

**Special Double Issue**

# **OG's Speculative Fiction**

**Issue #6**



**Stories by Len Bains  
Bruce Golden  
Edward Morris  
Daniel Ausema**

**Poetry by John Grey  
Timalyne Frazier**



# OG's Speculative Fiction

## Issue #6

### May

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Seth Crossman *editor*

Tony Diana *cover art*

## Tony Diana's Cover Art: *Discovery At Tumotunen*

Tony Diana is a digital artist and dreamer of demons, witches, and fairies. When he was in school he would doodle away when he probably should have been listening to the teacher. He escaped to other worlds that did not exist. As an adult he channels that imagination into concepts he enjoys and delights in making, and that allows him to explore the fantastic. His works have appeared in numerous venues including movies and television.

We are pleased to have *Discovery At Tumotunen* on the cover of our special double issue.



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Publisher, Seth Crossman

Editor, Seth Crossman

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# Editor's Letter

**OG's** Speculative Fiction is winding down its first year in print. With over a thousand readers to the site a month, we have far exceeded our own expectations. This success has also brought a desire to do more for our readers. We wanted to give something back, at the same time that we excited them about what is to come.

For that reason, we are delivering a double issue packed with good reading. Inside are four tales: a fantasy, medieval satire, historical speculation, and pure science fiction -- four tales that we feel represent the wide assortment of tastes and speculation that we feel is so important to the genre. Also included is a great interview with Diane Turnshek, SFWA's Eastern Regional Director, and two poems by rising stars.

We are already looking toward the future of our magazine, a future that we think will be bright and adventurous and rewarding. Our first issue of the new year will be full of good poetry in addition to the stories. And we have a few surprises we hope to add into the mix during the year.

We hope you enjoy the issue.



# Climb

By Len Bains

*Len Bains is, in no particular order, a rocket scientist, a brewer of beer, a father of four, a writer, and a caregiver of his severely disabled daughter. In 2006 Len was published in Fantasy Magazine, Fictitious Force Magazine, Expresso Fiction, and 5th Story Review.*

## "Name's Braid."

The goat seemed unimpressed. Its yellow eyeball held him for a moment before returning to the tricky business of finding a path among the rocks. Braid watched as the goat sprang, and with a brief clatter of hooves, gained a higher ledge. It bent to nibble the lone tuft of scree-grass it had been hunting when Braid's arrival disturbed it.

"Braid the Climber." Braid spoke to the goat's back now. He was glad not to be the subject of its scrutiny any more. He'd always felt there was something alien about square-pupils, as if goats didn't truly belong among men, and dogs, and horses.

"...the Climber." Blood welled up over his lips, and trickled down his neck, neither hot nor cold. He turned his head to see where he had fallen from. Bone grated on bone, but without pain. Two boulders cradled him. His fall had molded him to their shape, as if he'd been broken on a wheel. He could see the point, some seventy feet up, an overhang slick with ice. The place where his skill had betrayed him in a careless moment.

*Not a bad place to die. Held in the arms of the mountains.*

Braid could see no sky, just the thrust of the mountainside rearing up and becoming lost in cloud.

*And somewhere hidden high above, a lonely peak.*

He remembered his first peak. The time when he first came to the Shrouded Mountains. He saw himself as he'd been then, young, letting his anger burn so fierce that it could almost mask his loss.

Snow began to fall from the cloud-base, tiny flakes so perfect Braid imagined they might chime as they struck the rocks. The snow brought visions, scenes of lost days that stole his sight, and led him back along the years.

\* \* \*

"I do not accept it!" Braid dashed the blood-cup from the shaman's hands. For a moment the splash of crimson on the dirt floor kept his gaze.

"You have a daughter." If the old man took offence, his voice held none of it.

"I had a wife and a son." Braid's hands twisted, one against the other. Braid's skin tingled, on his back, his forearms. It crawled, as though he were too small a vessel for his outrage.

"There are no answers to your questions." The walls of the tent shook as the wind picked up outside. The shaman bent to retrieve his seeing cup.

The wind came again, and prayer-flags on the guy-ropes cracked and beat. Braid need only to close his eyes and he would see Kai, racing to fly his kite with the other boys. Kai had always loved the season of winds.

"You need sleep," the shaman said. "Then you need to go home."

"No." Braid saw too much when he slept. "I will know why they died. I will know where to seek revenge. And I will know how to undo what has been done."

"There are no-"

"There are answers." Braid caught the shaman by the neck as he straightened. "You speak to gods and spirits, but they don't tell you all they know." Anger tightened his grip and he heard the wheeze in the old man's throat. Braid drew the shaman to him, eye to eye. He tilted his head, seeking his answers in the other's face. "Who can tell me?"

A cramping pain entered Braid's hand, spreading from the fingertips, lancing up past each knuckle. Against his will, his grip opened wide. The shaman stepped back and rubbed his neck. "There is an oracle atop the highest peak in the Shrouded Mountains. It is said sometimes even the gods seek council there. The oracle asks no price, refuses no answers save those about itself."

Braid felt the shame rising in him, and beat it down with more anger. "If you're lying, I will return." He turned and fled into the night, running to escape the thing his grief had made of him.

\* \* \*

Braid watched the goat until its hunt took it from sight behind a shoulder of shattered rock. He lay back and studied the whiteness of the cloud. Sometimes he saw Kai's face written in swirls of mist, sometimes Anna's, wearing the smile from the day they wed.

He spat a clot of blood, coughed, and tried to move his arms. The right arm lifted a few inches, and fell back.

"What are you hiding, I wonder?" he asked the cloud. Another cough, no blood this time. "I'm the climber, I have to know."

A smile found its way to his lips. He recalled the moment when he first understood the joke the shaman played on him.

\* \* \*

"I'm looking for the oracle." Braid directed his words at a swarthy man, wrapped with enough goatskin to clothe a herd. Of the dozen men to have emerged from the village, this one at least held a glimmer of intelligence beneath his solid brow.

"Oracle?" The man shaped his lips around the word as if it were unfamiliar.

"Yes." Braid glanced back to the doorways where the womenfolk looked out. He wondered what kind of life these people could scratch from the rocks, nestled so high, in the very throat of the gorge. He wondered what lay in the darkness of their homes, half cave, half cottage, hewn into the cliffs.

"Oracle?" the man said.

Braid had learned patience on his journey to the Shrouded Mountains. When he first saw them, across the broadness of the Axan Velt, he started to run. By the time his strength failed him, the mountains looked neither closer nor more distant. For three weeks his march ate the distance, and each morning the mountains looked the same, rising from the plains without the preamble of foothills, peaks lost in a perpetual mist that never once parted.

"Yes," Braid said. "In the mountains."

"I don't know any oracle." The man stank as bad as if all the goats whose skin he wore still lived within his house. "All you'll find above the snow-line are cloud giants."

"It's on the tallest peak," Braid said. "Just tell me how to get there and I'll be on my way." He reached into the pouch at his hip. "I have silver for provisions."

The village men exchanged glances. The swarthy man stepped through them and stood beside Braid, pointing up toward the mountains, a serried array reaching into the mists like teeth on a hound's jaw.

"How could a man know which is tallest?" he asked.

\* \* \*

A laugh ripped from Braid. He felt his first stab of pain at that, the first since he'd fallen. The first in a long time. He rolled from between the rocks, gripping the mountainside to steady himself. The ledges held precious little room for goat-hooves, let alone a man. Was he still a man? Braid watched the pale flesh of his legs knit slowly, sealing the wounds he had taken. He watched his broken limbs straighten.

With the setting of the sun, the mists rolled down, a chill blanket unfolding across razored slopes, and Braid drew strength from them. He fed the cold fire at his core, and once more began to climb. Pale fingers hooked into cracks, naked toes seeking purchase on stone, eyes looking upward. Always up.

Braid climbed without thinking, from memory, without tiring, seeing only the blind whiteness of the mist. He carried no hope now. He had no recollection of spending the last of it, but hope had left him, only habit in its place.

"I had hope once." Braid spoke to the stone, an inch from his lips. He kept moving. Always up.

And with eyes that saw nothing but enfolding cloud, he watched his first ascent so many years before.

\* \* \*

"Will this never end?"

Braid clung to the mountainside, shivering in the fleeces he'd bought in the nameless gorge village. He'd lost all feeling in his toes long ago. For all he knew, they'd turned black and were rolling at the ends of his boots like so many marbles. His fingers hardly obeyed him, numb within supple goatskin gloves. His sword, passed from father to son for seven generations, lay a thousand feet below him, too heavy to bear. The knife at his hip was all that stood between him and whatever horrors the Shrouded Mountains might hide, its edge already dull from the work of climbing.

The wind howled and almost took Braid from the ledge. For a moment, in the voice of the gale, he heard Anna call. He closed his eyes against the sting of ice crystals, and saw her, a horror of weeping sores, dying on their bed.

Braid found new strength, and climbed beyond it. The mountain tore at him, each stumble offering his flesh to teeth of ice and rock. He climbed in cloud so thick he could see no further than his hand. And still he climbed, until it seemed that climbing was all of him. Memory shrank, the wind became a whisper, even Anna and Kai dwindled to a distant flame. Hand, foot, heave, push. Up.



He saw the peak only when he ran out of anything to climb. For the longest time he clung to the stone, too stupid with exhaustion to understand what he saw.

"Not . . . this one then."

He began his descent, resolved to climb the next mountain, certain he wouldn't leave this one alive.

Braid almost missed the cave-mouth. Not because it was small, it stood taller and wider than cathedral doors, but because the cloud concealed it. He staggered in, and the wind died to a moan, making slow swirls in the fog.

"Hello?" The mists ate his words.

He followed the walls, hands on the stone.

"Hello?"

He moved on. And found himself almost in the arms of the giant. It sat on the rock, knees drawn close to its face, looming as high again as Braid. Naked, whiter than alabaster, lean but promising strength. Braid raised his eyes toward the giant's face, his breath held tight.

The eyes that met his gaze were the blue of a summer sky, without pupil or iris.

Braid had no energy left for fear. "And will I find a giant on every other peak in this gods-forsaken place?"

"There are other mountains?" The cloud giant raised its brows.

Braid slumped against the cave wall. A sob convulsed him before he strangled it. The irony seemed too bitter, to climb for wisdom and find a fool.

His weakness pulled him to the floor. Hunger twisted in his stomach, sharp and hot. "What do you eat here?" There were no bones on what little of the ground he could see.

The giant spread its hands, each ivory finger as long as Braid's arm from elbow to wrist. In a complex motion the giant wove the cloud like a widow pulling thread from a wool-ball. He pursed his lips and drew the cloud stuff in.

"Mountains come, mountains go. The skies are eternal." His voice was the wind over stone. "Go home now, son of man."

\* \* \*

Braid's first descent had been harder than the climb, and a month was scarcely enough to restore his strength. The second climb came harder than the first descent. And the peak held no oracle.

Braid found a cave not far from the summit. He crawled in, fingers bitten black by the frost. He lay as dead, hidden from the wind, lost in cloud. In a dream of warmth, Anna came to him, as she was before the plague's kiss.

"Come to me," she said. Arms wide. The heat of her drew him.

"I can bring you back." He turned from her, stumbling in imagined grass. The day grew dark, icy, the ground hard, and he woke, lips against the cave floor.

He heaved himself, like a broken thing, a dog with its spine shattered beneath a cartwheel. A white hand took him from the ground. Cold strength ran from the fingers that wrapped him, and Braid lifted his head.

"You're not the oracle."

The giant set him on a shelf of polished stone, beside a hollowed basin where the mist distilled into a pool.

"You spoke to another. Anna," the giant said. "She is not here."

"I lost her." Braid clutched himself, shivering. "I'll bring her back though. Whatever the price."

"Clouds come, clouds go, never the same one twice." The giant shrugged. "Only the sky is forever." He took Braid's arm and pushed the hand wrist-deep into the pool. Braid had no strength to resist. The water felt freezing. It took his breath. His ruined fingers had been numb to ice and snow, yet now he shouted at the chill of the pool. He jerked to free his hand, and the giant let him. His flesh looked pale, laced with dark veins, the blackness of frostbite washed away. He moved the fingers, set them to his face and felt the stubble there.

"How?"

He thrust his other hand into the pool, and drew it clear, pale but whole.

"It's the blood of the sky," the giant said.

Braid set his two hands into the water, gritting his teeth against the shock of cold. He lifted them, cupped and brimming.

"It is not for men to drink," the giant said. The blue of his eyes was the sky Braid saw when Anna came to his dream.

Braid raised his hands to his mouth.

"It is not for men." The giant watched him, as if powerless to interfere.

Braid drank deep.

He left the cave filled with a cold fire, an ancient strength locked within his bones. The wind felt like a caress, the rocks warm beneath his fingers.

Before Braid reached the valley his speed twice caught him on an edge of stone, tearing open his jerkin on the arm and side. The flesh below looked as pale as a fish belly, and the cuts closed before his eyes.

\* \* \*

Braid climbed at a steady pace. Free of the past for a moment. For the longest time his climbing had kept him in the now, his memories walled away, behind exhaustion, behind purpose, behind the certainty of death should he slip. Though the past might swell around him like a rising tide, he would climb beyond it.

But the years seemed to carry him back rather than forward. His hands had somehow learned the mountains. His ghosts kept pace at his shoulder, and the wind whispered truths he didn't want to hear.

The injuries from his fall were in memory now, a slight soreness in the back, an ache in the neck. He'd thought the drop would kill him.

*Maybe I can't die.*

Braid could sense the peak now. Over the years he'd grown to know them. To a degree. He still rang with the shock of reaching for that handhold and finding only ice. It had felt like a betrayal, a hurt to be remembered long after the pain of the fall.

*If you've seen one mountain you haven't seen them all, not even one mist-shrouded mountain.*

The same didn't hold true for the cloud giants. Braid had met . . . he didn't know how many . . . hundreds? He'd spent weeks in the company of giants, months maybe, and never once learned to tell one from another. Even their names sounded the same, just wind noise over rock.

The giants liked to dwell nowhere but in caves below the very top of the mountain. Braid had wondered if they hewed them into the rock themselves – a giant told him that the wind had carved the chambers for him.

The gale blew harder, laced with ice. Braid picked up his speed. He knew one thing about the giants: it was best not to visit them in a storm. Braid felt at his hip for the knife he once carried. He regretted its loss, but he could have lost more than a trusty blade. He recalled the weather had been similar then, snow and a skittish wind. He'd looked for the oracle, in habit rather than hope, and called in at the local giant's cave. Braid visited each mountain's giant. Not for wisdom -- they were simple creatures -- but for company. He spent little time in the mountain villages now. The men there seemed afraid of him, and he never saw the same face from one visit to the next. They called him 'the old man of the mountain' when they didn't think he heard them. Braid found that strange, for his reflection looked no

older to him, only tired and drawn. And pale of course, white as fog and snow.

A rumble of thunder sounded in the distance, and Braid thought of his knife again. He'd been with a giant when he lost it. Listening to talk of mysteries revealed in the mist. A sudden squall had hit the mountainside, with the force of a battering ram. Lightning had lit the cloud, and his quiet host had struck out with no warning, as if the giant and the storm were one. The blow threw Braid against the wall, his knife had flown loose, and he'd scrambled clear, daring the descent in the jaws of the gale rather than spend another moment with the raging giant.

Braid reached for the knife again. His fingers closed on empty space. Another betrayal, as keen as the missing handhold. He climbed harder, faster, outpacing memory, escaping recollections of older, deeper losses.

Braid ran out of mountain to climb. He shook away thoughts of giants and storms, and scanned the bleak rock. He lowered his head.

*There's no oracle, no hope, nothing but the wind. Go home old man of the mountain.*

\* \* \*

"Hello!"

Braid found his way to the giant's cave, blind in the shroud of the mountains. He'd developed a feeling for finding cloud giants too it seemed.

The giant sat close by the far wall of its cavern, as unsurprised to see him as the very first one he'd met.

"I'll never find her, will I?" Braid slumped down before the giant's feet.

"Only the sky is forever," the giant said. Giants said a lot of this kind of thing in Braid's experience.

"I'm changed. I'm not me anymore." Braid held a white hand before his face and turned it slowly. "If I brought them back, I wouldn't be Kai's father any more. Anna's husband."

"Clouds come, clouds go. You can't remake them."

Braid got to his feet, a memory of his old anger echoing through him. He stepped forward until he stood directly before the seated giant. "Where is the oracle? I've climbed too long, too hard. I need to know."

The giant held him with summer eyes.

"I've nothing left, nothing but this hunt." Braid spread his hands and looked down at himself. Rags bound him, a bare-foot beggar in the mountains. "I've nothing."

The giant held out a white fist. One by one its fingers unclasped, and on its palm lay a knife.

"You have something," it said.

Braid stared, not understanding what he saw. He reached out and took the knife.

"My knife?"

"Yes."

"Who . . . how did you get it?" Braid felt the outlines of the answer already.

"You brought it here," the giant said.

"I . . . I can't have climbed the same mountain twice. I can't"

"The wind has no memory," the giant said.

"I've never climbed this mountain."

"You've never climbed anything else."

Braid felt his certainty slip away. He forced himself to meet the giant's gaze. "Which is the tallest mountain."

"They're all the same height."

"You're the oracle," Braid said.

"The oracle doesn't answer questions about itself."

"But you'd answer any other question I have?"

"Yes," said the giant in a voice of wind over stone.

Braid felt his lips move, writhing, trying to frame the words. He thought of his boy, dust now, flying over distant plains, borne on kite-winds. He thought of Anna, softness and strength, passed into eternity, and of Serah, cast in her mother's form, lost to him behind the wasted years.

Braid returned his knife to its scabbard. "You've already told me what I need to know, haven't you?"

"Yes."

And Braid the Climber left the mountains.



# En Route to the Stars

By John Grey

*John Grey is an Australian born poet, playwright, and musician. His latest book is "What Else is There," from Main Street Rag. His writing has recently appeared in Avocet, Aethlon, and The Rockford Review.*

## En Route to the Stars

He painted his bedroom ceiling  
the color of the night sky.  
No cloud cover for him,  
Ursa Major always prowling  
between Draco, Camelopardalis  
and Cygnus, the nervous swan.  
And if a spider were to crawl  
in search of prey, it would  
need negotiate the wilds of Centaurus,  
the shimmer of Hydrus.

Day could not diminish  
that proxy heart,  
those held breaths of his thoughts,  
a dazzling clutch of constellations  
just an outstretched hand away.

Let a woman compete with you,  
he'd say to Sextans.  
Who could move me  
more than Pegasus,  
be man's best friend  
with more twinkling faith  
than Canis Minor.

He'd lie in bed for days,  
eyes negotiating wondrous flight-paths.  
Hunger was meaningless  
to a sated mind.  
The more he faded,

the more he became another star  
seeking out its place  
in all that beckoned him.  
Sure, they found his bones  
in the suburbs,  
but just like any stage discarded.



# In Case of Dragon...

By Bruce Golden

*Bruce Golden has written humor and witty satire for many years, and was the producer/creator of Radio Free Comedy. His most recent fiction sales have been to Lenox Avenue, Shadowed Realms, and, of course, our own magazine. This story again demonstrates his mastery of satire.*

The foot soldiers gathered round the notice board and stared at the announcement nailed in place by the sheriff's lackey. Of course, most of them couldn't read, so they waited for old Garon to limp forward and read it to them.

"What to do in the event of a dragon attack," he began, reading the bold words at the top of the tattered scroll.

This immediately set the men to mumbling. As he continued to read, the grumbling was spiced with assorted curses and invocations.

When he was finished, opinions were neither tardy nor timid. The commentary ranged from indignant sarcasm to outright acrimony. Popular opinion was summed by one bold fellow.

"This plan be a crock of shit. It reeks to high heaven. The king's gone round the bend."

The pronouncement was greeted by a vociferous bellow of assent. The disgruntled assertions continued until Sir Sycophant, the brown-nose knight, rode up on his horse. The congregation quickly dispersed, leaving old Garon standing there.

"Tell me, Master Garon," queried the knight, "what do the men think of the plan?"

Garon, doing what he could to gentrify the utterances of the vox populi, replied, "Well, Sir Sycophant, I'm afraid the men believe the plan to be a trog of dung so foul-smelling it will offend the angels above. They hold that the king may be touched."

This troubled Sir Sycophant, so he went directly to the sheriff and told him, "The men believe the emergency dragon plan to be a full chamber pot of such powerful odor, heaven itself will take notice. They contend the king may be ill."

Such insubordination rankled the sheriff, but when the time came for his daily report to the Earl of Officialdom he stated simply, "The troops have been informed of the dragon plan, and they collectively agree it is a vessel of royal fertilizer with a heavenly scent."



The earl thought the metaphor a bit odd, but was too busy to conduct an impromptu session in semantics with the sheriff, who had a penchant for malaprops. Later, when he ran into Duke Doolittle in the castle foyer, the duke asked, “Has the garrison been informed of the contingencies in case of dragon attack?”

“Yes, your Lordship,” responded the earl. “Everyone agrees the plan is heaven-sent, and will enrich our defenses. There is growing support for the king.”

“Good, good.”

That evening, Duke Doolittle informed King Highness that a new plan concerning possible dragon attacks had been instituted. He laid the plan before the king, who scanned the document indifferently.

“Sire, the feeling among your men and officers is without dissent. They agree the plan is a potent one that will promote heightened security for the castle and your entire domain. There is strong sentiment that the plan is an inspiration borne of your majesty’s wisdom and sanctioned by God.”

The king read with renewed interest and saw that the plan was good. Henceforth the plan became policy throughout the land.



## A Few Words With Diane Turnshek

Diane Turnshek is an astronomer, a mother of four, an adjunct professor at Seton Hill, a publisher, a writer, and the Eastern Regional Director of the SWFA. She ran the Nebula Awards weekend in New York this May, founded Alpha, the SF/F/H Workshop for Young Writers, which has had such distinguished guests as Timothy Zahn, Bruce Holland Rogers, Harry Turtledove, and Tor editor James Frenkel. Besides running her own publishing company, PARSEC Ink, she has also published stories in Analog and is a repeat Sapphire Award finalist. We had lots of questions for her and feel privileged that she was kind of enough to answer them.

*How and when did your desire to be an astronomer begin? Did you have glow in the dark constellations on your ceiling as a child?*

I had them on my dorm ceiling in college (Villanova)--how did you guess? My interest in astronomy took hold very early. I remember being seven and loving the way people's eyes bugged out when I said I wanted to be a theoretical nuclear astrophysicist. The desire stemmed from wanting to know where I was--not just the street I lived on, but my place in the Universe. One of my favorite children's astronomy books is "My Place in Space" by Robin and Sally Hirst and Roland Harvey.

*What does it mean to be an "astronomer?" What is a typical day on the job like?*

When I was working as full time researcher, I'd spend 80 plus hours a week, regularly traveling to remote mountaintops to observe a planned program, then back home to reduce the data, write papers and present them at meetings. After my children were born, that research phase ended. Now, I teach basic astronomy at St. Vincent College and occasionally at the University of Pittsburgh.

*Have you discovered anything unique in space, or been able to name a new star or planet?*

Actually, yes, but, understand, this is a rare thing. Most advances in the field are made through painstaking detail work in collaboration with many other researchers. In 1981, my husband and I were lucky enough to discover the second-ever instance of a gravitationally-lensed quasar. It was heralded as

a confirmation of Einstein's law of general relativity and got a lot of press. I was up all day before traveling to the observatory on Kitt Peak in AZ where we observed the object, then, I reduced the data, wrote the paper, submitted it and talked to the press. That marked three days without sleep, the longest I've ever stayed awake. I do *not* recommend it. Near the end I was seeing flashes of light that weren't there. Our discovery story, with an awful, grainy photo, made the cover of Science News and the research paper was published in Nature as "The Triple QSO PG1115+08 - Another Probable Gravitational Lens".

*Where and what do you teach?*

Besides the class and lab courses in astronomy, I have three graduate students in the Master's Degree Program in Writing Popular Fiction at Seton Hill University.

*You also have a passion for teaching youngsters the craft of writing. Can you tell us a little bit about this?*

For five years, I ran a discussion forum for teen science fiction and fantasy writers that originated at the writing resource site Inkspot (created by filker Debbie Ridpath Ohi). Hundreds of teen writers from all over the world posted there, many of whom I am still in touch with through livejournal. Whenever they wanted to meet each other in real life, I had to talk them out of it—too dangerous! Until I had the brilliant idea to start a teen writing workshop at the University of Pittsburgh branch campus near my house. My friends tried to talk me out of it. All that responsibility! All that money! But, in the end, I talked them all into helping and now we host Alpha, the SF/F/H Workshop for Young Writers, a ten-day residency workshop for ages 14 to 19.

*How many young writers attend and how good is their writing? Do you ever wish you could steal some of their ideas? Just joking!*

Every year we accept 20 students. The farthest one has attended from New Zealand, so we can truly claim to be a world-spanning workshop. The writing is professional level or close to it. Students from Alpha have sold stories to prominent publications including Realms of Fantasy, Writers of the Future, Boys' Life, Fantasy Magazine, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Fantastic Stories, Corpse Blossoms, Aberrant Dreams, and Fantastical Visions. I'm constantly put to shame when we do writing exercises and they

read their stories aloud. I mumble excuses and stick my pages under my chair.

*Can you give us one of your favorite exercises that you use to stimulate the creative process in your young students?*

The Alpha students are usually brimming with ideas, so we focus on weeding them instead of sprouting them from scratch. We have writing studios of five students and a mentor to teach the process of shaping the stories from the initial idea. Add two ideas together. Ask questions. “What does your protagonist love?” (Take it away.) “What does he or she fear?” (Bring it on.) Who is hurt most by a situation? (Use their POV.)

I personally don’t like writing exercises, but I do use them sometimes. One of the authors I wanted had trouble coming up with a story idea for the first issue of *Triangulation*. I had her get a dictionary and pick three random words. Airplane, plumber, downsizing. The story was a tribute to her skill as a writer—I loved it and bought it for the anthology. A plumber is called to the house of a witch. While working under the sink, he angles his mirror to look up her skirt. He hears a sound like an airplane, then finds himself back in his van, disoriented. She had downsized him and he could hardly reach the pedals.

*Best piece of advice for young writers?*

Don’t make it more complicated than it is. Follow the rules at first. Write your story, making sure the genre elements are a critical part. Workshop it (for free) using your teachers, friends who read or an Internet critiquing group like [Critters.org](http://critters.org). Remember that money flows towards the writer. Look at [ralan.com](http://ralan.com) and the response time listings at [The Black Hole](http://TheBlackHole.com) to decide where to send it. (<http://brain-of-pooch.tech-soft.com/critters/blackholes/>) Make sure the manuscript format is perfect and you’ve followed submissions directions precisely. Send it out and write something else.

*Have you met any interesting or famous people in the field through your workshops?*

Some of our previous guests include Timothy Zahn, Theodora Goss, Harry Turtledove, William Tenn, Lawrence C. Connolly, Timons Esaias, Bruce

Holland Rogers, James Frenkel, Michael Kandel, Tobias Buckell, Mike Arnzen, Leslie What, David Barr Kirtley, Wen Spencer, Eric Davin, and Tamora Pierce.

*Who did you find to be the most enlightening or inspiring?*

Bruce Holland Rogers walked in the graveyard at midnight with the students. Picture that? Singing the Buffy musical to the dark. That's hard to top. Most of the students come to see Tammy, but we show them that—oh, my—there are actually other writers out there! Classy lady Dora Goss and unstoppable Tobias Buckell taught them the most—which is saying something since our guests only have two days to give over all the wisdom garnered in a lifetime.

*On your first attempt, you had a professional short story sale. What was this story and what was it about?*

I've heard people say it takes a million words before you can write something worthwhile. I flunked an English class in high school, never paid attention to composition, never took a creative writing class in college. Hey, I was planning to be a scientist, but that's a hard road with four babies. I thought writing would be easy, so I set out to learn how. It took five years. I created a novelette that I thought was pretty good, but what did I know? I'd never written a story before. So, I started a writing group to critique it. Write or Die has been meeting at a public library for ten years now, every other Tuesday night. The members critiqued my manuscript; I revised it and sent it to Analog Magazine where it was printed in December of 1999. "Dancing in the Light" was an upbeat romance about an astral projector who saved the world and got the girl, while showcasing my astronomical background.

*Did you have any success after this?*

I thought the first sale was a fluke, but Analog editor Stanley Schmidt bought the next story I sent him, too. I use this quick start to motivate Alpha students and my Seton Hill graduate students—demonstrating to them that their very first efforts could sell to top markets. I'm ever so grateful to Stan for buying these first stories of mine.

*Why did you suddenly stop writing? Or was it only submitting?*

I keep pretending to myself that I'm still writing at the same level, but it's not true. I've ended up taking on more administrative responsibilities and the time for my own writing has melted away. Also, I started a fantasy erotica group novel. Our protagonist is a gorgeous hunk named Seth (I kid you not!) We have over half the novel done and the rest painstakingly plotted out. I promised the members of the group that I'd work on nothing else until it was done, so all my other writing effort dropped to zero. I'm hoping *Hidden Designs* will get published someday and make up for the loss to my short fiction. I learned that I'm not yet a novelist—while I'm this busy, it's easiest to get flash pieces done.

*Any hope that we might see more in the near future of your own writing?*

A resourceful Martian teen gets the job and the girl, while saving his brothers and the underground city from invaders.

How's that for a one-sentence, twenty-word blurb for my young adult science fiction novel? Now, all I have to do is finish the second half.

*If you could only pick one, would it be writing or teaching? Why?*

Writing. Teaching is hard work, but it pays better. According to Tobias Buckell's recent survey, a first novel in this field nets the author \$5000.00 on average. How many books would a new writer have to sell in a year to pay the bills? Short fiction pays even less per word (and the rate of pay for stories hasn't changed appreciably in decades).

*What do your four boys think of mom? Did they inherit the creative gene?*

They're proud of me. I don't talk much about my sons in public forums, mainly because they are smart, active and extremely creative. Do you have any idea how much trouble boys with those qualities can get into?

*If being an astronomer and a professor, a mother of four, and a tutor of future writers weren't enough, have you pursued any other creative or editorial endeavors?*

Whenever I see something that needs to be done, I figure out a way to do it. My nickname around town is "blue sky", because many of my ideas seem impossible. I've helped run conventions (like MilPhil, the 2001 WorldCon),

started an annual, Pittsburgh-based anthology and the small press PARSEC Ink, I created a 200-person email list for the announcement of events of possible interest to science fiction readers in Western Pennsylvania, and I'm roadie for my son's band, Bristol Lane. In August, I started a street team for Pyr Books—a group of ten young readers who get ARCs and write up reviews. I've met them all at various conventions—and, Lou Anders? Wow—he's a dynamite, dynamic editor.

*Which was the most enjoyable?*

Music and family trumps all.

*Members of the SFWA have recognized your contributions and expertise and elected you Eastern Regional Director. How did this make you feel?*

Awww . . . thanks, Seth, but the truth is that no one else wanted the job. And again, the SFWA officer and regional director positions up for a vote this year are filled with unopposed candidates. It's a rough job with no pay, long hours, serious negative feedback and no obvious bennies. But, I'm learning so much, I find it fascinating. Where else are you forced to learn the intricacies of German copyright one day and Hollywood contracts the next? The SFWA Board of Directors has frequent negotiations with the big guys (AOL, Google, Amazon), agents, high-powered figures in the publishing industry, cover artists, and new media gurus. Where else could I be involved with so much intrigue?

*As an insider, what secrets can you share?*

In truth, that's been my biggest nightmare. I find it hard to not share what I know with others and, yet, here, serious repercussions could ensue for such a security breach. Some agreements are reached through SFWA Griefcom on the promise of non-disclosure. I've surprised myself with how closed-mouthed I can be.

*You are running the Nebula Awards Weekend in New York City this May. Is this an easy task? How many people are you expecting? Will you go into the event as more of a fan or as an administrator?*

Yeah! I'm so glad you brought that up. It's going to be an amazing weekend, but it is not a con. (<http://sfwa.org/awards/2007>)

Although it's open to the public, it's SFWA's annual meeting and considered professional development. I've had a lot of experience running things, but my methods are more suited to teaching. My committee, at 35 people, is huge, many more than are necessary to run a small convention (approximately 350 people). It boasts a lot of students of the genre, high school, college and graduate students. I'll be working, but dressed to kill and surrounded by a committee of fun people. You should come!

*What kind of events have you lined up for the weekend? Besides the ceremony and the banquet, which promises to be the most exciting?*

A single track of programming starts Friday morning early. A seventy-five person book signing will take place Friday night, then a ghost tour. We have a Publisher's Summit set up for Saturday morning, then the SFWA business meeting. Don't forget parties each night, a well-stocked hospitality suite and a pool party, too. Battlestar Galactica executive producer Ron D. Moore is the toastmaster for the Nebula Awards Ceremony and he's planning to be around for days with his wife, Terry. Professor James Gunn will be receiving the Grand Master Award and D. G. Compton is our new Author Emeritus. German publisher Carsten Polzin will be joining us. We're still filling in our program with a science talk, a screenwriting workshop, and a "speed dating" activity, which will pair agents with authors. The most exciting for me is seeing what people wear to the award ceremony, but I admit that's not typical.

*Of all the nominees this year, whose writing struck you the most and why? Any predictions on the winners?*

I should be ~sweet and ~kind and ~professional and not say. Ahem, but since you asked, Paul Melko is someone to watch.

The Final Nebula Ballot is here:

<http://sfwa.org/awards/2007/NebFinal2006.html>

Many of the nominated stories are available for free.

I try each year to read all the young adult novels nominated for the Andre Norton Award—this year among the six nominated, I've read two good ones by Scott Westerfeld and one by new author Justine Larbalestier. This award helps teachers and school librarians choose genre novels. The emblem placed on the books (gold for the winner, silver for the nominees) is a griffin, reading a book with stars behind its head.



*Diane, we want to thank you for taking time out of your hectic schedule to answer our questions. You were entertainingly honest. We wish you the best of luck with your writing, and a peace of mind with your busy schedule!*

Thanks, so much for the interview, Seth. Good luck with the magazine!



# The Sick Breath At My Hind

By Edward Morris

*Edward Morris is a former bouncer who is lucky enough to be a full time professional writer. His work has appeared in Heliotrope, Oceans of the Mind, Nowa Fantastyra, and numerous other publications worldwide. His second novella, "Journey to the Center of the Earth," is due out in Interzone this year.*

When living long out of doors, there comes a time when you forget what it was like not to itch. Even in my sleep, I crack head lice with my fingernails. Now my own head cracks in two with hangover as I wake in this filthy, improvised basement cell.

From the other side of the bars in the high, tiny window, I smell the linden flowers of a street I know to be la Place del Opéra. Down here, the spring breeze cannot cleanse the sour, unwashed scent of hunger and fear and dreams soured on the tree.

It took me a long time to make myself come back here, after that silly, childish attempt to run away from home. Now I am St. Francis to my fellow street kids during the day, and Faustus to them after dark. I wonder what I did, to make the flics throw me into the drunk-tank like this.

I don't care what they do to me, or where they send me, or how big my cell-mate might be, as long as they don't send me home to the gray unleavened afternoons of Charleville-Mezieres and Maman's endless penny-opera bitching and moaning.

I want to roll a cigarette, but the gendarme-bastards got my purse as well. I hope they found enough in it to pay for the room, or I will be getting that big cellmate presently. Or perhaps clemency is forthcoming, a return to my silly cirque tightrope-act while all the rest of the rabble don the skins of critics and throw fruit.

"Allons-y!" The fat Breton turnkeys are banging cell bars up and down the block. One of them, drogue in the line, beats his truncheon also upon a roasting-pan as the Romans beat their shields going into battle. I want to wring all the necks of these crowing turkey-cocks for Sunday supper.

Somewhere down the block, someone with a mouth-organ is playing 'L'Internationale', badly. That would mean...Communards. I'm locked up with the damne dirty protestors from the other side of the river. Quite a few of these people owe me money. Hmm...

The Communards, and their little third-wheel Fifth Column, are meat for the flics and the soldiery (not that there is much difference between the two groups, nowadays.) The Germans have retreated for a while, the front lines of shelling moved far back beyond the Seine. So the law's long arms have more time to snatch cannon fodder from their unwitting tent-cities pitched on the next day's battlefield.

The jailer on my side stops at me, looking at a scrawled sheet of foolscap in his hand as he pushes back his tricorne hat. I can smell the sweat in every roll of his fat. He badly needs a shave. Wax flakes in his too-thin mustache.

"Arthur Rimbaud." he snorts. "Our little runaway. Do you know where you are?"

I scowl. "Do you? We're in the new jail at Garnier's opera house. Anyone could s—"

He dismisses me with a look. "I hear you like to hit cops, boy. Want to take a poke at me?"

I pop a match on my thumbnail and strike the badly-rolled cigarette to light. My head is pounding

"What am I being held for? Am I being charged with---"

"Public drunkenness. And as a witness. " He waves one grimy hand at the rest of my bedmates, "We've got real criminals here. We've no time for spanking children."

"You do know how to make friends." I observe.

He sneers. "You were at the Lupercalia last night, in the Rue d'Auseil. Do you remember?"

"How could I forget?" I smoked a pipe full of opium on the roof with a hooker called Chloe, and nearly fell to my death trying to swing from the downspout.

"When we found you," He looks me in the eyes, "You were insensate. Raving. You swung on my commanding officer. You kept trying to drag them back to the inn, and they had to explain to you six times that all the foot patrol were already up there. "He glances at the crumpled sheet of paper. "We'd like to talk to you about anything you might have seen. There were several dead."

Oh, this is too much. "I vomit at the sight of blood." I sigh, "If I'm a suspect, you fellows must be pretty hard up."

He motions me to my feet. The air around us is all dust and sunbeams through the chinks above. I think of church.

"Not as a suspect, you ass. I just said, as a witness. If you can manage to remember anything. You seemed fairly eager to enlighten us last night, if you'd only not attacked my commanding officer. Not..." He

manages not to smile, "That the bastard doesn't deserve it, but two wrongs, and all that." He feels more human to me now, and the look in his eyes knows it. He's serious, or thinks he is. "We just wanted to wait until you'd sobered up."

I put one hand on his shoulder. "What is your name?"

"Etienne." He growls. "We still have a file on you from the railroad men. Why do you put your poor mother through this, Rimbaud? Running away to lie down with the lions in their den, with anarchists and pederasts and bleeding hearts? There's only death in the street, boy. Why not get right with God, settle down, find a good woman?"

Etienne leans in. "I read the cahiers you were carrying with you. You are a brilliant poet, boy. Like Baudelaire, if he only left his brain alone. The Church's money and patronage made DaVinci immortal. You could---"

"Why do I do it?" I snap. "Why did Villon do it?" The question hits a nerve. "No choice. But you speak of Signore daVinci, who preferred the boys every bit as much as his patrons, and said that most people are only fit to transport shit---"

"Communard," he interrupts. I almost hit him, but decide not to. "You talk like that mad Marquis they locked away in Charenton. He---"

"Was more popular than Paul Verlaine will ever be?" My head is grinding like a mill full of bad wheat. My teeth begin to bare. "What of these murders?"

"Come," he says, moving towards the stairway on the far side of the hall. The cell door hangs open. I follow, raking my lousy hair out of my face with my hands.

\* \* \*

The bodies lie on rude sawhorse-tables, chairs and planks in a partially-walled back room of the morgue at the Hotel deVille. No shelling did this to the building, but my own compatriots, faking the overthrow of the government while they burned their own neighborhoods. The big burning orb in the sky outside does my hangover no good.

The bodies are mostly women, house prostitutes from the Luperca-lia. But when I see the man on the end, the bald little ferret with his apron torn down the middle in three places like a gutted fish, I mutter, "Bread. Black bread. And beans. For the free lunch, at the inn. But the bread wasn't supposed to be black. He---"

\* \* \*

I remember tasting the foul bread on my tongue like tainted cheese, and vomiting cheap wine around it under the table. Chloe was taking forever with that boy, I was thinking. She promised to smoke me out.

"Who in God's name cooked this shit?" I growled at the wench from my lone back table. She knew me, and barely turned around. "We've sent the boy down to the mill to see what they have left. No worries, cheri." She sighed. "You lot are lucky to get this. The nobility are eating out of the Zoo."

All around us, the waterfront trash still fed like Circe's men at pasture on the free fare. Candle-flames bounced to a strange Gypsy hunkadola coming out of a boisterous group in the back, clustered round an old man with an accordion. All of them had bread and beans as well...

\* \* \*

"... And this is the fourth one this morning," Etienne finishes my thought. The St. Anthony's Fire, like in le moyen age, when people cooked with rotten wheat. It made them see demons. L'ergotisme. I have simply never seen such an outbreak of it."

I am still studying the body of the cook, noting the way that the throat has been torn open, a ring of bone protruding from high up.

"It was like the St. Vitus, the dancing sickness, last night all over Paris. Like wild monkeys. What you say makes sense. I'll.." He looks away, "I'll tell my capitan of this. You might have just got me a promotion, little poet. Give yourself a hand."

I'm in no mood. "Give me a sou for coffee and I'll consider it. Now... This man was the cook." I look down at the last body, the male one. Etienne's face strains at a memory in his head.

"Claude or something. I forget. He...he.."

Behind him, a mannish nun sticks her head around the side of the splintered oaken door (presumably checking to see that we aren't cutting the bodies for two-legged mutton.) She clucks, nods and disappears. "Old broody hen." Etienne mutters. I wag my finger at him like a priest in school. "Now, now."

Before me on the slab lies a comely girl only a bit older than myself, half her face sheared away as if by a sickle or an adze. I remember her by her black dress that still hangs low on one white shoulder. "I was with her last night." I say softly.

Etienne is about to make some joke, and almost does. But the tears silently tracking their way through the dust on my face shut his big trap. "She was a good friend," I whisper, in a raspy treble that sounds nothing like me. She let me sleep on her floor, some nights. She... I wrote some poems

about her I never showed her, one called 'First Communions', and one other one that's not very good, it—"

Etienne couldn't be more aggressive about his indifference. "Did she turn any tricks last night?"

"One." I remember waiting forever. "A Vicomte. Never left his right name."

Etienne leans on the doorframe, grimacing as his hand settles on a cob of dirt. "We know that one." He looks flatly at what is left of Chloe. "Who else?"

I glance up and down the line. "Prostitutes. I knew that one—" a lolling head with a mane of black hair, the once-sublime tongue hanging out, "To...uhh, speak to. The rest," I glance away. "I was smoking opium last night. Quite a bit. Might we..might we return to the inn? It might help me remember."

"I was going to take you anyway." He nods. "Turn you loose far away, like the boss said to." There are any one of a dozen students higher up the hill on the Rue d'Auseil who owe me a favor. I could think of worse jungles to be led out into and left.

\* \* \*

The leaves are bright in early afternoon. All Paris seems to have gone on without me since last night. I take no little comfort in that.

We follow the cobblestone alleys back along the river for a while, almost to Montmartre if we took the longest straight stretch far enough. As the Seine begins to bend, the Rue d'Auseil rises before us from the next corner. I can feel the steaming paving-stones through the thin leather of my boots. I would kill for a bite to eat.

The Lupercalia sticks out of the hill like a carbuncle, an ugly stone hive with two floors. There are fisherman's nets across the railed balcony back behind to keep the drunks from falling off. The place looks deserted. No lights shine in the little octagonal windows. The front door is lying in the street. I see a Shakespeare-sized bloodstain on the front steps...

\* \* \*

...The blood flooded the floor as I stumbled back. It was full night, now. The shadows outnumbered the lights. My opium nod in the window-sill left me fitful from bad dreams and wanting more wine. Where had everyone gone?

Everything was timeless, full of aetheric gravity and the clear vision of childhood. I thought the blood was a shadow, until I heard thudding footfalls take the flight as someone was dragged upstairs.

It looked like a dog, dragging a dandy fop collar-first in its teeth, its long, long jaws. In the dimness, it caught my scent and reared up on two legs, its forepaws...

Its hands. Its hands dropped the dandy on the stairs with a clunk and the weevil-wigged head lolled back at an awful angle. The beast nosed upward at the air.

I did not trust my own perceptions. The stars above the hill were whirling like fireflies. Nothing had stayed in place. Why should this be any different now?

But the blood smelled too real, all bright metal and fear like a wind off the sea. The beast too, smelled, all spoiled milk, gangrene, vegetables rotting on the docks.

The loup-garou at the top of the stairs was having trouble deciding something, but in the end it glanced greedily down at its cargo, dragging it up again, out of sight. It turned towards me as it ascended, eyes burning like green gaslights. If I live to be a hundred and eight, I shall never forget the single finger laid upside its nose, and the sibilant whisper...

"Sssshhhh."

\* \* \*

I find myself sitting on the flagstones. My lips are moving, but I cannot remember what I was saying, presently. I glance around again. The blood is getting old and oily now.

Etienne is not looking at me like I am feebleminded any more. "Then what?" he asks. For a moment, I cannot answer.

I sigh. "It was the same around the back. No more. Only bloodstains." This part is embarrassing. "I...I ran and hid. In the old privy. For a while. I think I nodded off again, but not as long this time, only----"

\* \* \*

...A blurry flash of narcotized somnambulance knocked back into conscious command by the flics pinning back my arms. My ratty old black suit jacket began to pop and fray apart.

"Embetants!!" I spat in the face of le Capitain. "There's a dead woman in there, and, and---"

"We know." The Captain wiped my spittle off his stubbly boar face with a hand like a maul. "Take this one in and dry him out. We'll see if he can corroborate in the morning. Well done, mes amis."

As they took me in, I looked over my shoulder. Two young rookies appeared to be dragging a large dog down the stairs. One of them was green, looking like he was about to lose his dinner on the sidewalk at the first chance. The other was holding a dull lead pistol-ball.

Down towards the alley, green eyes watched me go, and marked the way. The shadows slunk and fainted, snapping and bobbing their heads. I could not scream any more.

I nodded off again, and dreamed, and dreamed...

\* \* \*

I feel very cold, there on the curb in the sunlight. Etienne is still standing. "You've told me everything I need to know," he says. "You're free to go. But this had better be the last time I have the pleasure of your company."

I stand. It's suddenly an effort to speak. "But..but.. What of..."

"It was your Vicomte that did it." Etienne answers softly. "After we shot him, les chirurgiens cut him open. There was black bread and beans in his stomach. We thought this was some type of mass demonic-possession. Now we know better, and so does Holy Mother Church. My thanks, boy."

"But, but... the Vicomte was the one the beast killed!" I exclaim. "The sisters told us in school that witches used the St. Anthony's Fire to change themselves into beasts! Do you not---"

Etienne spits on the ground. "Don't trouble your head about it, boy. You ate the bad bread, too. It was all a dream." He points down the hill. "You don't even have to go home. Just go."

\* \* \*

The old pouter pigeon did toss me my purse as I turned to walk down the hill. I'll give him that much. So now I sit at a bistro being stared at by the hoi-polloi, sipping listlessly at a cup of coffee, watching my elders and betters going on about their blind way.

I will find a couch with those students on the hill, write poems for my supper, and try to forget that tonight ever happened. But this has taken its toll.



I have no idea what I am going to do after today. For the first time, that becomes a concern. For now, I will haunt the streets and try to record my lessons.

Perhaps I'll slip them over the transom of some old poet chasing his misspent youth, line my pockets and do myself homage. Perhaps I'll travel on, and strike it rich in the tropics. My envelope hasn't even been opened yet. All Paris belongs to me, and I to her. It is the springtime of my age.

But in my deepest dreams, I will always see what I saw last night. As I struggle feverishly to make some map of where I am going and where I have been, the sick breath of the werewolves draws closer, boiling up from the shadows of my past despite all I attempt. I've cheated them once now.

Blessed Mother, let me stay this lucky.



# Paper Crane #1

By Timalyne Frazier

*Timalyne Frazier has been published in Nantucket Magazine, Polyphony and Tomorrow SF. She won 3rd Place in the Playboy Fiction Contest and recognition in Asimov's Fiction Contest. She has attended Marlboro College, Warren Wilson College, and Clarion West, and finds herself a student again, this time at Reed College. But there is nothing amateurish about this poem.*

## Paper Crane #1

the first one  
a flapping bird  
folded by my mother's  
surrogate father  
a mentor  
our savior

I took it home and studied the paper  
like a futuristic history text  
every fold line meant something  
no one could tell me  
I unfolded and refolded  
until my whole life fit tight  
inside and the paper took flight again

# The Underground School of Lower Education

By Daniel Ausema

*Originally from Michigan with a background in adventure education and journalism, Daniel Ausema now lives at the edge of the Rocky Mountains. He is a stay-at-home dad and writes furiously during naptime and Sesame Street. His fiction and poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in a variety of magazines, including All Possible Worlds, The Sword Review, Mytholog, Noneuclidean Café and Scifaikuest.*

No one else wore glasses these days. Not a single one of Deala's classmates in Argansy College, a post-grad prep school situated high in the skyscrapers of so-called Peace City, had to deal with eye exams and prescriptions and nose-pinching, god-awful glasses. But Deala did. She could never afford the las-surgery to fix her eyes. With a practiced motion, she adjusted the glasses on her pale face so she could read the letter again.

Every time her thoughts stumbled toward self pity, though, Deala imagined her brother's voice. "Be glad you can see at all," he would have said. "At least you're out of the under-tunnels. At least they have such a thing as glasses up here."

She wondered briefly where Landeep was. Likely in a jail somewhere, again, since she hadn't heard from him in several months. He'd been first out of the deep ways, preceding her by some years. In the border tunnels--that strange zone between the deep ways and the surface--he made a name for himself as the leader of minor gang that called themselves the Ninja. Eventually he'd left them to work the equally violent surface of Peace City, a minor criminal the authorities didn't bother with. His victims never had enough money to involve the police.

What Landeep had really done in that time, though, was steal information. He learned the ways of the surface and smuggled those secrets to his little sister, along with enough money for her to sneak out of the under-tunnels.

Still smelling of sewage and the rotting trash of the deep ways, Deala found what passed for a school in the border tunnels. She was eight years old, small and malnourished like every underdweller, but eager to learn. The greatest secret from her brother was the importance of learning. It didn't come close to trumping riches for those born to money, but it was

the next best thing in the corruption of Peace City and the rest of the post-industrial world.

A knock interrupted her thoughts, and the door slid open. She hadn't reread the letter, but it didn't matter. She knew exactly what it said.

Deala spun her seat on its cushion of air to face the visitor. Mr. Shorvel, her sponsor. The latest in a series of sponsors as she'd moved up from school to school. She smiled, careful not to show her imperfect teeth.

"Good news, I hear!" Mr. Shorvel's own bleached teeth flashed in his chemically bronzed face. Back in some of the lower schools Deala remembered her poorer classmates trying to get that look by lying in the sun, but it never matched the perfection of lotions and sprays the rich used. And besides, if the acid rain clouds didn't move in to cover the sun soon enough, their skin quickly burned--those students probably had aggressive skin cancer already. Her own pale, underdweller skin would never be able to handle the harsh sun.

"Yes. I'm still a little overwhelmed." Deala's fingers tightened on the acceptance letter.

"You deserve it, Deala." She heard the unspoken, And I deserve the credit for sponsoring you.

"What do you know of..." she glanced at the letter, though she didn't need to, "Kursniyov Higher University?"

"It's prestigious." He smoothed his suit coat as if to remove any hint of dirt. "It began on an early orbiting station, was named for its founders. A combination of their names or something. Today their students orbit individually most of the time. Independent research and all."

Deala nodded and looked out the window at the low clouds. "Flying."

Mr. Shorvel continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Their graduates go on to move the world. Move this world or govern the stars, that is. That's what I..." he cleared his throat. "That's what Argansy College has given you."

Deala smiled again at him and turned away. She was grateful to the school and to her sponsor. She just wished he wouldn't remind her of it every time they spoke. It was as if he feared she'd forget. An underdweller never forgot.

"Well, I'm sure you'll have many questions. There's someone from Kursniyov coming here to visit you this afternoon. I just wanted to stop by and wish you my congratulations." And make sure you remember me, he left unsaid.

"Thank you. It has meant so much to me to have a sponsor to help me rise from the lower levels." Might as well reassure him a last time, she thought and added, "I won't forget it."

Mr. Shorvel smiled and left the room, his back straight, his head high. The door slid silently shut behind him.

Deala walked to the window wall and looked out at the city below, the letter pinched between her fingers.

The window itself was a sign of how high she'd come in education. She looked down far below, past the lanes of traffic where the light barely reached. Her first school had been below even that. No windows there. Only broken, archaic light bulbs and students who cared even less than their teacher. Or their guard more like, stationed to keep them occupied. She'd slept in the dust of a disused service tunnel for over a year before somebody realized she had the potential for a true education.

The surface life was staggering, even with the knowledge stolen for her by Landeep. But she'd had a bitter but competent teacher in the new school and an enthusiastic sponsor, and once her sponsor learned she was sleeping in an alley, she even had a small room of her own with a street-level window up near the ceiling.

Two years later, she earned a scholarship to a richer school, which meant moving up the towering buildings. To the surface dwellers and those above, higher education simply meant higher above the ground, and she learned no more five stories up than she would have below. The difference was, she met more influential people and learned their disdain. Her dorm held the other scholarship children, a dozen in all, and contained a single row of windows along the upper edge of the wall. They had to climb onto the upper bunks to look out at the usually rain-drenched streets below.

The other children didn't like her. Her skin was too pale, her eyes too big, her hair too dark. She was shorter and scrawnier and uglier than the rest. And that was when she got her glasses. Even the other scholarship children didn't wear glasses. And though she bathed regularly, the others claimed they could still smell the stink of the deep ways on her.

By the time she was thirteen, she had risen again to another school and another sponsor and larger windows. So it went as Deala excelled enough to gain the attention of the next school up at each level, because that was the real value in the higher education: catching the interest of someone more prestigious. She became a master at it, despite her underdweller looks.

Each school had richer students than the last and fancier equipment and a higher position on the skyscraper totem poles. Everywhere the others despised or ignored her, and everywhere she outdid them academically until it was time to advance.

Here, eighty stories up and fourteen years after she'd left the deep ways, her room--all her own--had one wall that was completely window, giving an excellent view of the acid rain and rank on rank of skyscraper,

connected haphazardly by walkways. The filth of the surface streets was hidden by smog.

She'd risen so far. And now...now they wanted her to fly.

#

Deala walked up the hallway to the dorm's conference room to meet the representative from Kursniyov. She arrived to an empty room, so she settled herself into one of the chairs to wait. The chairs were too high, made for these surface- and sky-dwellers. Even at twenty-two and as tall as she would ever be, her feet barely brushed the floor.

Finally the representative arrived, a woman in a shark-gray suit who smelled of the latest, ever-shifting perfume. The scents swirled around Deala dizzily, and because they kept changing subtly, she found it hard to maintain her full balance. The woman introduced herself as Myrel, though from the way she said it, Deala was sure she didn't usually go by her first name. Using it must have been just part of her attempt to recruit Deala.

"You must have many questions. Let me tell you a bit about the university first, and if you still have questions afterward, you may ask.

"Kursniyov Higher University is an elite, post-grad university, the most prestigious of any. I would say in the world, but it isn't really in the world. You've been selected, and your full tuition is covered by your country of origin and other sponsors. You will be given a list of your sponsors and are expected to keep them up to date on your activities and research."

Myrel continued her spiel without giving Deala a chance for questions. She listened closely, but so much of it flew by too fast. She grasped what she could from the flow of words, the rest slipping through her fingers. Finally Myrel spoke of flying.

"These days the orbiting ships are largely symbolic. Other institutions of higher learning sit atop the tallest skyscrapers, but only we fly above them all, free of earth and muck and the petty concerns of the planet. Your actual learning will be largely self-guided, with any lectures easily attended virtually. We will outfit your ship with everything we consider necessary. The best computers, the latest programs, all the reference access of a full research library. Our professors will be available to help virtually at any hour. If you feel there is something specific to your field you need to add, you will have time later to do so."

Deala finally interrupted. "This is all great. I can't wait to see my ship. But I don't understand why it's this way. Wouldn't it be easier and

more cost effective and maybe even better academically if we were all together in one place, a station perhaps if not here on the earth?"

"We..." The woman paused as if struggling to find words that weren't a part of her usual speech. "We have our reasons. One is the interesting dynamic of isolation and connectedness. We've found that that struggle," she was back in familiar words now, "leads to some remarkable insights. It also prepares our scholars for space missions where they are the experts, even at

times the commanders of non-military matters. And it may defy logic, but with all the papers and fees and setup and equipment a full space station would cost, it even makes financial sense according to our accountants.

"Now..."

But Deala had another question now as she imagined herself shooting along on her own through space. "Is it..."

"Please," Myrel narrowed her eyes at Deala, though her half smile never melted, "allow me to continue. You may ask questions later."

She proceeded then with more information about the ships themselves, about the types of study, about Deala's own research and how it should ideally progress. And finally she answered the question Deala had wanted answered.

"The ships are very safe. You could strike an asteroid and not be bothered. You could probably even crash it into the moon and hardly notice. Even if something went wrong in takeoff and the ship went down in the ocean or the open land, there's a strong likelihood that you'd survive unscathed. And nothing like that has ever happened anyway.

"Besides, you won't really be piloting the ship, so even as you prepare to take off or if you have to adjust your orbit for some reason, you'll be free to work on research or networking at your computer without interruption."

More logistics of the school and Deala's preparations followed until her eyes watered and her head felt numb. Myrel spoke of everything from how often she would be supplied with food and water to recommended exercises to keep her body fit in space. When she asked if Deala had any questions, she could only shake her head while her brain lurched about like an old drunk in the dark of abandoned tunnels.

She thanked the woman and saw her to the door of the suite.

"Thank you for coming by. I look forward to joining the University and pursuing my degree. There's so much to understand, but you've been very helpful."

If Myrel answered her, Deala quickly forgot as she stumbled to her room and lay down. She cradled her head in her long, skinny fingers and

rocked slowly side to side as if it would help her process so much information.

Eventually she slept.

#

The next weeks buzzed by as Deala prepared for the trip to space. She hardly had time to think about actually being in space and pursuing her doctorate with all the minutiae of getting ready. She finally found time to write a letter--on paper, like glasses, another thing her classmates had little experience with--and sent it to her last contact information for Landeep. She wished she had time to actually look for him herself.

She scarcely managed to attend a few lectures and wrap up her thesis on a psychological study of modern politics. At times the thought of pursuing the same subject for years to come depressed her. But it was a subject of power. The more she understood it, the closer she could come to having real influence in the world. Still a poor substitute for money, but she knew enough of economics to recognize that nothing would ever get her into the kind of high power the rich wielded. Modern, post-industrial interstellar economics meant no one could ever truly rise to that level without being born to it.

Now that she was going to Kursniyov, the other students noticed her. Amid all the planning she had to find time for occasional parties and group functions. Mr. Shorvel insisted she attend and form whatever contacts might later be useful to her.

One Thursday it was a department dinner for political science. Those were almost worse than the parties. At least at a party Deala could sneak in, greet whoever threw the party and thank him or her, say a few words to the people nearby, then retreat to a wall, lean there in obscurity for half an hour and leave. Here she had to sit amongst everyone else and could find no excuse for leaving early.

Talk flew faster than she cared to follow, so she focused on the elegant foods. Foods grown organically on the floating gardens of the ocean. Foods planted and harvested by real people instead of remote machinery. Even foods said to be reminiscent of the meats earlier, more barbaric people had once eaten. Foods delicately cut and sautéed and mixed by chefs who called themselves artists. But foods that came in such small portions it took course after course interspersed with far too much talking for Deala before the meal drew to a close.



All of the students there were heading to grad school. Any student of Argansy who hadn't gotten in anywhere or chose not to continue was an automatic pariah. Deala knew something about being a pariah. Unlike her, though, they didn't have a glorious future planned for them, and they weren't invited to these dinners.

Talk was light, but still full of the competitive nuances these high-born people grew up with. They spoke of the schools they would attend in a few weeks, of the requirements and benefits they would receive, of the famous graduates currently in power in this international city or that and even at the global level.

Many were headed for prestigious schools, but only Deala was bound for space, and so her silence in the conversations was taken for the quiet superiority students at Kursniyov deserved. The more daring tried to cozen up to her, but she kept her answers short and impersonal.

During dessert, a bowl formed from the petals of some desert flower filled with rose-water flavored ice chips and fragments of a fruit Deala couldn't identify, one of the other students stood. It was Mynen, another scholarship student. He'd risen to Argansy from the lower floors of the skyscrapers, not the surface and certainly not the tunnels below, but he understood the world she'd come from better than any of the other people at Argansy. His father sold excess goods from the higher levels to those closer to the surface. Mynen had spoken with Deala about the lower levels, but she wouldn't say she knew him well.

Mynen held out his hands, and the conversations faded off. "There's news," he said, pointing to his earpiece for some kind of feed. "Turn on the VS."

Someone went to the wall, and the giant video screen lit up. The scene was of chaos in the streets. A car burned. Several people jumped through the broken glass of a store window, the night-time bars torn away and lying on the ground. Others ran desperately up the street, though with no clear destination in sight. Some bodies lay within the camera's view. The view flicked to other scenes of violence, of mobs of people swarming the street-level shops, or wounded surface-dwellers crying out in pain. This was more than the eternal gang wars of Peaceful City's streets.

Finally the sound kicked in, at first only a murmur of cars and shouts that got louder until Deala could hear the announcer's voice. The first word she heard was underdwellers.

Eyes turned to her. She pulled her hands under the table and kept her own eyes on the screen. She was sure everyone was staring at her, so she kept perfectly still except for squeezing her hands together, alternating one then the other.

Underdwellers and border tunnel people had come to the surface and rioted, looting shops and filling the streets of Peaceful City with mayhem. The experts on the VS were shocked and had no idea what could have sparked this. Most of what they said she ignored, but that word, underdweller, came again and again, each time a hammer against her skull.

Her eyes darted about the screen, wondering if she'd see Landeep. Terrified that she might.

Without thinking, almost without being aware of her own body, she was standing. She was walking toward the wall, turning off the screen. Her movements hardly seemed her own. She returned to her seat, and no one spoke.

Finally conversations resumed while Deala just stared at the ridiculous flower-petal bowl. How could such a thing exist in the same world as the riots, in the same world as the dark and awful deep ways? Only, she knew it wasn't the same world. This place so high above with its lectures and research and prestigious degrees was a far distant world from what the VS had shown and where she'd grown up.

Mynen sat beside her without talking, as if waiting for her to acknowledge him. Deala said nothing but cocked her head toward him.

"Why do they do it? I mean, it doesn't really help them, you know."

Deala tried to decipher the look on his face. Thoughtful, she supposed, and sort of sad. She wondered if the riots had damaged his father's business, maybe even endangered his father, though she couldn't imagine that he would hear any news of that for a while yet.

"We study all the politics, and psychology too for you, I guess, but I don't think we really learn why people do something like this. It'll lead to more police there and unjust arrests and probably people killed. They know that. You and I, we've been down there. We understand it better than any of these other people here, but I at least don't know the answer. I just don't understand."

Deala didn't respond. She wasn't sure what to say, and he didn't seem to expect her to. After a silence that never became awkward, he stood and moved to another part of the room. Deala slipped away soon afterward and returned to her room to hide and sleep.

#

The day arrived for Deala to fly away. She hoped she had remembered everything she would need. In the final days leading to this she had spent time she could have used packing to study the ship itself, learning how it worked. How to fly it in an emergency. If it was truly safe.

She wasn't completely sure it was, but any underdweller learned early how to block fear. Their world of half-collapsed tunnels and unseen dangers taught them quickly.

Mr. Shorvel was there to see her off, as were Myren and a few other students who hoped to gain from having known her. She put on a smile and spoke empty words as she walked into the ship. Myren, though, caught her eye and held it as she walked past.

She had thought about his question after that dinner. Why did the underdwellers riot? The problem was, there was no simple answer. This upper world was made only for its own people. The underdwellers might as well be aliens.

Deala slid into the seat and strapped herself in, making sure her awful glasses were firmly over her ears.

More money might help, but not really. Money was power, but only for those born and raised with money. Even a rich underdweller would be shunned and would, ultimately, be as powerless as the rest.

And that was the problem. If money didn't lift an underdweller out of poverty and powerlessness, why would learning? Was she only deluding herself? Clearly Mr. Shorvel and the rest of her sponsors hadn't believed that. They had thought she might actually rise to have some influence. But they hadn't studied the political landscape and history. They hadn't studied the psychology that showed how people saw the underdwellers as others, completely unlike them, the psychology that showed her how the surface world pushed the underdwellers back down in ways others didn't even notice.

The ship accelerated from its dock. Clouds stretched and shifted around. Deala's body refused to relax as the ground swung about and disappeared when the nose pointed up.

She'd succeeded somewhat because her brother had told her what the surface world was like. She'd crawled out from the filth already armed with knowledge. That was the first step, but knowledge alone wasn't enough. The surface world itself had to change. The chairs that were too big, the steps that were too high, the lights that were too bright. And surface and sky-people had to change too, and that was the hardest of all. The hatred and contempt was so ingrained.

The ship was locked into its flight path, headed first for a low orbit barely into space. Deala turned and scanned the computers and thought of all the knowledge stored there, of all the things she had prepared for this trip. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Leaning forward, she pressed a sequence into the driveboard. The ship bucked--at that speed, not a pleasant feeling at all. Deala tightened her

grip on the yoke and felt the ship respond. It had an animal feel, like she was some horse or elephant rider before the mass extinctions, pretending she had control over all that non-human power. Deluding herself.

Her eyes went up as she imagined the stars, the sight of earth from space. Then she pushed forward, and the ship dove. The ground had seemed so far away, but now it sped close. Deala struggled to ease into a shallower descent. The ship responded slowly, and she curved around to face Peaceful City again. The towers rose from the top of a plateau, a dozen square kilometers packed full of skyscrapers. Like nails sticking up through the ground, nothing peaceful about the image at all. At the edge of the plateau, the ground itself was exposed to the sky, naked of any human-made clothing. The absence of concrete was striking.

The hillside grew in her window. A few hardy plants poked through the sun-bleached trunks of dead trees. Now she could see the tunnels that opened to the sky. These were not border tunnels, though, but true deep ways, the only place she'd ever known sunlight before following Landeep to the surface.

Deala aimed for them, hoping no underdwellers were there just then. She slowed, but not too much. She couldn't leave herself the option of simply taking off again.

There was her research, in the tunnels. The politics of the modern world and the psychology of the underdwellers. If knowledge was the first step for her people, then she'd provide that knowledge. Certainly the computers onboard the ship had far more resources than what passed for schools even in the border tunnels.

The ridge was close now, near enough to provide a clear view of the acid-burned trees around the edges of the tunnels. She braced herself, imagined the schooling she would provide to children like herself even as she achieved her degree. And she imagined using the prestige of her degree to change things in the surface world, maybe even to change people. Tension between connectedness and isolation indeed. She'd live that out here, at the edge of the deep ways.

The ship hit. Lights blinked out, and the front of the ship crumpled. Had she gone in too fast after all? Her gear had been secured, but still it flew around the cabin, and the ship hadn't stopped. It skidded on the steep ground. The nose was pushed back so far her legs were trapped. The upper edge of a tunnel came straight for her window, straight for her eyes, it seemed. She squeezed them shut, brought a hand up to shield her glasses.

It passed overhead, scraping along the top, and the ship jolted to a stop against a tunnel wall.

Deala lost consciousness. Less than three minutes had passed according to the driveboard clock when she came back to herself. She wasn't sure she could trust that after the crash, but no one had come yet to examine the wreckage.

Deala unclasped her safety belts and pulled her legs out from the narrow space in front of her seat. She stepped down, wincing at the pain in her legs, and turned to examine her new classroom, her underground school of lower education.



