlocked, Abby yelling something, I couldn’t tell what with the wind scratching at me, and the sound of ice scraping beneath my coat. I stopped and looked back at her. She had that thick purple rope I kept back there.

I panted and yelled, “Tie the line around your waist! Throw me the other end!”

She worked, trying to do it. I took the seconds to rest. She threw me the end, and—a miracle I only had to roll over to my side to grab it—I looped it through my belt, pulled the free length through. I yanked out as much as I could, to make a loop going from Abby, around my belt, to the pile of rope beside me. Then I tore off my boot and tied it to the end for a weight, threw it back to her.

“Spread the tarp!” I yelled as she ran to fetch the boot. “Prop it open

with sticks!” It took a few times to get her to understand, precious seconds. Then she was nodding, hurrying, and I was back on my belly, grunting forward.

Marco’s fingers scrabbled at the edges of the ice. If he could have grabbed on, it would have made my job easier, but falling through salt ice, it’s not as if you’ll find a ladder to get you out. The stuff crumbles in your fingers. And it’s cold, colder than fresh water, colder than regular ice. I knew what he was feeling, the way the muscles stiffened and began to seize up. There’s a terrible urge to just let go. To have peace.

Why risk myself for a man I didn’t even like? A man I’d wished hadn’t married Abby in the first place. A man who couldn’t support his family because he couldn’t hold a job. A man who hit my little grandgirl right in front of me today when she stumbled into him while we walked on the beach, saying she’d bumped him on purpose, that she was out to ruin him, that everything that had happened to him was her fault. A man who shoved me to the ground when I yelled at him, and then ran from what he had done.

The same way I’d run long ago, out across the ice.

I’m only human. Black thoughts slither in the back of my mind. You know the kind, the bad thoughts you ignore every day. Or try to. The ones that tell you someone else deserves what they get because you don’t like them, or because they were mean to you, or because you just think they deserve it. The thoughts that tell you that you don’t have to do a thing to help anyone else. Leave the trash you see on the ground. Don’t bother stopping when you see an accident, let someone else handle it, wait for the rescue machines. Let Marco die on the ice. Let him die.

I’d like to believe that somewhere, somehow, the better part of me thought about redemption, of doing the right thing regardless of Marco, who he was, what he’d done to me, what he’d done to my grandgirl. But that’s another thing about being my age: I know myself well enough to know I never had those thoughts before I set out across the ice. Later, as I pushed myself ahead, maybe. But not as I set out.

No, I was thinking about all the rotten things he had done, and I was angry, and a part of me wanted to beat the bat snot out of him for knocking me to the frozen sand, old man or not. All those bad thoughts, they kept telling me to leave and let that idiot freeze and drown, and that Abby would be better off for it. But I went, and it was in spite of how I felt, and all those nasty little thoughts roving around this ancient head.

I went because of what Papa taught me so long ago. Not with words, because he and I had gotten long past words by the time he pulled me from the ice. He taught me with what he did the day he saved me, when I heard

his message where I hadn't been able to hear his words. And I still hear him, his thoughts sounding in that remembered action, telling me to go out there and rescue Marco. Whether he deserved it or not.

I surged forward over the ice, fast as I could, my joints grinding as if packed with broken glass. Without the boot, my left foot slipped, no traction. The ice chewed up my sock and then it was my skin scraping the surface as I pushed ahead. I ripped the nail off my big toe. Didn't matter. I wriggled ahead. I wouldn't lose him.

Marco's naked fingers slithered over the edge of the hole ahead of me. Spray dappled my cheek, freezing there in the cutting wind. The taste of salt. The feel of rime.

Ice cracked beneath me.

If you never hear that sound, count yourself lucky. It's a hollow and brittle sound. An emptiness to it. You can imagine everything you ever wanted to redeem falling into that sound, and never being pulled back out.

"Hold on!" I called out, knowing it was stupid, knowing he couldn't hear. Knowing that, even if he could, his brain had probably cooled to the point where he couldn't understand anything. Then, over my shoulder, I saw Abby with the tarp all spread out, driftwood sticks propping it open. Good girl. "Lash the line to it!"

She heard. She understood. I saw her dashing to work. She's always been my bestest grandgirl, Abby. Much better than what life dealt her.

I wish I could tell her that.

When I fell through the salt ice, I was younger than Marco in years, but I reckon you could say Marco was about the same age in spirit as I'd been when I fell through the ice. And just as foolish. Marco ran from what he'd done to Abby and me, and the life he felt falling apart around him. Me, I'd run from my father, his life, a future I did not want.

God, how I loved Papa. How I hated him. Not for what he was, but for wanting me to be it too. "I'm going to pass what our family's built to you, boy."

I couldn't stay on the farm, there was no future for me there. I dreamed of flying machines and rockets, of building ships that would take people to Jupiter's moons and beyond. But I never knew how to tell him, not then, and so he never understood. Never knew how wanting me to be what I could not be—to be what he wanted me to be—tore me apart, until that day, that argument, and me running off the duck farm, out across the ice, just wanting to get away.

I remember thinking, and I don't know if it's a real memory or something that came after, but I remember thinking that the ice was like my dreams,

something that would melt away, and that I had to run across while I had the chance. Then I heard that crack. That broken ice sound. I fell into freezing salt water, and maybe that told me something about dreams too.

He rescued me, of course. He tied a hemp rope to one of those few scraggly pines along the shore, went in, tied the other end around me, and then climbed back out and hauled me to safety. A strong man, my father. An amazing man. But still a man. He died from the cold, not two weeks later.

I've lived my life knowing a better man died so he could pull me from my selfishness. You remember things lost. The chance to explain. To ask forgiveness. The Papa-sized hole in the world that you can only try to fill, knowing it's not something you ever could, and that you're foolish to try, but that you do anyway.

You remember.

So there I was on the ice, hauling the improvised tarp stretcher on the line Abby had lashed to it. My fingers shook. I don't know how I undid the knot, but I untied it.

I made a slip knot from the loose rope, a little loop I could pull tight. I jerked it over Marco's wrist. Reached out to grab him, that weakly grasping hand. Slippery as an eel, but he clutched at me. Weakly, but he did. Not dead yet. So I grabbed back, and called over my shoulder. "Pull, Abby!"

Strong legs, my granddaughter. I was a swimmer, she a runner, good genes. Good legs. She pulled, and between us we had him coughing up on the ice, spitting out seawater, shivering like mad. I somehow got him up on the plastic, used the rope to hold him to the tarp. "Walk him back!"

She did, bless her. This man who'd hurt Abby so much, who'd said and done things no man should to wife or family. She saved him.

Then the rest of the ice started to give way.

My legs and half the tarp slumped into water thick with chunks of broken ice. I saw Abby struggling against the pull on the rope, heard little crackling sounds as the rest of the surface got ready to break. We were too much for it. My arms were the only thing keeping me from going all the way in.

If I didn't let go, the ice would totally fail. Marco would die, and so would I.

So I let go.

It wasn't Abby's fault. It wasn't Marco's. Never believe that. Life has an ebb and flow, like tides, or like the way the salt ice came back after all these years. A debt repaid. A life returned. The salt ice taking its toll.

I see sky beyond the surface here. The water's cold, but the shock of it only lasts a second. If the machines pull these thoughts, I hope Abby will

know I was thinking of her. Of her and Marco. Of me and Papa.

A part of me died with my papa. I don't want that to happen to Abby. It's easy to keep on breathing, but still be dead. Trust me, I know. And I know if Marco died today, that's just what would happen to her. And if she just let him go, then it'll happen to them both, and there'll be three deaths on the ice today. He can be saved yet. And so can Abby. It'll be hard, but I know she's strong enough. I know she can, and I believe—I pray—she will.

Because he's not the only one on salt ice.

We all are.

We all need saving.

* * *

The machines stilled. The cells fell silent. The speakers that had carried the dead man's thoughts hissed a moment longer and then quieted. Nearby, a woman cried. She stumbled to a man wrapped in electric blankets and doctoring machines. She reached out for him.

I Have Lived Without The Sky

by Bruce Boston

Three time Bram Stoker Award winner, Bruce Boston is the author of more than forty books and chapbooks, including novels Stained Glass Rain and The Gardener's Tale. His fiction and poetry have appeared in hundreds of publications, most visibly in Asimov's, Amazing Stories, Weird Tales, Strange Horizons, Realms of Fantasy, Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and the Nebula Awards Showcase. In addition to the Bram Stoker Award, Bruce has received a Pushcart Prize, the Asimov's Readers Award, the Rhysling Award, and the Grand Master Award of the Science Fiction Poetry Association. He lives in Ocala, Florida with his wife, writer-artist Marge Simon.

I Have Lived Without The Sky

I have seen the thrusters flare
in brilliant red-orange clouds.
I have heard their sonic roar
as they tear the air apart,
as they push the Earth away
and slice into the vacuum
that lies beyond the sky.
I've known the silence after
that settles all around,
the awe and the emptiness
of those they've left behind.

Yet I will not seek the stars
and I will not travel high.
I will keep the Earth beside me
like a lover and a friend
from my birth until I die.

I have seen young spacers eager
for their journey to the stars.
I've heard their talk of fortune
and the dreams that they confide.

I've seen the ones returning
with their faces dark as brick,
out of sync and out of time,
their families gone to history,
their fortunes still unclaimed,
and with nothing left to do
but ship again on high.

So I will not seek the stars
and I will not pierce the sky.
I will keep the Earth beside me
and there I'll make my bed,
with a breath and with a sigh.

To them I'm but a groundling,
those who've left our world behind.
The contempt in their voices
and the vacuum in their stares
are always easy to divine.
Yet they do not know the choices
this groundling's had to make.
They've never seen the clouds
that flare within my mind
or the visions I've denied.

For I have not sought the stars
and I've never reached on high.
I've kept the Earth beside me
and will keep it to the end.
I have lived without the sky.

Every Song Is a Love Song

by Edward W. Robertson

Edward W. Robertson is a graduate of NYU's fiction program. His works have appeared in Reflection's Edge and M-Brane SF. Currently, he resides in the Northwest where he is a movie critic. Halfway across the galaxy some things are still the same in this story.

Mitti had a song for me she wouldn't sing until I did the job, but she had a lot to learn about humans. I looked at it as an anniversary present from the company. The average lifespan of a raker, they hadn't told me, was nine months. I was two weeks from two years, and if every day of my life on Salumbria weren't already indistinguishable from a party, I would have thrown myself one. That was how Mitti got me in the first place: stealing from the Fist of the Sky sounded like a great idea when I was too drunk to remember it might make us both dead.

It didn't matter. Salumbrian security was Salumbrian security, which is to say an old man with some flatware could knock it off. Me and Mitti didn't even have to kill anyone. We went in at night, came out with a locked metal case, and ended up drunk again, Mitti sprawled on my couch. I watched her sleep until the sun warmed through my window and threw shadows below her cheeks. I woke to a headache and a highly illegal gun jammed against my gums.

"Hand it over and I'll shoot you in the face instead of the guts," the Salumbrian said. He looked tall for them, over five and a half feet; when he leaned over, a dozen small braids spilled past his face and neck, woven from the mane-like stripe of hair that ran from Salumbrian scalp to the base of their spines. Six months in, I'd shaved the sides of my head and grown the rest past my collar—from a distance, I didn't think you could tell the difference. The man twisted the gun in my mouth, steel scraping enamel, and I tasted blood. I mumbled something and he pulled the gun away.

I tried again. "So where will you shoot me if I tell you I don't know what you're talking about?"

"Everywhere that won't kill you, then everywhere that does."

"Then I know right where it is." I sat up and glanced past him to the other room. It was silent, still. My heart jarred in my ears. "Where is she?"

"Don't know. Don't care. Get the case."

“Okay,” I said and snapped the heel of my palm into the bundle of nerves just below and inside his elbow. His wrist flopped up and so did the gun and my other fist cracked into his button nose. I was off the bed then, chain punching him until he wasn’t moving, picking up his dropped gun and clubbing his head until he wasn’t breathing. Troublingly, he was wearing the blue and white of the Fist of the Sky. Mitti wasn’t in the other room. The case was gone from mine. I got my jacket and the thug’s gun and my gun and all my cash—they used paper—and my omni and stared around the empty apartment trying to convince myself Mitti hadn’t ripped me off. Salumbrians were weird about lying, in that they didn’t do it, but then again she’d never promised not to rob me of what we’d stolen the night before.

More would come. I hit the street and popped in my earbud and punched Kammert up on my omni.

“Ramsey,” he said, forcibly cheery. “Where is it?”

“There’s a corpse in my apartment.”

“Another girl?”

“Funny. If you want me out here scaring up investments instead of getting bludgeoned to death in prison, someone should get rid of it.”

“We’re on it. Where’s the product?”

“It’s grown legs.”

I could hear his frown. “Mitti?”

“I don’t think it’s how it looks,” I said. A couple did a double-take as they passed me. I was hustling without direction. I tucked in behind a brass statue of a tree and squeezed my eyes shut. “Let me find her first.”

“If she’s run off—” Kammert started.

“Then I’ll deal with it. Your other idiots couldn’t find her anyway.”

“Ten hours local,” he said. I agreed and clicked off, knowing if I called Kammert back thirty seconds later, he would pretend he wasn’t already on the line with a half dozen other rakers. They’d be on the street in as much time as it took them to register their hangovers and find their pants, but I knew Mitti and they didn’t. I could have lied to Kammert. Maybe I wanted her caught.

She wasn’t at Lopp’s. She wasn’t at the Red Horn or seated among the cushions at the back room of the Crescent. I didn’t bother with her place. Rittin hadn’t seen her. I checked the vegetable stalls beneath the Naralon bridge—she had a thing for buying her food under the open air—bumping Salumbrians’ broad shoulders, ignoring the boxes of red fist-like fruits and the orange fingers of tubers, searching faces, skipping among the snub noses and leafy ears for the set that was hers. I stopped beyond the crowd and called her room and got no answer. There was a crinkling to my stomach, a

pressure like it was being wadded up from beneath.

As a classicist, I'd tried drinking and whoring around long before I learned the kung fu I'd killed the Salumbrian with. It was good for a while. The time passed. I met a lot of young, unpredictable people, most of whom were still alive when, four years into it, I woke to a knifing pulse just below my navel and no memory of falling asleep. I shivered and sweated in the dark, thinking hangover, failing to sleep, damp-eyed and tight-breathed, shuffling for glasses of water with my arms wrapped around my belly like a gargoyle, but by that afternoon I thought I might be dying. None of my friends called back and I drove myself to the clinic without crashing and the doctor told me he needed to bud me a new liver. I had no money. I quit drinking. I listened to my friends and the girls yammer through the night and they made no sense. I moved across the planet.

Mitti didn't see me coming, she saw the way the Salumbrians across the dirt-floored bar jerked their chins and went quiet, some nudging their friends while others went back to their conversations, louder this time, like if they ignored the alien he couldn't hurt them. She bolted without looking back, case in hand, and I sprinted past flinching locals, my longer legs catching her three steps before the back door. I tackled her and we skidded into the booze-soaked dirt.

"Oh," she said from beneath me, breathing hard, smelling like sweat and a Salumbrian vine that reminded me of kiwis and wet paint. "It's you."

"Why did you leave?" I asked, direct as I could.

"Why did you come after me?"

"You owe me four grand and one song."

"I didn't want to get killed."

"By?"

"Whoever wanted to kill me," she shrugged. "Will you let me up?"

"Run again and it means another tackling."

She nodded—she'd picked that up from me—and I rolled off and we stood, brushing dirt from our sleeveless shirts and slitted pants. Now that neither of us appeared intent on killing the other, the ring of locals that had bunched around us began to drift back to drinks and talk. Three or four men were staring at me with the blank eyes of people talking themselves into a bad decision. Mitti jerked her chin at the door.

"I'm sorry," she said once we were out in the sunlight and heading away. She was, as usual, trying to stare straight through my eyes as she spoke, a cultural tendency that always made me want to scrape my nails across a few corneas.

"For what?"

“For running out on you. I bet you’re mad about that.”

“Uh-huh. Money?”

“Indirectly. They want the case.”

I nodded, hands in pockets, eyes on the case in her hand. Talking to a people who never lied, while useful when it came to my semi and outright illegal dealings with the city’s shadow class, was a paranoid swamp that stunk worse than death. How to know when you had the whole truth and not a partial meant to placate you? Was it best to ask specific questions with no room for ambiguity, or broad ones that couldn’t be evaded on technicality? Did I want the truth? After two years, was my command of the language sharp enough to parse the subtleties of their elegant responses? It was an art to them, providing answers that were true enough to satisfy their perverse social code without bringing shame or harm on them from the one doing the asking.

It was all a mess, a confused mess, a tangle with no ends to its threads. My interrogation strategy with Mitti was unscientific guesswork, veering between vague and laser-tight, rephrasing a question a minute later, sometimes asking nothing at all and just letting her talk; but it was bullshit, thinking I could trick her into being understood, self-delusion. In the end, I simply had to trust her.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I said, turning a corner and ducking under the reaching branch of a bronzed tree. “We could have done something.”

She ducked her chin to her chest, a Salumbrian shrug. “Dragging you into something that’s threatening my life, that’s what friends do?”

“Friends trust friends to make their own decisions about whether to help their threatened friends. Especially when the deciding friend—me—has access to all kinds of badass weapons and associates.”

Mitti stopped to stare at me, forcing me to stop, too. “My people want the case,” she said. “So do yours. The math on this is simple enough for even you to understand it’s mutually exclusive.”

“Ha ha.”

“Laugh it up. I’m the one who has to start learning a new language.”

I squinted at her, then got it. “Why would you have to move when your people are going to get what you promised you’d steal for them?”

It was her turn to squint, a gesture that roughly translated. “You just decided this right now?”

“Yeah.”

“Is this an insane human thing, or an insane you thing? The company will kill you if you don’t give it to them.”

“Yeah, well that’s where the plan gets hazy. I figure if we deliver our

burden to your new friends, they might be convinced it's worth their while to ensure we're in a living enough condition to go on helping them in the future."

"I'm sure the company will be happy to just whack off in the meantime." She pressed her leafy ears flat against the sides of her head—frustration, something just before panic.

"I got that." I reached for my omni and earbud. "Start thinking of somewhere we can hide and get ahold of your people." I punched buttons. A moment later Kammert's voice sounded in my ear.

"News?"

"I got her," I said.

"And the product?"

"Oh, you wanted that, too?"

"You," he said, unenthused. "Bring them in."

"Things are weird street-side." I winked at Mitti, who looked puzzled. "Trouble with the locals. Meet me at the Lindi on 21st in forty minutes. Bring me some backup." Kammert complained through the details with me and I clicked off and grinned at Mitti.

"Why exactly would we want to meet him?" she said, chin back.

"We don't. I'm buying time."

Her orange-red eyes went as wide as they got. "You lied to him!"

"You only think it's bad because your entire species does too."

"It's so—dirty."

I shrugged. "Judge me after we get to the safehouse."

She walked in silence a while, case held in front of her hips with both hands. "Do you ever lie to me?"

"No," I lied. From the corner of my eye, I saw Mitti draw her lips tight and raise her brows. This was something like a smile, but it had untranslatable particulars I was still picking up on two years in: tones of comfort and an honored gratitude, an expression granted only when a truth was expressed without evasion or qualifiers. I smiled at her. She'd been around me more than long enough to know what it meant.

There was a moment as I understood we were about to be attacked when the absurdity of what we were risking our lives for—the case still clamped in Mitti's hands—made me want with all my heart to throw up my hands and laugh until my lungs were too perforated by the gang's ridiculous bone-tipped crossbows to wheeze out another giggle.

I had gotten on a nutrition and exercise kick after escaping from friends and booze, but after a while I realized the only thing fitness did for you was

make you spend too much time in front of a mirror. After a while, I realized it had another use, and I started sleeping around again. Better, in some ways; sober, I was no longer poisoning the relationship outright, but drunk, you can put up with more for longer. Liz worked at the dive bar where I went to meet girls and remember what bourbon smelled like. She said she used to be a stripper; that made me like her more. Three months later she moved in with me, started tacking up the cartoons and sketches she worked on during the slow hours. Her papers stayed on my walls two weeks longer than the day just over five months later when she moved out while I was at work. When she called to say sorry and goodbye, I went out for a bottle, drank in front of the TV, called and got no answer, then untacked each of her drawings, rubber-banded them around a foot-sized rock from my yard, and chucked the whole bundle into the river.

Diet and exercise. The world's most boring, self-righteous lifestyle, adhered to by the kind of person I used to scorn and hate above all else; I maintained its rituals after Liz left as a perverse way to punish her—I would eventually look so good, this goblin in my brain insisted, that the very sight of me would make her crumble to her knees in regret—and found that it did help, if just a little. Health is something to cling to when everything else breaks apart. The Salumbrians, like that old me, would know this soon enough.

The six men about to kill us were as easy to count as to spot, wearing, as they were, the uniform colors of the type of cultural power-group my company higher-ups referred to as “gangs” and us rakers snidely called “companies”: blue and white, in this case, dyed in their mohawkish hair and striping their blousy clothes, painted over the crossbows they were beading up on us above the ducking heads of an abruptly scattering crowd. Skyfisters again. I liked everything about Salumbria, but I was starting to hate them.

“You guys have bad laws,” I said to Mitti, stepping around her and reaching into my largest pants pocket.

She snorted. “Carrying deadly weapons signifies to everyone around you that you distrust them so bad you expect you may have to kill them all.”

“And those arrows, they’re just going to sting a little.”

“Bolts. Bows use arrows.”

I freed my gun and stood there while the last of the streetside crowds melted away and the six men drew into a loose cluster some fifty feet from us. The shadows of ten-story tenements hooded our intersection in urban twilight. If I zigzagged until I was out of range, I could outrun them. It would mean outrunning Mitti, too.

“Throw down the weapon and the case and put your hands in the air,” the thinnest of them shouted.

“Huh-uh,” I shouted back.

“What are you doing?” Mitti hissed.

“Something illegal.”

“Last chance,” the thin man said. “Then we shoot you down and take them anyway.”

“Wait!” I said, then flicked up my wrist and fired. The gun was an old heat-based Sarun 2X9 and I’d turned off its tracer, but the thin man was blown apart somewhere in his middle, the water in his body vaporizing and expanding so quickly he may as well have swallowed a stick of TNT, his disembodied feet still planted on the street while upper limbs and pieces of torso twirled up into the sky. The first of these began to land by the time the second man had similarly exploded, one man had turned his back and run, and the other three loosed their bolts.

By the time I thought, insanely, about palm-striking the bolts out of the air, I heard a whisper and a thunk and my left side went numb. Mitti screamed. I fired again, badly, waving the beam like a sword until it cut through another man. Their crossbows had a revolving mechanism and the two still standing sent a second round sailing over our heads. My eyes saw specks and gray. The ground tilted. I couldn’t hear or see much for a while and all I could smell smelled like blood. My head felt warm. I was seated on the ground and Mitti knelt in front of me and her hand was hot against my cheek.

“I got shot,” I said.

Mitti blinked a few times. “Are you there? Are you okay?”

“Did you get them?”

“I got them all over the street.” She grabbed my right arm. “Think you can stand?”

“I might barf.”

“Me too.”

I jerked up my head. “You’re hit?”

“No. Your gun does gross things.” Mitti tensed and gently hauled me up with her rope-tight arms. “We need to get you to a doctor.”

I agreed and gave her the address of my personal doc, the one the company didn’t know about. I swallowed a nervekiller and by the time I’d stopped limping a minute later my head was clear enough to remember how fucked we were. The Posse—the cop-gang—would be on us now, along with the Fist of the Sky, and it had been over an hour since I talked to Kamert, so there would be rakers soon, too. I fumbled out my omni, switched

it off, then glanced at Mitti and threw it into the gutter. I was Salumbrian now.

With the company's main method of tracking me disposed of, there was also the matter of the two feet of wood sticking from below my left ribs and the streamers of blood dribbling down my side, a condition which, for the first time, drew more double-takes from pedestrians than my alien face; a few blocks from the battle and where the bike cops would soon be converging, Mitti guided me into an alley and tore the clothes away from my side.

"This thing is huge," I laughed, wagging my hip at her so the bolt waved too. I couldn't feel much, just a painless pressure as its tail end ticked back and forth.

"Stop that, you moron," Mitti said, then told me to look away. I felt a pinch and heard a snap and turned back to find her flinging the broken bolt onto a pile of trash. A hand's-width of wood still projected from my belly, and I was bleeding worse than a minute earlier; she clumsily bound it up with strips from our gauzy shirts.

"You're the best." I gripped her shoulders, eyes skipping between hers, the orange-red coronas around her pupils. It seemed very important to let her know this.

"You're high." She reached a hand under my armpit and half-dragged me along. I tipped back my head at the bronzed ivy traced like veins across the bright orange walls of buildings scarcely older than humanity's presence on this planet. Swapped up among the new towers were the graceful curves and stark lines of the older style, walls a rusty red, sooty with the smoke of a century of fossil fuels. On some towers, cylindrical walls sloped seamlessly into domed caps, fingers pointing at the heavens, and God they were beautiful. The city of Pillin, jewel of the Ragged Coast, envy of their modern world. My city. My home. My love.

"So go die on the street," Doctor Lim said when Mitti had knocked on his door till her knuckles were barked. Lim seemed to shrink back from us even as he leaned out his door, like a masthead shying from brackish waters. His snub nose bunched in a hard scowl.

"He needs help," Mitti said, hoisting me an inch up her hip. I couldn't remember the last leg of our trip. I had the sense it had only been a few minutes.

"Then take him to his human doctor. The one who knows where his organs are."

She waved a bloody hand in his face and he flinched. "He's bleeding everywhere."

"Another reason to take him away."

“No one knows I’m here,” I said.

The lines around Lim’s nose deepened. “You think you cut your hair and you’re invisible? You got those little stump arms, those crazy ears. There aren’t twenty of you on the whole planet. People are going to remember the fucking space-monster showing up at my apartment.”

“The rich fucking space-monster,” I said.

“Go bother your own people.”

“I’ll sing for you,” Mitti said. Lim’s nose went smooth. I opened my mouth, heart going hard. I couldn’t speak. “When this is over,” she said. “I’ll sing you a song.”

Lim was quiet a moment. “If you use my name, they’ll know it was me who helped him. But if you don’t use it, what good is it to have a song?”

Mitti tipped back her chin. “Everyone who matters will know.”

The doctor shrank back through his doorway. “Get inside.”

I woke to the soft sigh of Mitti’s breathing. In the starlight through the slatted windows, I could see her facing me, asleep in her chair, feet tucked beneath her, face smooth and untouched. At once it looked impossibly alien. My side gave a sharp tug as I twisted to look at the black stitches in my skin. A clock across the room said it was just before sunrise. We would have to find a way to meet Mitti’s people today.

After Liz, I got the idea I wanted to know how to fight. I scrolled around the net for local martial arts and settled on kung fu because it was out of style. Being in the kwoon was like being someone else. When the sifu threw me, I would come untethered a moment, lost to up and down, time drifting like my flipped-up body; I would land on side and hip and laid-out leg, palm slapping the mat as my weight came down, and each time it hurt a little less. At home, I threw blocks until my arms were moving without me. From there I learned to control my breathing, to integrate the muscles from shoulder to ankle, to the footwork that anchored it all. Once I was ready, I found my fights. It wasn’t hard. Among other humans, I didn’t look like much—short, thin, quiet. I didn’t lose.

It was nice to confirm what I’d always believed: devote yourself hard enough to changing, and you can become a different person. I had drifted far enough to see that this city I’d moved to, the entire planet of Bankson, my birth-rock and twenty-nine-year home, it wasn’t for me. I signed with the company. Seven-year contract. Long jaunt, but I figured if I changed my mind halfway in, I could always punch my way back out.

“Are you all right?” Mitti said when she woke and caught me staring.

“I’m thinking.”

“About what?”

“Getting shot by a crossbow is even more fun than I imagined. It’s like a video game that can kill you.” I remembered, for a flash, a melody from the dream I’d had the night before, but I lost it. “We need to deliver the case.”

She mimicked my frown. “How many hours ago were you fainting and bleeding?”

“Did you think about running off again while I was getting fixed?”

“That’s not fair.” She stared at her hands. “Yes.”

“You should have. Lim’s right. If we stay, they’ll find us—my people, the Fist, whoever. They’ll find us and they’ll hack us into slurry. The way we don’t die is if we surround ourselves with a lot of armed men all thankful for the kingly gift in our hands.”

“And expose ourselves in the street until we bump into one of my guys. I think you just have a problem sitting still.”

“Wrong.” I stood up, hurt, sat back down, rifled my gear for a nervekiller. “We leave in an hour.”

We compromised on camping out in Lim’s joint till nightfall, then Lim made some noise about his life being in danger every moment we were there and I agreed we’d move up to the flat roof of his building to wait out the daylight. It was a magnanimous gesture, I thought as I paid him for services rendered, but Mitti made no sign she’d noticed, and in fact wasn’t hardly talking at all, instead aiming a buttoned-up expression of something that wasn’t all nerves at the windows, the door, and, once we were up on the roof, at the skies. I was looking there, too, though I doubted the company would break out their planes; they had faith in their street team—clearly misplaced. Her gaze jerked over the low rooftop retaining walls at the shouts and occasional booms of street-sounds, and at all times, it seemed, scrupulously avoiding me. I thought about asking her flat-out, but in a move of further magnanimity, let it be.

At sundown I popped an amp to cut through the pleasant fog of nervekiller and got up to stretch my legs. It was hot up there (though I’d never been anywhere on Salumbria that wasn’t) and in the evening breeze the sweat felt cool on my legs and ass and back. We were above the general city stink; I thought I could smell the sea. The city’s old geometry stood beside its older minimalism and modern metalwork and I regretted never learning more history than what we’d been briefed on the ship-ride here. You don’t realize just how stunningly, stupidly large the galaxy is until you see a few places other than your birth-rock; I could live and die here and never know anything else.

After it had been dark a while and the street-sounds had taken on the

spectral echoes of nightfall I checked my gun and my chemical balance and Mitti checked the case and the bright steel knife she'd talked off Lim and we descended to the sidewalks. Mitti said she knew a few haunts where her people (the Blackbirds, she called them) might be that were low-profile enough to be off our hunters' radar, which puzzled me briefly until I realized she'd learned the phrase from me. At our second attempt, an almost literal hole in the wall with dirt floors, unpainted stools, and the sweet scent of smoked otsi on the humid air, Mitti braced her arm over my chest and jerked her chin at a man so relatively pale he was almost lighter than me sitting slumped alone at a table with two half-drunk glasses in front of him. He gave me the long, blank look I was used to, then noticed Mitti and went even whiter.

"You're a long ways from where you're supposed to be," he said, taking in the rest of the sparsely-customed bar.

"It turns out this was dangerous." Mitti narrowed her eyes at him. "So get us out of it."

He drained one of his drinks and gazed past our shoulders. "I think it's time we took you home."

Back on the street, I introduced myself; after I'd reassured him I was no longer working for the company he admitted his name was Vammin and that we'd work out the complications of my identity once we were safely in hand. He flagged down a cab drawn by four underfed sleeks and gave the hack an address I memorized. The cab's tall wheels cracked over potholes and we brushed aside pedestrians and bicyclists and made way for carriages and after some ten minutes I thought it might all be that easy.

The cab jolted hard and I went weightless a moment as the front axle clanked down and ground against the pavement, spraying sparks and spooking the sleeks, who strained hard on their leads before falling back. Through the front window, I saw the hack abruptly fly sideways, a fine red mist replacing the space his body had just occupied.

"Well fuck," I heard myself say, shouldering the door open. I yanked Mitti out as Vammin spilled out the other door. "Rakers."

"How'd they find us?" Mitti ducked below the collapsed cab as chunks of wood sprayed from its roof.

"You wouldn't believe their surveillance," I said, neglecting to mention which orifices of mine they'd probably infiltrated. The pack-pack pop of needle fire cut through the screams and I saw Vammin go down—drugged, I hoped; there was the narrow chance they'd been ordered to take us in breathing, and at worst they wouldn't want to blow up the case. I was under no such constraints, and when I tracked the muzzle flash from eighty-ninety

yards down the dark street, I pulled my trigger and heard the wet bang of superheated meat blossoming in all directions.

Anarchy now, no decision a good one. Vammin was as good as gone and I grabbed Mitti's arm and yanked her behind me onto a side street of low tenements stacked in cubic stair-steps along the strip of pavement. I glanced back for pursuit and heard Mitti swear and turned to find Joh planted in the street ahead of me. He was the only one of the rakers I'd thought of as a friend and he held a needlegun at arm's length aimed straight for the not-so-broad target of my chest. I skidded to a stop just far back enough for him to feel safe.

"Drop it," he said, twitching the end of the pistol. I let my gun fall from my hand. He rolled up his lower lip, drawing strands of his brown beard through his front teeth. "Kammert told me to kill you if I want, but I don't want."

"Thanks."

"Why'd you turn? Money's right, isn't it?"

I glanced at Mitti, saw she was still conscious, apparently unhurt. "Money isn't worth that much."

He scrunched up his eyes. "How little of it do you think it took to get us all to agree to kill your dumb ass?"

I nodded as if thinking, then swung my hips and kicked the gun out of his hand with the blade of my heel, feeling my stitches tug; I punched him a few times to soften him up, then stuck my heel into his chin with all my weight. He dropped. Troublingly, I no longer felt my stitches at all. Mitti grabbed the gun as it skittered away from his limp hand and pointed it at his face, her elbows extended, orange skin around her knuckles gone white.

"Don't," I said. "He's like my only friend."

"I'm your friend," she frowned.

"Then do me a favor and let the idiot live." Down the street, half the pedestrians were rushing away screaming while the other half were bunching up at what they considered a safe distance from our recent violence. I picked up my fallen gun and tucked it into my waist. "Here's an idea. Let's get the hell out of here."

"I know where Vammin was taking us." Mitti grabbed my elbow and broke into a jog. I was steeped to the gills in adrenaline and nervekillers and the city lights gleamed off the brass ivy facades and no one looked like me and I thought, *At last*.

"All right, this is getting ridiculous," I said, easing up. We'd outrun all the witnesses and the yells in the streets were back to big city drunk-sounds. "Sing me my song."

“What?”

“My song. Sing it to me.”

Mitti gaped at me like I was the stupidest man on Salumbria. “We’re in the middle of the street!”

“We’re in the middle of the street because we keep getting fucking shot at. I did this for a song. I want to hear it before I get sprayed all over the pavement.”

“You don’t know anything. I can’t sing it to you here. It would be rude.”

“I don’t care about rude.”

“Rude’ is a bad word,” Mitti said. “It would be like if you proposed to me while vomiting into a toilet.”

“That’s looked down on here?” I stopped short and snagged the hem of her shirt. “Look, I never even had a song about me back among humans, and we sing about how bad we want to bang girls we just met and how cool buying bran flakes will make you. I don’t care if it’s declassé. I just want to hear it before the company I just betrayed assassinates me.”

“It won’t be what you deserve,” she said quietly. “Once it’s sung, you can never hear it again for the first time.”

“I’m sure that, either way, it will be like nothing I’ve ever heard.”

Mitti gave me a look I doubted I’d have been able to read had I been born and raised here. She drew me down a side street, making gulpy, subverbal noises that sounded not at all beautiful. I’d lied to her; I’d heard their songs before, their ceremonials and celebratories of course, but also, once, a boon-song, their private song somewhere between an ode and a living elegy but about eight hundred times more. I wasn’t supposed to hear it—they were deeply personal, composed and performed for an audience of one, though through some osmotic social process I didn’t understand the basic themes and the identity of the recipient became public knowledge within days of it being sung—but in the office halls one night, otherwise empty, I’d heard that buzzing drone and swaying melody and pressed my ear to the closed door and listened to the music of the stars. I couldn’t make out the words, and it wasn’t until three days later, talking it over with a local, had I understood the significance of what I’d heard. I still hummed the tune sometimes—not that I could consistently hit one note at a time, let alone two—and though I had no lyrics, simply humming it made me burn to meet the man it had been inspired by.

Mitti led me to the inset doorway of a closed shop, looked up and down and up the street. A couple was walking away from us toward the corner; a lone man hustled down the opposite sidewalk. I watched him walk, his

shoulders swaying in that weird way they had—something about their legs being shorter—then turned to the brain-jarring sound of the same voice producing drone and melody. Mitti was staring down at the grimy pavement, singing no louder than a speaking voice, but with a force I thought I would have heard across the city:

*“When I met him he was hugging a bottle
The rest of them watched across the bar, dark-eyed,
I walked up, said Hey, you from around here?
He showed his teeth and made a sound I’d never heard*

*Got him in a fight that night, you don’t know jealous till
You’ve seen drunks watch a girl talk to an alien
He left them bruised and walked me home, left me be,
Left me wondering why he can’t look more like me”*

I leaned forward, craning into the quiet beauty of her voice and the weirding drone of her under-note. I remembered that fight, mostly, though my head was mushed from local liquor I hadn’t yet gotten used to. I’d left her at her door and gone home thinking I’d never see her again. She hunted me up in another bar a couple weeks later. For a while I used her for her contacts with the gangs; I don’t know what she got out of me. Cachet of slumming around with a spaceman, I’d thought then, or maybe she was always looking too and sensed a kindred spirit, however foreign his face. I didn’t change my mind about her until much later, and by then it was far too gone to shake up what we’d become.

She sang about the day we went to the country and were almost killed by farm-bred sleek and the night we’d gotten too drunk to find our way home and slept it off on a stoop beneath my coat. She sang about how I made her laugh and feel excited about a city that had grown gray. She sang about how I watched her back while we were working, how I lent her money without asking for it back, and, finally, how I’d risked my life on this job to save hers. She made me sound like a hero; I waited for something more.

*“If the stars sent him down, I know some day they’ll take him back.
If I’d been born on his world, our hands might fit, our faces might
match—*

*He’s mine, in his way; yet there’s more space
Between us than the space between the stars.”*

“Is that it?” I said, knowing it was and always would be. Mitti drew back her chin, face blanking. “I mean, I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“That’s it.” Her eyes skipped between mine. “Did you like it?”

“Yeah. Yes. It was everything I could have asked for.”

“Good,” Mitti said. She drew her lips tight and raised her brows, believing me, and I knew that she was right. After I’d signed up with the company they’d shipped me here, just-discovered Salumbria, the brass tapping into the legal markets while us rakers clawed around in the black ones, which all sounded great until we hit dirt and the food had me puking three days straight. By the time I stopped getting sick I stopped hating the place. By the time I met Mitti a few months later, I thought I might make it my home. Considering the bridges I’d torched with the company, I no longer had much choice in that—not until the other incorporateds flew in and set up shop. I doubted I’d have long to wait.

“Well.” I dry-swallowed another amplifier. “Let’s deliver this thing.”

“Let’s.” Mitti started off in the direction the cab had been taking us not half an hour earlier, case clutched to her belly. “I’ll tell you this much, if they don’t tell me what’s in here I’m going to steal it right back.”

I hesitated, then remembered it no longer mattered. “It’s a local analogue for what we Earth-men call penicillin,” I said, using the English word. “A drug so advanced that, for us, it no longer works on anything worth treating.”

“You knew?” She gave me a look I couldn’t read. “Then why do you even want it? You humans, I mean?”

“Business code. We can only sell you what you come up with on your own or people very far away will get very, very mad at us.”

“You’re a strange people.”

“I don’t make the rules.”

“It doesn’t sound like anyone does.”

“Come see it some day. There’ll be more ships soon.”

“I don’t think so,” she said after a moment, ducking her chin to her chest. “This is my home.”

I kept my eyes wide for the company, the Fist, and the Posse, but amped though I was, I caught no sign of any. We ducked through foot and cart traffic, dodging bikes and piles of manure. Part of me ached for another shootout, but the only looks I drew were the looks an interstellar monster or any deformed person gets—a lingering glance, then a quick one away—and the addresses ticked along until we were standing in front of the hotel where Vammin had been trying to take us before he’d been neutralized.

“Do we just walk right in?” Mitti said, free hand touching her waistband

where she kept her largest knife.

“We could stand out here waiting to get shot.”

“I think we just walk right in.”

We walked in. The lobby was an earthy, low-ceilinged, needlessly cramped room that had me once again wondering if these people were descended from moles. A short man in black gauzy pants and an open black vest rose from a chair to intercept us and I dropped my hand to my waist but Mitti wrapped her fingers around my wrist.

“He’s one of them,” she said. “A Blackbird.”

“I’m Jori,” the man said, locking eyes with Mitti. He extended both hands palms out and fingers down and she did the same. I had stopped minding when they ignored me; it was better than when they tried too hard to be chummy. Jori ran a finger along his lower lip. “You’ve got it?”

“No, that’s cancer,” I said, jerking my chin at the case dangling from Mitti’s grasp.

Jori eyed me, then turned back to Mitti. “Come with me.”

I fell in behind him, the wound in my side aching distantly. All that hassle and all that worry and all we’d had to do was know where to go. Two tall men dressed in black and solid as marble glided up behind us into the elevator and down to the basement penthouse. Mitti gave me a smug look. I winked at her. We were greeted, both of us this time, by a middle-aged man with the stripe of his hair slicked against his skull. He took the case, turning it over in his hands, then passed it to Jori, who disappeared into another room.

“Mitti. And you must be Ramsey Mathers. I’m Selvin i-Dim,” the man said. I nodded, tired of names. He tapped the tip of his nose, an ironic gesture. “You two have been making some noise out there.”

“That happens when you scream,” Mitti said.

“But you’re alive.” Selvin glanced between us, as if seeking agreement. “It’s not much good being alive without money. We’re all about to have a lot of it.” He gave their version of a wry smile.

Mitti gazed at the floor. “Ramsey split from Anders Co. over this. He’s out on his own.”

“Are you asking for a bonus?”

“I’m asking for ten thousand,” I said, naming enough to live high for over a year.

“Done.” His orange eyes held steady on mine. “Think you’d look good in black? You’ll stand out, but I imagine you’re used to that.”

“I would be honored,” I said, and found that I meant it. “I could use a partner.”

Mitti squeezed my arm just above the elbow. Selvin tapped his thumbs together, assenting. Across the room, one of the bodyguards gave me a long, inscrutable look. Selvin talked details: settling up Mitti's debt, opening up channels with the company, who might be open to truce, and protecting me and Mitti from the Fist, who certainly wouldn't. He didn't talk about the case and the drugs inside that would change the face of medicine across Salumbria, but I doubted it would be far removed from what I'd seen back in the Settled Systems: at first essential for the rich, bankrupting or simply beyond the means of the rest; several years later, routine but at the cost of a paycheck; finally ubiquitous. You can have all the world's crossbow-gangs, lawyers, and extremely illegal firearms, but you can't hold control forever. Things slip away. Before you understand what you've got, it's already gone.

I first met Mitti at a bar, like she sang, and like she sang, I'd been alone. She'd been as drunk as me—that wasn't in her song, but omission's not a lie—talking loud, her head swaying in a circle so tight you could only notice if you were paying special attention. She was amused to death by my laughter, telling me I honked like an animal. I told her she had ears like something at the bottom of a salad bowl. She faked shock, a gleam in her eye I'd sometimes seen in my now-dead friends on Bankson before they tried a new drug or spoke to a fresh girl or when they talked about how once they had the money they'd spend their lives soaring between the systems meeting people and eating food and waking under foreign suns. Mitti grabbed my hand, made me show her my five fingers, squeezing each one. I explained what my grin meant. Outside, after the fight, she swung a finger at the sky and asked what star I'd come from. I looked, but I didn't know a single one.