

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #23



Poetry by Darrell Lindsey

Stories by Lawrence Dagstine
Wayne Helge

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Cover Art: *The View* by Jem French

Jem French is an educator based in NY. He has recently started dabbling in imagery after he found out computers do a much better job than his hands were able to.

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Editor's Letter

I personally have never experienced an earthquake, though three times I have experienced tremors. All three times I thought something was wrong with my brain, that I was dizzy and the world was shaking because of an imbalance in my head. As such, I was more fascinated than scared.

Those tremors lasted only seconds, and by the time I realized what they were, they had passed and there was nothing to be afraid of. I can only imagine the fear I would feel if those tremors had lasted minutes and I was cognizant of what they were. I imagine it would be akin to the fear that strikes when you are just about to get in a car accident or just miss having a car accident, that surge of adrenalin that leaves your knees weak and trembling for a long time after.

This is in part what I have been thinking about as I read the news and continue to see earthquakes in the headlines. Four earthquakes in matter of months. That is quite a bit, and some have said it is a foreshadowing of the end of the world. They always quote the Bible and how the world will shake in the last days. It seems that any time there is a flurry of quakes, people love to mention this verse. Now, I am not saying that the last days are not here, but I will go so far as to say that earthquakes are a fraction of what the Bible says will happen in the last days.

People love doom and gloom. Or maybe people just love to understand the things that are happening around them. If they can explain away the rash of earthquakes by saying it is the end of the world, then at least they have a reason that their mind can accept.

I think it is the same reason people struggle with breakups. They want to know why. They want to know what they did wrong or what they didn't have that made someone leave them. They want to be able to understand it. Even if they don't like the reason, at least it is something their mind can latch onto and wrap itself around and even possibly fix.

As a lover of speculative fiction, I realize that I am one of those kind of people that loves to find reasons or create them. It's the beauty of our genre. We can take unexplainable (and there are some things humans just can't understand at this point in time) phenomena or situations and create answers. We can take our characters into unknown realms and solve the questions that have plagued our imaginations.

-SC

My Own Private Earth

by Lawrence Dagstine

Lawrence Dagstine is a freelance writer whose byline has appeared in hundreds of print magazines and webzines such as Aoife's Kiss, Beyond Centauri, The Martian Wave, Atomjack, Jupiter, Nova Science Fiction and Black Ink Horror amongst others. Sam's Dot Publishing released his first collection in 2009, FRESH BLOOD: Tales from the Speculative Graveyard. He is currently signed with Damnation Books. This story is about brothers, bonds, and bits of history.

The Earth rolls around in my hand at the bottom of my pocket. It is my favorite planet. One I take with me everywhere. The funny part is, it's the worst looking one of the lot. It doesn't come anywhere near the pock-marked craters with active volcanoes or the gas giants with massive hydrogen storms. The one I love is made of blue oceans and green continents, and like a marble in this great big universe, the glaze has chipped off here and there.

I love that planet. It's nice to have the Earth tucked away in my pocket, with the mountains and valleys and rainforests and everything else that once existed. The best part is that I just stare into the planet's core and I can make these wonderful landscapes appear again, breathing new life. I can concentrate real hard and see what the people were like, or I can focus on starting a new civilization from scratch.

A finger prods me. "Well? Can't you make up your mind, Del?"

My brother Flan is waiting, sitting on the metal walk in front of the nutrient center. Between his legs is a pyramid of six globes: three on top of the other three, two moons belonging to the planet Jupiter.

He goes into his little case and dumps a few more out, and says, "I'll see you two carbon worlds, and raise you one."

Naturally I can't make up my mind, and I definitely don't want to part with my Earth. I've shot ten times already and missed everything, like an asteroid coming within close trajectory but barely skimming the firmament. Only my thumb and forefinger is piloting it. Flan's vest compartments bulge with the planets he won at recess. There are also a few others he purchased from the vending machines outside Duffy's, but these are from entirely different solar systems. Now he has way more than me and we merely play to

kill time. Now we wait for the food bell. Before I know it, I'm down to my last one. My beloved Earth.

"You think I'm going to sit here on my can until the next cycle?"

"Don't be so impatient. You're making me nervous."

"Just go!"

The Earth trembles in my palm. I shoot—and miss! Well, that's that. Miracles don't happen. We have to go in and eat now.

* * *

I wake up. The circle of the flashlight blinds me. It's pitch-dark. "Quick, get dressed," a voice says. "Don't make a sound."

What's going on? The others are asleep in the tent. In the darkness I pull on my shirt. Damn it, I've got it on inside out. I sense my brother close to me, scraping his soles on the floor.

"Who are all these other people?" I ask.

"Well," says the voice, "I ought to tell you that most of these people are Jews."

This can't be a Gestapo raid; there would be cries, everyone would be up. The man holding the flashlight goes by the name Stevynski. I recognize him.

"Come on. I'll meet you in the office."

Outside the night is cool. There are millions of stars; I wonder if anybody is looking back at me. The tent is already wet with dew. One other tent is alive with noise. A large one. It is jammed with people, children, suitcases. The noise from that one tent is infernal. Its occupants are to be transported someplace. They each hold numbers. Everyone else in the camp is asleep.

Near me stands a single couple in their late fifties, and they welcome my presence. The man is bald, wearing his Sunday best. The woman is short and frail, and must have just had a permanent wave. He's wearing a brown suit with matching loafers. She's wearing a blue and gray polka dot dress. From time to time they exchange glances, and I'm afraid. As young as I am, I understand that those two older folks are looking at each other like people who have lived together all their lives. Deep down they know they are about to be separated. Each will go the rest of their way alone, especially if it is the only way.

The office is open. Stevynski lights a small lantern and I see that he's carrying two knapsacks. One for me, one for my brother. "You're leaving right now. I've put everything you'll need in these bags: clean shirts, un-

derwear, stockings, canteens, and a bite to eat. I'm also going to give you some money. You'll cut across the pumpkin fields. Then you take a train for France. From there you'll go to a village south of Paris. A woman waits for you there. Her name is Martha. The village is called—"

My brother interrupts him. "What's going on?"

Stevynski lowers his eyes. "Your father was arrested in an SS roundup yesterday."

Everything is starting to spin. The Gestapo is stronger than I imagined; they managed to get my father.

"That's not all. Your father was carrying his identity papers, made out in his own name. It won't be long before the Germans link you with him and they'll be looking for you."

After hearing that, my brother puts his knapsack on. "What about my mother?"

"They warned her in time. I can't tell you where she is, but you can be sure that your relatives had a hiding place picked out. But go now. And don't write! They might be watching the mail."

We start out. Everything has happened so fast that it still hasn't registered with me. I only know my father is in Nazi hands. What a triumph for the Gestapo if they get us in their clutches. But what about Stevynski? Anyone caught helping a Jew must share his fate. No, we'd better not get caught.

The earth is hard and dry, but as we brush past weeds and vine leaves the dew wets our short pants and our shirt sleeves. The camp already lies far behind us. The night is so light that the crest of the hills casts its shadow on the terraced farmland. The train station is a long way inland, and we must remain undetected. It makes me sad to leave my home. I'll come back to it when I'm bigger, and when there's peace.

* * *

The storefronts along the space walk are spectacular, most, if not all, wavering crazily. They sell items from galaxies and cultures long extinct. Shop owners are well rehearsed in the histories of the objects they supply. They have to, for these are not your ordinary merchants. What they choose to specialize in and carry are more than just keepsakes. To the right customer they are collectibles. I look to the left, because Flan is walking to the right of me. That way he doesn't see his younger brother crying.

"Quit your blubbering," he says.

"I'm not blubbering, damn you!"

“When you look away like that, I can tell you’re blubbering.”

“I am not!”

“Bah, you’re a sore loser. It’s not my fault I save my credits and can keep buying and keep playing. You should have known when to stop. Besides, it’s just a planet.”

“You know how much it meant to me.”

“Then you shouldn’t have played. You could have talked me out of the game, but you didn’t. You decided to go through with it. The best part is you’re getting all misty-eyed over a world that wasn’t even that fantastic. Trust me, they’ll be others. Better ones. You’ll see.”

“It’s not the same.” A wipe of my jumper sleeve and my tear ducts are dry. We’re going to get a scolding; we should have been back at the living units an hour ago.

“Here, tell you what. Take my Callisto.” He goes into his case. “I already have two just like it.”

“I don’t want your Callisto,” I argue. “And I don’t want your Ganymede either!”

“I’m nice enough to give you free satellites, and you shun me?”

“Those moons are insignificant. The planet you won off me has something of value. It has a chance. It has hope embedded within it.”

I talk our game over some more on the main boulevard. The mall shops here have never looked prettier. The signs are enormous and jut outwards. There are advertisements for anything and everything just about everywhere. The orange and yellow and purple glow speaks volumes. Visitors from all over the cosmos come here to buy or barter the recorded accounts of empires long forgotten. History is a big business in the Cat’s Eye. Sometimes, if you’re lucky, you can pull it from a vending machine. The right one, at least. Duffy’s has the best machines. Other times you can download it directly into your memory from these cute little kiosks. That’s why all the cool kids come here.

But now it is hard to imagine new tourists. The atmosphere is always full of laser fire and colliding freighters. Interplanetary war and space politics. I am a kid like any other. Now all of a sudden they stick a jumper on me and turn me into a human. What is a human, anyway? Supposedly I look like one. Supposedly that’s who my ancestors were. I feel anger welling up inside me. I suddenly want to learn more about these humans and how we ended up related. But I can’t. And I probably never will. Flan won my Earth. Fair and square.

We leave the space walk and go home.

The courtyard to our facility gleams so you can see it from the distance.

“That you, boys?” The processing of liquids and proteins accompanies my mother’s voice. “Go wash up before you sit down to eat. Is your brother with you?”

I soap my hands with some kind of foam that slips through my fingers without producing any suds. “No, but he’s coming. He stopped real quick at a science shop to pick up some more planets.”

My father tousles my hair. “If that boy didn’t have enough already.”

“He took my last one from me. Now I have none.”

“Well, maybe if you’d save your allowance more often, you’d be able to stock up like he does.”

Flan comes in, gulps down his meal, and gets out of his seat at the same time as I do.

My mother is peeved. “Now where are you headed?”

Flan launches into a complicated explanation. The shopkeeper has sold out all her planets, but can get some more in exchange for fixing her display cases. For that, we have to persuade the owner to trade our services for a special order.

Father raises his head over the top of his reader. “Not late. Understand?”

“Yes, Father.”

Outside, Flan says, “Is this Earth really that important to you?”

I’m quiet at first, then, “Yes. It has personal meaning.”

“Then come with me.” We start heading back to the space walk. “You’re lucky you’re my brother.”

* * *

The path to freedom goes uphill. We’ve got to stay away from farmhouses so the watchdogs won’t bark, and that takes us out of our way. Finally, my brother stops. We can see a road ahead of us. “We’re going to cross,” he whispers.

There’s no one coming, so we dash across the road. After we scramble up a bank, the sea appears at our feet, broad, gray, shimmering. Now we’ve got to traverse the beach and get back on trail. Then we’ll work our way through miles of vegetable gardens to the train station. As dawn comes, we see boarded-up villas, and finally reach the center of town. A few people pass us on bicycles. Shopkeepers are beginning to raise their shutters. But the windowpanes provide grim reminders of the night before and the night before that.

Stevynski has told us stories. All children love stories, but these particular ones are something special. My brother and I are the heroes in them. I

am weaned on stories of Stevynski's adventures, and we are to follow in his footsteps. At first, I am told not to be scared. I am told to just listen. I envision rifle butts smashing doors, breaking windows, and families being pulled apart. There is the wild flight of peasants, houses and shops in flames. There is a whirlwind of saber blades, the breath of charging horses, the glint of spurs and, towering over a tragic scene, the flying Swastika.

As the massacres intensify, the streets become peopled with refugees who leave dark, rainy townships with dark, ornate architecture. There is an infernal series of tortuous passes and glacial steppes. There are stormy nights, revelry, laughter, tears, and death. The day the good guys cross the last border and find a beautiful sunlit plain, with bird song, wheat fields, apricot trees, and whitewashed cities with red rooftops, is where the story comes to a close. Then all the refugees set down their bundles and the fear has left their eyes, for they have arrived in Unoccupied France. Stevynski says these people have never been surprised by the love of the French for their own land. But he knows of no one who has ever loved that country as much as they do.

There's the station. It's already crowded.

I run up to the window. "Two one-way tickets for Paris," I say.

The clerk consults books and timetables. "One hundred and fourteen francs, twenty centimes."

My brother scoops up the change while I ask, "Where do we have to change trains?" This is all so very new to us.

"It's complicated. Go to track D and take the express to Marseille. There you change for Lyon. If there's no delay, you'll only have to wait two or three hours. At Lyon, take the motor train. Or you can go another way; via Saint-Germain-des-Fosses or the Bourges track. But, whichever way, you're bound to get there. Only I can't say when because..." Spreading his arms to represent an airplane, he imitates the sound of exploding bombs. "Understand?"

We nod, fascinated. "Thanks, monsieur."

We're lucky to have stumbled upon that informative ticket agent; I launch into an improvisation: "It's complicated. Go to track A, B, C, then X, Y, and Z." My brother is hysterical. "We change in Marseille. No, I mean Saint-Germain. Actually, the Bourges track. But whichever way you go you're bound to get blown up!"

My brother perks up. "Even I could do a better job."

Finally we board the train. At Marseille, contrary to what the ticket agent told us, there is a connecting train for Lyon almost immediately. Paris will be our final destination. But once we go through Avignon, an unex-

pected enemy confronts us.

The cold.

The trains are unheated, and we are going farther and farther away from the warmth of our home. We seek refuge in the toilet and put on all our clothing. But our arms and knees are still bare. In Lyon, where the station platform is swept by a damp, chill wind, we hold a contest to see whose teeth can chatter the loudest. When the train leaves, the situation becomes serious. It is only October. Never has there been a winter so early as this one. The other passengers are already wearing overcoats and thick clothing, while we are still dressed for summer.

Blue and trembling with cold, we get off the train into one big icy draft. People tramp up and down the sidewalks, trying to keep warm. Despite a triple layer of stockings, my toes feel as hard as marble. My stiff brother manages to say, "We've got to do something before we catch pneumonia."

The well-known axiom, "Run a little—that'll warm you up," is one of the biggest absurdities that adults can utter to children. After my experience that day I can safely state that, when you're really cold, running tires you out but doesn't warm you up at all. After half an hour of frantic galloping and hand-rubbing, I find myself puffing like a walrus but shivering even harder than before.

"Listen, we've got to buy jackets."

I look at my brother. "You have ration stamps for clothing?"

"No, but we've got to try."

We see a tiny shop. It has faded lettering: CLOTHING FOR ALL AGES.

He nudges my forearm. "Let's go."

When the door swings shut behind us, I experience one of the greatest sensations of my life. The shop is heated. The warmth enters each of my pores at once, then on to my bones. Without so much as a glance at the good lady behind the counter, we rudely glue ourselves against her potbelly stove.

The proprietress asks us, "What would you like, children?"

My brother tears himself away from the heat. "We'd like coats or heavy sweaters. We don't have any ration stamps, but maybe if we paid a little extra..."

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. We haven't seen a coat or sweater in so long that we don't know what they are," she admits. "The only thing I can show you is this." She reaches under the counter for a pair of mufflers. It's better than nothing.

We stay by the stove until it is dark outside. It is too late for Paris, and it is far too late to take the bus from Lyon to the village where this Martha

lives. We must find housing for the night.

I'm explaining my fears to my brother when the woman looks at us with compassion. "You won't find any hostels in Lyon," she says. "They've been requisitioned for the Germans and their militia. But I can offer you my son's room. The bed will be a little narrow for the two of you, but at least the room is warm."

We practically jump for joy. That evening she cooks for us, and we delight in hot chocolate after our meal. I fall asleep instantly, buried under a comforter stuffed with goose feathers. There is some kind of an alert during the night, but the sirens don't even wake me up.

When we leave in the morning, the proprietress kisses us and won't let us pay. It's not that cold now, and we have our new mufflers. She tells me that we want to take the first bus of the day, and that we'll cross the Alps. We want to end up in the mountains, she assures us. But the ride will be costly. Outside, my brother waits for me. He's lost that wan look from the day before. The sleep has washed away the fatigue of the trip.

The two of us walk the streets. There is a crowd in front of the baker's shop: young men with resistance armbands and small pistols stuck in their belts. Some of them wear berets and smoke long and thin cigarettes. They don't look like real members of the underground. No. These guys have blossomed out on the very morning that the krauts have packed up to go farther north, which probably explains the sirens the night before.

The bus station isn't far now. Behind the counter the man doesn't even look up as my brother asks for two tickets. So here we are again, with two tickets in our pockets. We don't have much money left, but it doesn't matter. Free France isn't far off.

We soon board. The asthmatic vehicle holds two-dozen people and chugs its way across a countryside, which seems terribly grim compared with the one we have left. There aren't any leaves on the trees, and it is beginning to drizzle.

* * *

The methane showers begin to subside, and Flan tugs on my jumper. He assures me it is safe to click off my protection bubble. "Let's go already!"

"Are you sure this woman's shop will be open?" I ask.

"Trust me. She stays open later than Duffy's."

"And you say she's human?"

"Yup. Pink like you and me, bro."

"What's so different about her merchandise?"

“Ah, man. More questions? You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, tell me.”

Flan laughs. “Boy, are you in for a treat. Rumor has it this woman comes from that planet you love so much.”

“Impossible,” I say. “Earth doesn’t exist anymore. That’s why it’s so rare. It’s a cinder in space.”

“Hmm, maybe that’s the reason you miss it.”

“Not really. Just that the people who lived there were interesting.”

Flan crosses his arms. “I thought you said it was embedded with hope.”

“It is. Well, when I want it to be.”

“Yeah? Well, the word in the shopping center is that this woman is some kind of time gypsy,” Flan explains. “She can construct worlds out of putty—duplicate planets!—puppeteer and imitate ancient races, and become a living, breathing part of them. She can even physically cross time streams!”

“She sounds like your run-of-the-mill historian. The Cat’s Eye is littered with them.”

Flan shakes his head, annoyed. “She’s not just an historian.”

“Impossible,” I argue. “Matter transference and temporal shifting is a mythological process. Nothing comes out of wormholes. As an advanced species we’ve proved as much.”

“All right. See for yourself, Mr. Incredulity. She’s just around that corner.”

“I don’t need some history lesson,” I say. “Nor do I need another collector planet from some chip-operated kiosk. Flan, I’m tired. I’m sorry I acted like a baby. Just give me your Callisto and we can call it a day.”

“No!” he insists. “Not until you meet this woman.”

* * *

We stop just outside the village. On the road a car passes us with German officers. I act scared for a few seconds, but they pay no attention to our rattletrap bus. The sky is clear, the country flat. The houses are huddled around the steeple of the church. The wind meets no obstacle and roars right into our lungs.

My brother hitches up his knapsack. “Let’s get moving!”

Upon further inspection it appears more a hamlet than a village: one or two narrow streets, a school for all ages, a butcher-bakery shop, a shoemaker-dressmaker, a grocery-hardware, a tobacconist’s store-bar, and one or two rundown cafes.

The main street goes uphill a bit. Our wooden heels resound on the

uneven cobblestones. We come to a fountain under a portico. There isn't a soul on the streets. An occasional dog sniffs around our legs. The town smells of cow manure and wood smoke. Two grocery stores face one another; both are closed.

"Damn," my brother growls, "it appears dead."

The silence makes an impression on me, too. After the din of the train, the long cold journey, the plight of our arrival, we feel as if someone has stuffed cotton balls into our ears.

Over our heads the church clock strikes. "That's right," my brother says. "It's noon and everybody's eating."

That's a word he should never have mentioned, for the sandwiches have been gone a long time. The morning coffee seems way in the past, and the country air is sharpening my appetite.

We wander aimlessly around, and find another square. Across from a building that must be the town hall stands a café-restaurant. I look at my brother pleadingly, "Maybe we could get something to eat."

My brother hesitates. "All right," he says. "We don't want to collapse from hunger."

The streets may be empty, not so the café. Much to our surprise, almost a hundred people are jammed around the tables. A half-dozen waitresses run through the aisles, carrying plates, pitchers of water, silverware. An enormous terra-cotta stove heats the place. An antique coffee machine decorates the front counter.

"What do you want, boys?" One of the waitresses, red-faced and disheveled, tries to catch a curl that's falling over her face.

Bewildered, my brother replies, "We'd like food."

She pushes us to a bare wooden table. "We've got bacon and stuffed eggplant. For dessert, there's cheese and fruit. That's all we have. I can give you tomatoes with salt to start."

"No. That'll be fine." I look at the other diners. They aren't country folk; they're probably from Lyon or Avignon. There are children, too.

My brother lowers his head. "We're going to bump into everybody from the camp in this place. Just you watch."

"They're like us," I note. "Jews waiting to cross the border or get back to Paris. But what are they waiting for? Maybe it's harder than we think." Our waitress comes back with our eggplant. I ask, "You're always this crowded?"

She raises her arms. "Believe me, when the Fritzes put that line a kilometer from here, they helped a lot of people in this ramshackle town get rich." I follow her gaze and see the patronne delicately drying a coffee cup

behind the bar. She is wearing lots of flashy jewelry and her hair is dyed a carrot red. For a woman, she is large and there is a distinguishable air about her. “With what she makes here, she could spend her whole life at the beauty parlor.”

“Who is she?” my brother asks.

“Her name is Martha. She pays the bills.”

My brother and I look at each other.

The waitress takes away our empty dishes. Nothing goes down faster than eggplant when you’re hungry. When she returns, I ask, “What about Paris? Is it easy to get back to?”

She shrugs. “You’d have to talk to Martha about that,”—and with that, we realize that the large woman is involved in the resistance effort—“but mostly they get across without trouble...only you’ve got to wait till after midnight because it’s too dangerous during the day. Excuse me.”

She comes back with various cheeses, sets them before us, and goes off again. The second helping of eggplant is stringy and the stuffing nonexistent. The cheeses, too, are flat and dry. The apples are withered, but our waitress makes the mistake of leaving them near our table; they all end up in my knapsack.

Behind us a thickset man motions to us. Seeing that we are petrified, he smiles and pulls his chair toward us. His frightened eyes, his nervous hands, everything about him says that he is trying to get to Paris or some other part of Unoccupied France.

“Are you Jewish?” he asks us.

I shift my apple-filled knapsack to my other hand. “No. I mean, um, well—”

The man’s jaw tightens. “I am. I’ve got my wife and my teenage son hiding in the woods. I’m trying to get across.”

“What happened to you?”

He slaps his trouser leg in a hopeless gesture. “Yesterday I was about forty kilometers from here. I found a man. He charged thirty thousand francs for the three of us and took us out. Ten thousand a head. We walked for a long time, and then he told us to wait while he went to see if the coast was clear. When I insisted on going with him, he punched me and ran away. We spent the whole night in the woods. We’ve been walking since daybreak. That is until a farmer came along and told us about Martha. Are you here to see Martha?”

“Why, yes, we are,” I say.

Little by little the café empties out. We pay our bill, which looks outrageously high. The man puts on his hat and says before he leaves, “You kids

better hurry. Martha is an important woman. She won't be around forever. She comes and goes."

My brother pushes me forward. "Go ahead."

I slowly make my way through the exiting crowd toward the bar. There the woman waits, her eyes rounder than planets. "What can I do for you, son?" she says.

"Stevynski sent me," I say. "He said we should see you."

* * *

"My brother said I should talk to you." I point behind me. "That's him."

"Oh, yes, I know you. You buy here often. Flan, right?"

"Hey, Martha!" My brother smiles.

A brief pause, then: "Hmm, Earth. Let me see what I have in stock."

The shopkeeper goes in back.

I remember first entering and being greeted by those familiar colors. They are like the ones you see advertised on the kiosk screens or vending machine labels. Every childhood has its own particular color, sometimes black and white, even gray. Mine has them all—the whole range from red to blue to green to yellow, with splotches of orange, purple, and pink in-between—one of the benefits of growing up in the Cat's Eye, I suppose.

I can see those jars on the shelves, still recognize some of the moons and clusters, show ordinary customers what galaxies and solar systems they come from. I can even point them out on any one of the space charts that line the store's walls. If you hold any one of them in your hand real close to your ear, you can still hear the voices of the peoples who lived there. You can hear the past saying things. You can't communicate back, but at least you can listen. You can learn a lot from the past.

When Martha returns she places a small orb in my hand. "I'm sorry," she says. "This is the closest thing we've got."

It looks like the Earth. It feels like the Earth. Blue oceans, green continents, tall mountains. But it is not the Earth.

"No thanks," I say, and I hand the sphere back.

"I'm sorry I couldn't better help you. The planet you speak of is very rare."

"That's all right. Really." I leave the shop feeling more depressed than before.

"Del, wait!" Flan comes running after me. He is having a change of heart.

A brother is someone who gives you back your last planet after he's won

it from you. Flan digs me with his elbow. “Here, idiot.” He hands me the Earth. “Don’t ever say I never did anything for you.”

I get back my miniature world. It’s still blue and green with small chips and cracks, just like I left it. Tomorrow I’ll win a pile of planets from him. He’d better not go around thinking he’s the boss just because he’s older.

I mean it.

The Shift

by Darrell Lindsey

Darrell Lindsey is a freelance writer from the oldest town in Texas. His haiku and tanka have won awards in the US, Japan, Croatia, Bulgaria and Canada. He won first prize in the 6th International Klostar Ivanic Haiku Contest in English 2009. Previously, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Dwarf Stars Award.

The Shift

He says a plethora of planets
will soon morph many into grief:

they'll become beautiful women
laughing at desperate men in bars

unruly children spitting
in the faces of babysitters

cranky landlords
handing out eviction notices.

He says we'll want the old alignments back,
war with ourselves about what can be done—

but the clock will be frozen,
and buried deep.

Voyeurs

by Wayne Helge

A native of Chicago's south suburbs, Wayne served in the Coast Guard for a dozen years before wading ashore, and now works as a patent attorney outside of Washington, D.C. His story, Deep Kimchi, can be found in Malpractice: An Anthology of Bedside Terror. This story is about Mrs. Potts and the men in her life.

Monday, 6:37 p.m.

Carl Plumber stepped into Chicago and planted his Reebok high tops, with the soft soles that wouldn't mark up the model train track, in the middle of Grant Park.

He was off the clock at six regardless of how late he stayed, but he preferred to be the last to leave. Each night, before turning out the museum's basement lights, Carl would give the city one last check. He would scan the streets to be sure that the traffic lights had good bulbs in them. He would run each bridge up and down over the Chicago river one last time. And, if Phil Reemer, the HO specialist, had left by then, Carl would stop by the apartment of Mrs. Potts and say goodnight.

Inspecting a locomotive across the room in Seattle, Phil said to Carl, "Don't forget there's a school group coming tomorrow. The ten fifteen run's gonna be delayed. We'll get back on schedule for the eleven fifteen."

Carl said, "That's the first time since I've been here we've had a late train."

Phil ignored Carl, was busy inspecting the HO gauge locomotive—a diesel model marked with a classic Burlington Northern green and black emblem—as he slid it back and forth on the track near the Seattle gear house. The engine ran between their miniature versions of Chicago and Seattle sixteen times a day, and required daily maintenance. Phil let his disgust over the abuse be known to Carl as often as possible, saying "These engines weren't made to run like this." Now dissatisfied with the locomotive's motion on the track, Phil carried it to his workbench on the far side of the cityscape and clicked on his work light.

Phil would be a while still. Carl wondered if Mrs. Potts would wait up for him. Heck, she didn't even have to be asleep. If she'd retired to her

bedroom for the evening, his chance was gone.

The problem was simple. Carl couldn't fit in Mrs. Potts' apartment. He couldn't even fit in the lobby of her building, which, as a high-rise in model Chicago, stood about as tall as Carl's vintage B&O belt buckle. Admittedly, Carl was of above-average height, and could probably straddle Mrs. Potts' building with only the droopy crotch of his engineer's overalls clipping the building's parapet.

But even though Carl and Mrs. Potts lived and worked in different scales, Mrs. Potts had something that kept calling Carl back. On his first day at the museum, he had noticed her standing at the window of her apartment (or was it a condo? Carl always meant to ask her). She spent her days watching the train run from the city out to Seattle and then back, every half hour on the fifteens and forty-fives.

It took him nearly a week to realize that her window opened, and that her poly-something-or-other plastic body, dressed to the nines in its slinky azure A-line dress, high heels, and pearls, was not fixed in place in her apartment.

And so began Carl's routine of saying good morning, good day, and good night to Mrs. Potts, if that was her name. Carl didn't know for sure, and simply referred to her as such based on the potted plants dotting her one-bedroom. On more than one occasion, he had tried to get her to tell him what kind of plants they were, but she wasn't speaking. Hers was a green thumb, if not loose lips.

Carl ran the bridges up and down, up and down, waiting, watching Phil. During the third cycle of the Michigan Avenue bridge, Phil left the workshop and reconnected the locomotive to its payload, a string of 1950's style cross-country sleeper cars. Carl had questioned museum management on whether the BN diesel was the proper driver for that load, but his attention to detail fell on ears that weren't just deaf, but also disinterested.

Mrs. Potts' ears were quite the opposite.

"Okay Carl, I'm out of here," Phil said, slipping an engineer's ball cap onto his bald and polished head.

Carl stood up slowly, cautious not to bump into the buildings adjacent to either hip, and waved to Phil. Phil didn't return the wave as he walked out of the model train room for the evening.

With Phil gone, Carl stepped between the scattering of cars, pedestrians, and street lights leading to Mrs. Potts' building.

There she was. Mrs. Potts stood where Carl had left her that afternoon, near the open window, clearly enjoying the southern view of the city, but back a few steps to keep the falling sun from casting orbs onto her vision.

"How was your day?" Carl said. When Mrs. Potts didn't answer, Carl

continued. “Phil was in a mood today, huh? I can’t believe you didn’t close the window and hide in the kitchen.”

As soon as he said it, he regretted it. Mrs. Potts didn’t have a kitchen, at least not one with a full set of appliances. And she obviously knew it, but Carl recognized that pointing out such a glaring shortcoming was insulting at best.

Her reaction revealed her distaste for the comment. She gave him the silent treatment.

Carl apologized, pleading with her to forgive him, but without success. She had a temper, no doubt, but she would be over it by tomorrow. That’s just how she was, and there was nothing he could do about it, not at this stage of their relationship.

He slid her back into the apartment and closed the window. She would feel better after tending to her plants, he was sure of it. Then he said, “Good night,” stood carefully, and walked out of Chicago.

On the way to the table’s edge, Carl passed through the city’s suburbs, thinking of the other families he had come to know in the few months that he’d been with the museum: the Wilsons, the Sullivans, and the Yees, whose houses all bordered the track leading to Seattle.

Once past the suburbs, Carl began to step down to the stool leading off the table. But then pausing, he turned and retraced his steps. He approached a house on the edge of the suburbs and peered onto a backyard deck. The Yee family had a telescope mounted there for their son to stargaze during museum member nights, when the lights of the room would be turned down, the city lights turned up, and constellations appeared through ceiling tiles.

One such night, Carl sat with the boy, Jimmy Yee, for a good twenty minutes after the room had cleared out. Carl encouraged him to go to bed, pointing out the lateness, especially on a school night, but the boy was reluctant to go inside. Carl learned later that Jimmy’s parents had been fighting inside. Since then, Carl was always quick with a wave and a greeting for Jimmy, who looked like he needed the attention from Carl, from anyone.

But this night, it wasn’t Jimmy out stargazing. Instead, it was Mr. Yee standing on the deck, his eye practically glued to the lens of the telescope. Worse yet, the telescope wasn’t focused on the stars.

It was pointed directly at the apartment of Mrs. Potts.

Tuesday, 8:26 a.m.

Carl entered the train room and went about the train table, clicking on the lights, bringing the dawn to the city. Usually, he illuminated Chicago first, and then after an ample waiting time, illuminated Seattle. No need to rush the west coast into the day.

But this morning, he couldn't get the lights on fast enough. Phil would be there by around 8:45, and Carl wanted a chance to talk to Mrs. Potts. She would be receptive to his apology by now.

Climbing on to the table, Carl walked directly to Mrs. Potts' building. He was prepared to coax her away from her plants, back to the window, where he would sweet-talk her back into his life.

What he found, instead, was quite unexpected.

Mrs. Potts was not in her apartment. The only things in her apartment, aside from a bulky china cabinet left to her from her grandmother, were her plants.

And one was overturned.

Mrs. Potts stood in the hallway outside her apartment. Carl could see her through the open doorway, could see her looking down the hallway. But to what?

He called to her, trying to capture her attention, but she didn't respond, didn't even acknowledge his presence.

Well, fine. If that's how she was going to be.

Carl turned away and stormed out of the city, knocking over two cars and a stray dog in the process. What was her issue? Was she willing to just throw away weeks of their relationship?

At once, Carl stopped. He stood at the border of the suburbs, near the Yee house. He looked down. The telescope was still there, still pointed at Mrs. Potts' building. Mr. Yee, however, was not. Carl leaned over and looked into the picture window of the house. Mrs. Yee and Jimmy sat at the table in the breakfast nook. "Pancakes," Carl said. Mrs. Yee loved to make pancakes, but Jimmy was growing tired of them. It was clear by the boy's face and his slouched shoulders—clear to Carl at least. If Mrs. Yee didn't notice, it was only because her mind was elsewhere this morning. And that led to the next question.

Where was Mr. Yee? Carl scanned the neighborhood, searching for the man. Had he taken the dog for a walk? Headed to the store for groceries? The dozen houses of the neighborhood covered the edges of a t-shaped alcove leading from the main road out of Chicago, but Mr. Yee was nowhere to be found.

Carl expanded his search. Where was the little voyeur? Carl was still looking for Mr. Yee when Phil arrived, wearing what appeared to be the

same pair of overalls from the day before.

Phil said, "Hey Carl. How's it going today?"

"Have you seen Mr. Yee?" Carl said.

"Who?"

"Yee. From this house." Carl toed the Yee house while balancing on the other foot.

Phil shrugged his shoulders and then continued on his business. "He's gotta be around. I don't think he just got up and walked away, do you?"

Carl took his eyes from the table's landscape, opened them wide. He said, "I think he might of."

Phil hung his hat near his engineer's workbench and wiped at his nose, like he was trying to stifle a quiet laugh.

Standing midway between Chicago and the Yee house, Carl scanned the ground with the methodology of a search and rescue helicopter, observing every inch of the model territory in a zig-zag pattern. When he had cleared the suburbs, he shifted his focus north, to the city.

And that's when he spotted Mr. Yee.

He didn't catch Yee red-handed, but he might as well have. Yee stood on the second to the last step of a residential building, one along the city's perimeter, and faced the street, like he had just left the building.

Carl recognized the building immediately, and knew why Yee had been there.

It was Mrs. Potts' building.

Tuesday, 6:19 p.m.

Phil was in the process of cycling the locomotives back to their starting positions, so they'd be ready for the next morning's first run of the day. The Seattle-based freight train backed out of Chicago's train yard, connected to boxcars and gravel ballast-filled hopper cars. Once the locomotive had cleared the first switch and moved onto the westbound track, Phil would flip the switch and run the eastbound Burlington Northern all the way into Union Station, ready for the next morning.

Usually while all this was happening, Carl was making his rounds, trying to outlast Phil.

But not tonight.

Carl hadn't even made it to the Chicago Power utility building when he spotted Mrs. Potts, back at her window. And there was Mr. Yee, hovering over his telescope on the back porch again.

By the time Carl arrived at the bridge operator's station, he spotted Yee's family—his wife and Jimmy—in the family's front driveway next to the car. They were loading up, leaving for good. Two tiny plastic suitcases were stacked on the car's roof rack. Mrs. Yee wasn't crying—not yet at least. She was being strong, putting up a good appearance for her son, but Carl had no doubt that she would break down later that evening, maybe alone, or maybe into her pillow in the hotel room they shared while driving to her parents' house in Beaverton, Oregon.

Carl knew that either Mr. Yee would be making his way to Mrs. Potts tonight or vice-versa. He couldn't stand to see how it played out. With the bridge still running its cycles, Carl hopped off the table, grabbed his jacket from the second hook by the engineer's bench, and walked out for the evening.

Phil called out in a playful manner, "Where you going?" but Carl ignored him.

Wednesday, 7:49 a.m.

It was a mess.

Carl had arrived early, hoping to spring in on Mr. Yee and Mrs. Potts while they were in *flagrante delicto*, in the throes of passion. He might even be able to shame Mr. Yee back to his wife, or shame Mrs. Potts for breaking up what had, until recently, appeared to be a reasonably happy family, happy at least compared to Carl's experience.

But when he entered the train room and clicked on the lights, he found that his plan was out the window, so to speak.

Up on the train table, Carl spotted the police cars first. A whole squad of them, parked carelessly up on the sidewalk below Mrs. Potts' window. The steps leading to the building were packed with armed officers preparing to ascend.

And floors above the cars and the storming troopers with their guns drawn, Mrs. Potts' window extended outward into the morning. Mr. Yee leaned half-out the window, looking guilty.

Inside, the apartment was covered with potted plants knocked askew. Fake potting soil dirtied the floor. Mrs. Potts' china cabinet had been moved in front of her door. Carl suspected that Mr. Yee had done that. Mrs. Potts didn't have the strength.

And besides, Mrs. Potts was nowhere in the room.

"What've you done with her?" he said to Yee.

Then Carl noticed the window, and how open it was. Mrs. Potts sometimes opened the window to let the fresh air in, but never that far. The window almost made a ninety degree angle to the building it was open so wide. Something had happened.

And Yee's gaze was fixed downward, out the window.

Carl tracked it to the pavement, and for the first time noticed the blanket on the pavement.

It rippled and bulged as if covering something, something that had fallen. Something from Mrs. Potts' window.

Carl looked back up to Mr. Yee and said, "How could you do it?" He nearly bent over and lifted the blanket, to see the body (and identify it, if the cops needed him to), but couldn't bear it. He wanted to remember Mrs. Potts in her apartment, with the window open, listening to the business of the city and the trains making their way across country. Not as landscape.

Again, Carl looked to the cops standing on the steps below. They would be upstairs in moments and inside the apartment shortly after that, as soon as they could break through the china cabinet. Carl could help them. He could move the cabinet for them.

Once in custody, Yee would be taken downtown. Then it would be months, maybe years of suffering in confinement before trial. His only other choice was to jump, and he didn't deserve to get away that easily.

Carl pulled a screwdriver from his pocket and slide it in through the window toward the china cabinet. With a flip of his wrist the doorway would be clear.

Then Mr. Yee would get his.

Mr. Yee, who couldn't take his eyes off the body of Mrs. Potts below, would get his.

Carl stopped the screwdriver's motion and looked at Mr. Yee. His high cheekbones and neatly combed hair reminded Carl of someone he knew. Of Jimmy.

"Your boy," Carl said. "He needs a father."

Yee didn't respond, but Carl knew that Jimmy had to be on Yee's mind.

Carl checked the cops on the street below. They seemed to be in the same place, but Carl was sure that they would be upstairs any second. Time was short.

This was going to be close, and the risk to Carl was great, but it would be worth it if it meant there still was a chance for Jimmy. "Follow my lead," he said to Yee. Then he picked the little man up and carried him uptown to Union Station.

When they arrived, Carl put Yee down on the sidewalk outside. "The

first train runs at nine fifteen. Just lay low until then. Use the ride to sort out your thoughts. When you get to Seattle, find your family. Apologize to your wife, even if it wasn't your fault. Put this all behind you."

Yee didn't respond. Carl wished that Yee had taken notes, had written down Carl's instructions. It was a shame what had happened to Mrs. Potts, but no need to ruin Jimmy's life too.

Before leaving Yee, Carl said, "No need to thank me. Just make this right. For Jimmy." And he knew that Yee would.

* * *

Carl kept an eye on the cops afterwards, and saw them milling about the street, keeping their distance from Mrs. Potts under her blanket. Had they been on the ball, they would have established a tight perimeter around the city, especially the train station, and allowed no one out. But for some reason, they didn't.

Senior citizens and school children made their way into the train room at a few minutes after nine, and right at 9:15 a.m., Phil sounded the whistle, turned the control wheel up to cruising speed, and sent the Burlington Northern on its way from Union Station to Seattle.

Carl ignored a question from an inquisitive genealogist with an open spiral notebook and scanned the window seats of the Pullman cars as the train passed by. He didn't see Yee, but Yee could've been in the bathroom. No doubt, Yee was on his way.