

Emerging Worlds

Issue #1



**Olson / Autran / Fouldes
Daigneault / Nicholls**

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Hello, and welcome to Emerging Worlds.

I'm delighted to introduce you to the inaugural issue of our Magazine and even more delighted about the exceptional authors that we can introduce you to!

Contained in this issue are a variety of Science Fiction and Fantasy works by new and *emerging* authors. Sorry, I couldn't help it.

From the steampunk imagery in *Tick, Tock* to the solemn reminiscence of *Postcard from John* there is something in this issue for all SFF fans.

The quality of work from upcoming authors is astounding and it's a shame that we could only select these five for the issue.

I'd like to thank every single author that put forward their work for consideration, rest assured that there is a place for every piece of work. Don't give up.

A final special thanks goes out to our illustrator, Rory Van Dokkum, whose distinctive style graces the pages of this issue. He's an outstanding talent and I like to think that his work adds an extra element to this publication.

Happy reading!

Pete Richmond

Editor

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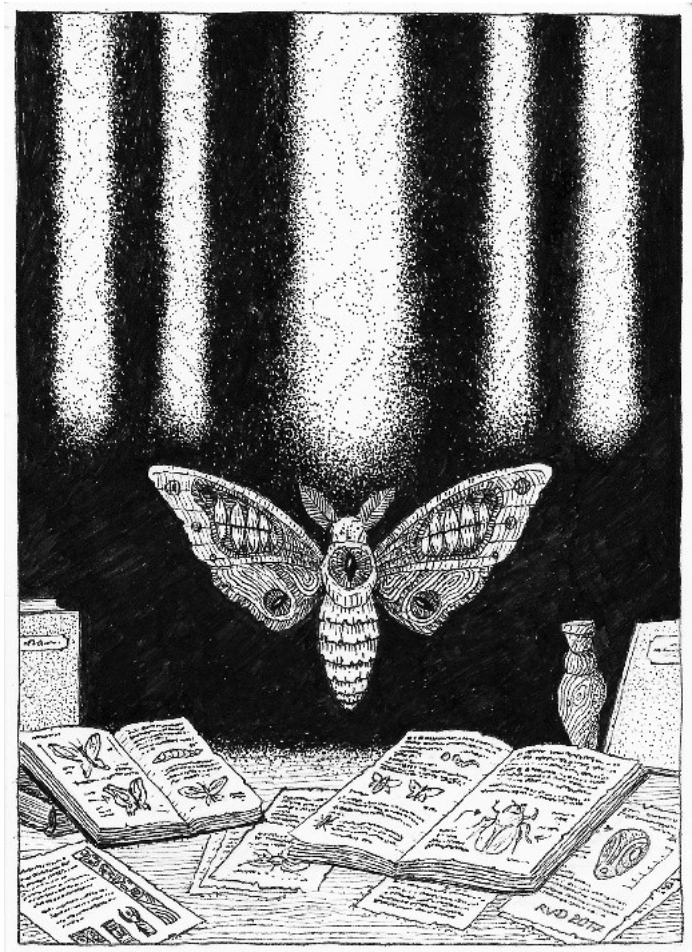
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A Thousand Mouths



Alexander Olson

My grandfather was a man of achievements. He had amassed a modest oil fortune by the time he was in his late twenties, and spent the rest of his life adventuring; climbing mountains, learning martial arts, tasting unique cuisine, visiting strange islands. Towards the end of his existence, much of his wealth evaporated, due to what my father described as “foolish gambles of a crazy old man.”

The little nugget of money that was left went to my father. I inherited a large trunk of my grandfather’s books, notes and scribbles. I was in my twenties when he disappeared. Most everyone assumed he had taken his sailboat out on a final, symbolic trip and never returned. I did not believe that; a mere week before his disappearing act, my grandfather visited me. He knew, of course, that I had worshipped him for much of my life, and that I lusted to accomplish half of what he had. That was when he gave me the trunk. He said very little, only that he knew I liked to read, unlike my father, and that he was getting old, going toward what he called the “beams of golden light”. He patted me on the shoulder, and then vanished a week later.

The trunk was full of madness, and it was only out of love for my grandfather that I trudged through it all. Diaries and notes about different species of insects he’d found in the Amazon, in island jungles and on strange mountaintops. He was not a scientist, not a scholar, so there was no rhyme or reason to his documentation. Excited pages describing rituals he had taken part in, exploring other plains of consciousness, “widening the mind beyond the reaches of man!”

One of his entries described a trip to a jungle, where he met a tribe that claimed to know of another world. Another world, of course, met more mountains to climb, as he put it, so he agreed to take part in their ritual. It was simple; they crushed a certain moth and smoked the dusty remains, and the ethereal gods would grant them with a cinematic preview of the world after this one.

My grandfather claimed to have done this, and gone into a place he assumed to be heaven, because of the “gold beams of light so pure!”

In the trunk was an envelope addressed to me. In it was a letter that told me that, if my grandfather were to ever disappear, I should repeat the ritual he described. Crushing and smoking the remains of a large, white moth, found most likely in places of darkness and misery...

I went to the store with the intent to purchase a bottle of the cheapest, vilest bourbon. I did this with sombre mood of a man who buys the pistol and single bullet that will end his life. I did not like bourbon; I did not like alcohol. Yet, I was a failure, and I needed to punish both my mind and my body for my lack of competency. I had searched jungles and dark caves, mouldy houses and dank crawl spaces, yet the white moth eluded me.

I entered the liquor store, blinking against the glittering neon lights and approached the counter. There were two clerks; a bearded young man who was chucking loose pennies at a rack of pornographic magazines across from the counter, and

another young man in glasses, pushing a broom slowly around the racks, looking supremely busy.

The beard glanced at me and nodded hello, while the sweeper frowned at me, but continued his custodial duties. I realized I must look out of place; I wore a suit jacket with pads on the elbows, round glasses and brown loafers; I resembled a university professor, likely with tenor. An elitist in the poorest part of the city; I might have been on Mars.

I approached the register, and pointed at the rack of liquor. "What's the least expensive bourbon you have there?"

The clerk was ready. Snap-quick, he turned around and motioned to a low rack. "Well, there's Thompsin, it's really bitter, and then there's Wild Grass, that's too sweet-,"

"Give him Meadow Hill, that'll do it."

We both turned and looked at the sweeper, who shrugged. The beard stooped and picked up a small bottle. He rang it up for eleven dollars, and I paid him in small bills.

I was heading to the door with my prize wrapped in a brown paper bag when I heard the sweeper utter words of the correct vibration and compatible syllables to make my hair stand on end.

"Dude, did you know there's a *giant* moth in the dumpster? I thought it was a bird until I almost hit it with the bags and it moved."

"Oh, yeah, that thing is scary as hell. I keep telling Matt to get an exterminator, but-,"

I froze, a feeling of uncontrol, a sense that cosmic hands were subtly shifting the landscape of my reality, molding the sides so I was locked on this particular path. Chance? Coincidence? There was no such thing here.

I raced back to the clerks, nearly tripping on the rug.
“Where? Where is it?”

Both men stared at me, wide eyed, perhaps thinking that I was not a professor of overpriced subjects, but a crazed homeless person in a shabby suit.

Think, Morris, think! Concoct a lie!

I tried to smile sweetly, but I probably looked leering. “I’m terribly sorry,” I said, “I was excited. I’m a... scientist, I study insects. Moths, specifically. Um-,” I tapped my hand against the counter. “I uh, I’m studying the effects of urban growth on different species of moth. How they react to...”

“To homeless people pissing in the parking lot?” the sweeper said. I gathered that he was the trash attender, and therefore the local expert.

“Yes,” I said. “Could you show me where you’ve seen this moth?”

He shrugged, and set his broom against the counter. “Okay.”

We went through the employee door, past a jammed stock room full of soda and wrapped cases of convenience snacks, and out the back door. He wedged a small chunk of wood under the door to keep it open.

He led me to a rusting, stinking dumpster. With a grimace, he threw back the lid and hoisted himself up to peer inside. "Yeah!" he called out. "It's there. Clinging to the back corner."

"Would your boss mind if I captured the creature?"

The sweeper jumped down. "Oh, no, please take it." He shivered. "I hate it. Gives me the frickin' creeps." He went back into the store, kicking the wedge out and locking me outside.

With some difficulty, I scaled the dumpster and straddled the side. The inside looked the bottom of the sea; littered with cardboard shipwrecks, broken glass and sunken bags, soggy with stale beer and syrupy soda. I removed the bourbon bottle from the bag and tucked it safely in my pocket. I spotted the moth; silver, white, whiskery antennae quivering, looking more slime-covered than the normal, dusty flutter of moths. It was the size of my hand.

After some thought, I grabbed an old pizza box and an elongated bit of flat cardboard; used together, they made a scooping motion, and I pushed the insect into the box and trapped it. It did not resist, nor did it flutter when I dumped it into the paper bag. The sound it made against the bag was the sound of a meatball, covered in marinara, as it tumbled off the fork and splattered against the linoleum. *Splack!*

Walking quickly, I returned to my car and sped home.

There was little methodology to my search, and little reason for me to do what my grandfather said, other than that part of me that remained a naive boy, full of curiosity and absolutely convinced of my grandfather's genius. I think that part exists in everyone. It's why we avoid walking under ladders or choosing thirteen. Small, childish beliefs that will not evaporate no matter the years.

The search for the moth went based on feeling, intuition, revisiting some of his old locations, searching in ruins of terrible, savage cultures.

And yet, as I dumped the moth onto my kitchen table, I found I had a feeling about it. Not a good feeling, but a feeling of resolution. Either this pearlescent mammoth moth was going to reveal the mysteries of the universe, or it wasn't, and I could go on with my life, knowing I had tried my very hardest to fulfil my dear grandfather's odd request.

The moth crawled sluggishly about, a fat, pregnant thing, dragging its over-inflated body behind it. I produced a knife, and proceeded to crush the creature with the flat side, sending milky bug juices spewing onto my table. The moth's innards ballooned out of its orifices, vomiting out its insides like a jelly donut being squeezed. With swift, sharp cuts, I diced up the insect and crushed any solids into powdery, chunky liquid.

After a cursory glance at my grandfather's journals, I decided that smoking the moth was simply a ritual; ingestion was the key. I brushed the pile into a small bowl, and then tipped it into a glass.

I raised it to my lips, then paused. I felt very foolish, and had the very sad and hurtful feeling that I'd wasted much of my life trying to hold on to a dead man. I frowned, then dumped the liquid into my mouth, swallowing it in a gulp. I shuddered at the taste, but found no other phenomena coming over me.

A wave of drowsiness hit me, rolling my eyes into the back of my head, pressure in my forehead, and the familiar sensation of falling deep into a cloud made me sit down. I laid my head down on the table, and allowed myself to be dragged to the depths.

Yellow light, warm and gentle like a noon sun, tickled my face, causing me to stir. I was on black ground; black like ground hamburger glistening with grease.

I raised myself up, and slowly turned around, eyes widening as this new world rushed to meet them.

The beams! Oh, the glorious beams! Golden yellow light, stretching to the sky, the emanating glow bring with it the greatest feeling of importance, of *authority*. Tall cylinders of light, shooting up to the sky like a hundred lightning bolts fastened together, harnessed for good. How many there were! Six! Seven! A dozen! More!

Grandfather had been right. Here were his beams. My eyes adjusted, taking in details beyond the glow, my enthusiasm fading as new details popped into focus. I was rooted to the spot, overcome by the sensation of *new*, of otherworldliness.

The landscape was black. And there was a stench, like old food rotting in a garbage disposal. I took an uncertain step forward, and something beneath my feet crunched, like frozen snow. I looked down to see that my loafer was wedged into the ribcage of a charred skeleton. In fact, the entire ground was covered in remains, like a giant urn had been dumped out, the ashy remnants of a million loved ones creating the terrible, dark landscape.

I screamed, ripping my leg out and falling to the earth, a coating of black dust kicking up, clouding my lungs. I began to cough, bringing my hands to my face, and the darkness was there too. The dusty coating, like soot like coal like death.

I struggled to my feet and began to walk toward the nearest beam. The light was warm and inviting, and I reached my hands out for it, despite being leagues away.

Like a moth! Like a moth!

I continued my trek, the only concrete thought forming in my mind was that I had to the beam, I *must* touch it, brace it, even, help it with its burden of all reality.

As I got closer, I became aware of a low hum, a vibrating sound that rattled my chest, vibrated my kneecaps, shook my jawbone. My eyeballs throbbed, pulsating in rhythm with the light. My heartbeat started to be breathy and irregular, skipping beats and only making dull, quiet thuds in my chest.

I pressed forward, and I began to see swirling shapes in the beam, rotating and flowing like galaxies and nebulas, morphing and splitting like the amoebas in a lava lamp. The

feelings of euphoria persisted, but I had an inkling of doubt shading my mind. The beams were not beams; they were cylinders. What did cylinders do other than store things?

But I was too close, the moth-brain inside me in full control, and the only thing was the light. I had to touch the light, I had to *be* the light. I strained forward, and pressed my hand against the beam.

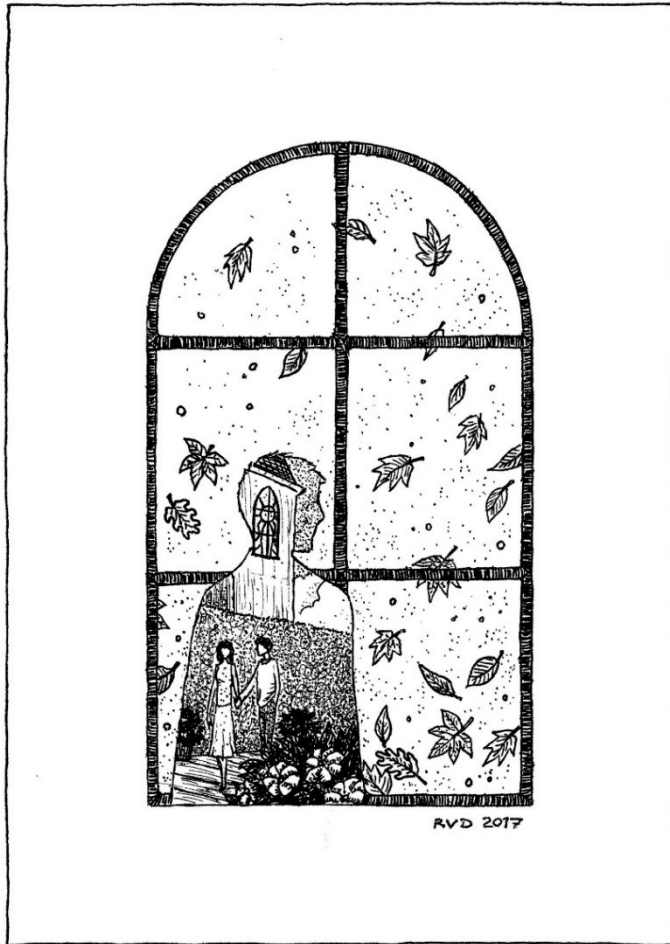
The heavens moaned, and wispy, smoke faces appeared in front of me, pressing against the inside of the beam, like children against a window.

“Morris,” my grandfather said. He sounded disappointed. I recognized his face, bubbling in the yellow fluid. “Oh Morris, I am so sorry.” His face split apart, and a snarling, many eyed creatures that looked half octopus and half chimpanzee took his place, swirling gleefully in the yellow.

The euphoria broke, but in tandem my mind was breaking too as I tried to pull my arm back, sputtering and spitting out useless words in the face of this madness. “This isn’t right this isn’t right this isn’t-,”

A thousand hands burst forth from the beam, clutching at me like a thousand hungry mouths, and I was their only source of food.

Postcard from John



David Daigneault

John is sitting in front of the window, staring down at the stained front of his sweatpants. The stain doesn't concern him really. He can't remember how it got there or even what it is from. He is tired and feels like leaving. His neck starts to hurt from looking down. So he looks up.

Outside, autumn is rapidly turning to that other season. Grey and drab except for an occasional whitewash of snow blowing through. John doesn't see any of that. His body shudders slightly. What he sees behind his eyes is from another place and time. You see John is a time traveler. His body doesn't leave. Only his mind.

Another thing about John's time travelling is it has no relationship to his present or past life. That's one of the things he likes best. Some people call him a waste of space in this life so he is happiest when he travels. He always goes to the same geographical location and always within a short time of when he was last there. John has been doing this for a while now. He doesn't remember when it started. He doesn't know how he does it. He thought at first he was just daydreaming. That was until he met Delia. He is in love with Delia. And that's reason enough to go. Over and over again.

John is sitting in a pew on Sunday. Our Precious Blood is a Roman Catholic church in a little 1930's mining town. The small choir is singing but John is staring at the young woman across the aisle sitting with her family. When John looks at Delia he feels like his whole life is ahead of him. Delia looks sideways at John and he imagines she gives him a hint of a smile.

John has a routine, everyday life at Pleasant Acres Lodge. He is the youngest person in a facility populated by much older people. Many of them with classic cases of dementia. Lots of garden variety Alzheimer's. Some poor souls with vascular dementia. As if a stroke or heart attack wasn't bad enough they have received the gift that keeps on giving. Some possible cases of Lewy Body but you can never be one hundred percent sure about that diagnosis. People can fall asleep standing up or be in the throes of some incredible hallucination that grips them so tightly they can barely breathe. Some of John's neighbors have graduated from Parkinson's to dementia. They've gone to the head of a class that has no size limits.

John's official diagnosis is frontotemporal dementia. That makes him pretty special at age forty three. He knows he is. His mother always told him so.

The church service is over. As people file out some of them stop to talk. John stops in front of Delia. He is never sure if she remembers him so he is always careful.

The room where John sits staring out the window has two beds in it. Two identical desks, two small dressers and one mirror. John makes a habit of never looking in the mirror. He doesn't want to see his prematurely white hair or the wrinkles. There are some family photographs and children's drawings taped to the walls. Nieces and nephews. It's supposed to be helpful for the residents to see familiar people and things they recognize. Even if you have to put your glasses on to see them. If you can find your glasses. If someone else isn't wearing them.

There are starlings on the lawn outside Pleasant Acres. Their hunting and pecking movement catches the attention of John's roommate Robert. Robert has been watching John as he often does. Bob, as he calls himself, is in his early eighties. No family to speak of. No visitors, not even at Christmas. His closest friend is John even though he knows it's pretty much a one way relationship. Robert is one of the few people at the Lodge without dementia. Something startles the murmuration and the birds all lift off together. John doesn't blink.

Robert aka Bob shuffles over to the window. Robert is a tall man, hunched over with lots of wild salt and pepper hair. He is careful walking, not wanting to fall, again.

John told Robert about his time travelling and Delia one time. He told him how much he loved her and how the travelling, his other life, made him feel worthwhile. Robert smiled and nodded his head. "Bring me back a souvenir sometime would ya?" he had said with a nervous laugh. John never mentioned time travelling again.

John is now lying on his bed motionless. Robert slowly lowers himself, sitting on the edge of the bed beside John. "John, can you hear me? It's Bob. We need to go for dinner. Remember what they said last time we were late!"

John smiles at Delia. She is twenty years old with thick, dark hair and eyes that are always on the move. Now she is looking right at John. She sees a handsome, young man with brown hair and blue eyes. John says "Hello stranger, do you come here often?" Delia takes a deep breath. "John it's not funny anymore. Where have you been?"

The layout of Pleasant Acres Lodge is classic institutional. Front door on a buzzer. Staff desk in the reception area. To the left of the desk is a long hallway with wooden handrail. Battered metal doors stand guard on the bedrooms. There are always residents in the hallway. Walkers and wheelchairs coming and going. Sometimes a solitary person standing still in the hallway. There are little groups, cliques, just like in high school. There is an “in crowd” at Pleasant Acres. John is not part of it. For one thing he’s too young. For another he has a habit of telling off colour jokes when he does talk and if you make the mistake of laughing at one then he starts to pile on with one after the other. John and Robert are shuffling down the hall together.

Robert has his fingers in his ears but he can still hear John. “Why were men given larger brains than dogs?” Robert sticks his fingers further in his ears and closes his eyes but he can still hear John laughing. “So they won’t hump women’s legs at cocktail parties.”

Delia is frowning and smiling at the same time as she says “Can we go for a walk?” John rubs his hands together as he falls in step with Delia. The church is on the main street of the little town. There is a wooden sidewalk. “John we have to make a commitment to each other. Our lives can’t continue on this once in a while basis. Can you do that? Do you love me enough to put down some roots?”

The foursome sitting at the dining room table is silent. They don’t get to choose their dining companions. The two men and two women are looking down and only one person is eating. Robert enjoys mealtimes. Three times a day Robert is

guaranteed to have a smile on his face. The food doesn't have to be good. Even if the jello is warm and there is only one cookie to go with it, Robert's world is bright.

He wishes the people here would call him Bob. He moved in not long ago and wants so badly to be part of a group. However the name on his file is Robert and no one calls him anything else. Keeping him at a distance by calling him Robert he thinks. Calling him Bob would be like giving him a hug. Not much hugging goes on at Pleasant Acres. John has never called him by any name that he can remember.

John hasn't said a word during the entire meal. Until now. "What do you call someone who refuses to fart in public?" One of the women sitting at the table named Margaret struggles to stand up. She clutches her walker like a life preserver. "Don't you want to know the answer Maggie?" John says. He is serious, staring at her. Margaret scowls at John and says "The day they take you out of here with a sheet over your head will be one of the happiest days of my life. Why don't you just die already?" John ignores Margaret and looks at Robert, then Cecile. Robert chokes on his cookie. Cecile says "John you told us that one last week. It was as stupid as all the others you know." John gets up abruptly and heads for his room.

Robert looks at Cecile. "I don't remember that one, what do you call someone who refuses to fart in public?" Cecile sneers at Robert. "A tutor, Robert, a goddamn private tutor."

Delia has tears in her green eyes. "John you have to stay. You need to stay. We can be a family. You just need to try." John has trouble keeping the tears from his own eyes.

“Delia you are all I’ve ever wanted. I just have some unfinished business to take care of and then we can be together. Can you wait for me one more time?”

John is lying on his bed, face down when Robert enters their room. Robert notices he is clutching what looks like a postcard in his hand. Robert decides to give John a pep talk, to try and make him feel better about his life. “You know John if you tried harder to get along people would like you. Maybe cut down on the jokes and just talk about the weather and the fact that you’re missing some socks. People want to be able to relate to you. They want to know that you’re not some kind of alien.” John doesn’t move and when Robert takes a bold step and touches him, there is no reaction. In fact, John doesn’t seem to be breathing and is cold to the touch. Robert turns so quickly he almost loses his balance. “Nurse” he croaks from the doorway. “We, we need help in here.”

Epilogue

Across the street from the care facility sits a strip mall. It boasts a variety store, a pet shop and a small travel agency called “Patel’s Fantasy Tours”. Robert has exit privileges from Pleasant Acres. The staff trust him to come back and he never wanders very far. He can remember the passcode to let himself back in. Robert is standing outside Patel’s. He is clutching an old postcard from the 1930’s. He has an almost overwhelming urge to go in and look at the glossy travel pamphlets he can see through the tinted window. Robert turns and slowly walks back to Pleasant Acres. Some people call it the Lodge. Robert calls it home.

Emerging Worlds - *By MJ Fouldes*

The fight for soul & torturous pain,
Emerges wild on thunderous plains
of star-fields making brand new worlds.

Dirty snowballs, shining pearls.

Rocks in space, giants of gas

Icy moons that shine like glass.

Yet... and yet... and yet... nothing calculated the beauty of
you.

The laws of chaos created a wildly, wilful, flexible film of
existence

& THIS is where YOU dance.

This alien world - this ailing world,

This world which IS you.

Hostile to all but the most persistent of beings.

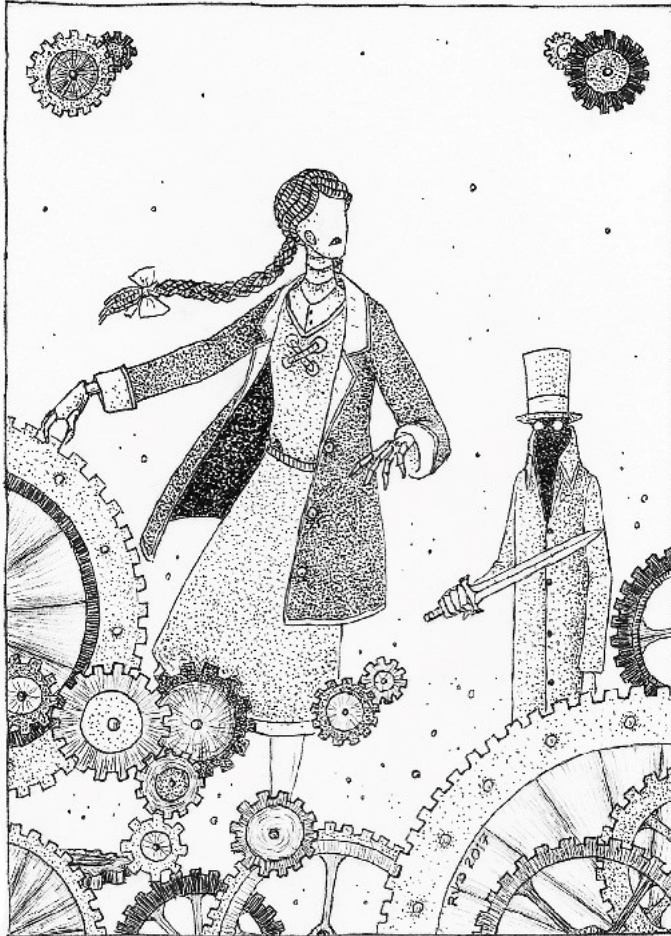
Heck, that's why I adore you.

You weren't made to be easily loved

& yet I do.

For infinity.

Tick, tock



Fernando Autran

Tick tock, the clock goes, over and over again. It never stops, never ceases, in the realm of gears. It is the central rhythm in the mechanical melody of the clock tower. It makes all the pieces dance in harmony. It raises from the great engine, filling everything with its inexorable tone. The song that defines the existence of the gears, and makes sure that they keep the great machine alive as it travels through the land of the manufactured in its massive tracks.

Everything ran as it should, and every piece was in its place, or at least that was how it looked. The music didn't sound the same everywhere. The artificial orchestra was unusually persistent in a single location. A dirty and noisy room deep inside the machine. The music reverberated there as if it wanted to make sure that it reached even the tiniest corner of the chamber.

A dirty light full of grease illuminated the place. At its center, a strange figure worked on the machines: An exquisite human-sized porcelain doll. She dressed from head to toe in a combination between a red dress and a blue janitor suit with shiny yellow boots. Despite all the dirt in the room, her suit was clean as if the dust and oil were reluctant to even touch her.

She had a perfectly symmetrical pale face with two red cheeks and bright blue eyes. Her hair was orange and collected in two braids with blue ribbons at the end. It was a lovely face indeed. The way it could show expressions despite its artificial nature could fool anyone into thinking she was a real girl. The articulations in her hands were barely visible and they moved with mechanical precision, a

masterpiece of craftsmanship. Whoever the creator was, they managed to insert the spark of life into her with ease. She was a diamond in a mountain of coal.

As for what was inside the dress? If someone could put his ear on her chest, he would hear thousands of tiny gears moving at once in perfect harmony. She took care of her maintenance with diligence, you wouldn't hear a single joint grind. Surrounding such perfect clockwork was a hydraulic skeleton and around it muscles made of strings of metal as thin as a hair. A special white plastic acted as her skin, its texture as soft as that of a baby.

Watching her work was mesmerizing. She moved from one valve to the other with inhuman grace. Her movement had something hypnotic in it. She moved with the elegance of a ballet dancer, dodging even the tiniest particle of dust. She had the speed of a leopard, switching places in the room in seconds. Not once she tripped or hesitated, a dance so perfect that only a machine could perform it.

She watched the ever-changing numbers of the boards and adjusted the valves and levers according to the sacred pattern installed in her. She didn't need to think about it, she could feel what the machines needed. They produced steam jets now and again signalling their satisfaction with her work.

Sometimes she had to take the tools and make some minor repairs, but it was nothing that she couldn't handle. She didn't need to stop for rest, which was curious. She remembered being "tired" a long time ago, but she no longer knew what "tired" was. Something to do with not being

capable of moving, but she could run all the time as long as she had energy in her core.

Her skills were so magnificent that she could pass along a broken gear and fix it before her foot ever hit the ground. The strange thing was that she didn't remember where she learned her skills. She thought that she learned them from practice and from listening to the machines.

One of the few things she didn't like about her situation was her boss. A rude teddy bear supervised her work from a cabin. He rarely left the place, preferring to shout his orders at her from behind the window, before going back to read files. She had tried talking to him a couple of times, but he always dismissed her.

She sometimes stopped when she needed to perform maintenance on herself or recharge her core. She didn't like these moments at all. Disturbing scenes would play out in her head, scenes of strange places and strange people, scenes of games and laughter...and scenes of horror and despair.

She wasn't sure if these scenes were dreams or memories, or what even dreams or memories were for that matter. She didn't have anyone to talk to about it. Despite everything, a part of her welcomed them. As crazy and weird as they were, they provided some novelty in her never-ending routine.

She had one recurring dream that disturbed her. It was a sunny day, she was in some strange place full of stores and noise with her family having a happy time (did she had a family? what was a family? why was it so difficult to

remember?) when an army of evil toys would appear and kill everyone.

She ran away scared, trying to find refuge, but the toys always found her. Her last hope was Mr. Tuck. It was a toy that her big brother made for her. It had a trench-coat, a hat and a pair of dark glasses because he was a bit shy. He unsheathed his red sword and fought the evil toys to protect her. It was useless, the bad toys always overwhelmed him in the end. Then, they grabbed her and took her to the sharp place full of knives, where the patched man awaited.

A shiver ran down her body whenever that part came. She wanted to know more, but phantom pains would run all over her body when she tried to remember. Even though she knew she couldn't feel the pain, she felt it, what was pain by the way? Images full of red liquid, and gross slimy things that pulsed came to mind. The patched man changed her from the inside out, one piece at a time, till nothing was left of her previous self.

She didn't know what these bizarre dreams could mean. Perhaps one of the pieces in her head was loose, but when she pulled her head out to inspect it she didn't find anything wrong, no errors in her mechanical brain. Maybe she could check out her insides later to see if one of the gears near her energy core was malfunctioning. Power fluctuations could affect mental processes.

The great machine slowed down sometimes, which gave her some time for herself. She spent it in a small workshop that she made with spare parts, creating trinkets to play with. Her favourite toys were a tiny family that looked like the family in

her dreams. They had their own mechanisms allowing her to animate them and play with them for hours. She did it because they gave her a feeling of peace and serenity that the machine could not.

Her days passed in the form of a comfortable routine. The fact that she was serving an important purpose inside the great machine made her proud, even though she didn't remember choosing it. The nature of this purpose was irrelevant, what mattered was that it was important, something to be proud of, for what is a worker without purpose? Less than nothing.

One day, after another round of self-maintenance, the boards appeared empty. It never happened. Someone knocked on the door. It also never happened. Nobody ever came here that she remembered. Curious...did the room always had a door? As far as she knew you could only exit through the cabin of the teddy bear.

The teddy bear looked as confused as her. He frowned, took his baton, and went to answer the door. The moment he opened it, a red flash surged through it. It cut the teddy bear in half with a ripping sound, spraying his stuffing all over the room. Both sides fell to the floor floating like feathers. It was quite horrifying, but she didn't feel sad. He was always so rude. A rude ending for a rude person.

A familiar figure with a red sword and a trench coat appeared through the opening. It took off his dark glasses, looked at her with his amber eyes and said:

"Jane, I finally found you. We have to stop this infernal device if we ever hope to get back home. Lord Gitgor made a mistake when he put the secrets of this machine in your head. Let's make sure it's the last one he makes."

"What? Who are you?"

"You know who I am. Look deep inside you."

She shook her head.

"No, it can't be. That would mean..."

She walked back horrified. He took a magnet from his pocket.

"I'm sorry for this, but we don't have much time."

He hit her head with the magnet, and she remembered.

First, sensation of familiarity, then memories hit her like lightning. Her name was Jane, and she used to be a regular girl. Then the evil toys came and kidnapped her, but she didn't know why. They took her to a horrible iron tower where they... She screamed.

The memories of her ordeal at the operation table came back. The thing was that, although she didn't feel any pain, she did have to see with horrifying fascination as they hollowed her out and butchered her body. Only to put her back together as some sort of cold mechanical doll, and yet, despite all of that, the worst part was yet to come.

She remembered the patched man's face, full of pride, telling her that they had improved her, taking away all non-essential features, and leaving only clockwork perfection. Only one

thing remained that could ruin his work: her memories. They didn't have enough butchering her body, they did have to butcher her mind too.

The feeling of having something poking inside her head, taking away pieces of her life, the blocks of what made her who she was, it went beyond desperation. Bit by bit she felt her identity disappear into oblivion. She always cried even though she could not remember why. In the end, the only thing left of her was an obedient servant.

She stopped screaming. Now she just wanted to cry, but no tears came out of her eyes. She felt them in her mind, but when she touched her face, there was nothing, only cold, lifeless plastic. Her face could show sadness, but no crying whatsoever, it was not necessary.

Even the sensation of touching was different. She knew that she was touching something, but there wasn't any physical feeling. The information came from her mind, telling what she was touching: the texture, the temperature, and how much pressure she was applying. Information with no sensation whatsoever.

The experience was the same for the rest of her body. She moved her limbs around, twisting them in impossible ways. Her mind screamed telling her that she should be feeling pain, but she didn't. Then she realized something vital: she wasn't breathing.

She tried to put air in her lungs, but the reflex wasn't there. Her mind went into panic mode, she grabbed her throat, air,

she wanted air, she needed air. She should be suffocating, why wasn't she suffocating?

"Air I need air! I can't feel anything! I..."

Mr. Tuck grabbed her.

"Shhhh, Look at this."

He picked a necklace with a coin from his other pocket and turned it in front of her eyes. Jane stopped struggling. The coin silenced her anguish, submerging her in a state of dizziness. She managed to calm down. She kneeled on the floor, trying to collect her thoughts.

"Again, I'm sorry, but I needed you back right now, they are tracking me."

Jane said nothing. She looked at her beautifully articulated hands, moved her fingers, watched the articulations working, so well done, and so artificial. She stood up, she was getting used to not feeling, to just give orders to her body without any physical sensations.

In a way, it was liberating. Her mechanical body had many advantages, and not feeling pain was the least of it. She didn't have to worry about eating, drinking, or going to the bathroom. A recharge now and then and she was ready to go. Not that it made her miss her real body any less.

She sighed or at least made the gesture. She stopped when she realized that she didn't breathe anymore.

"Thank you."

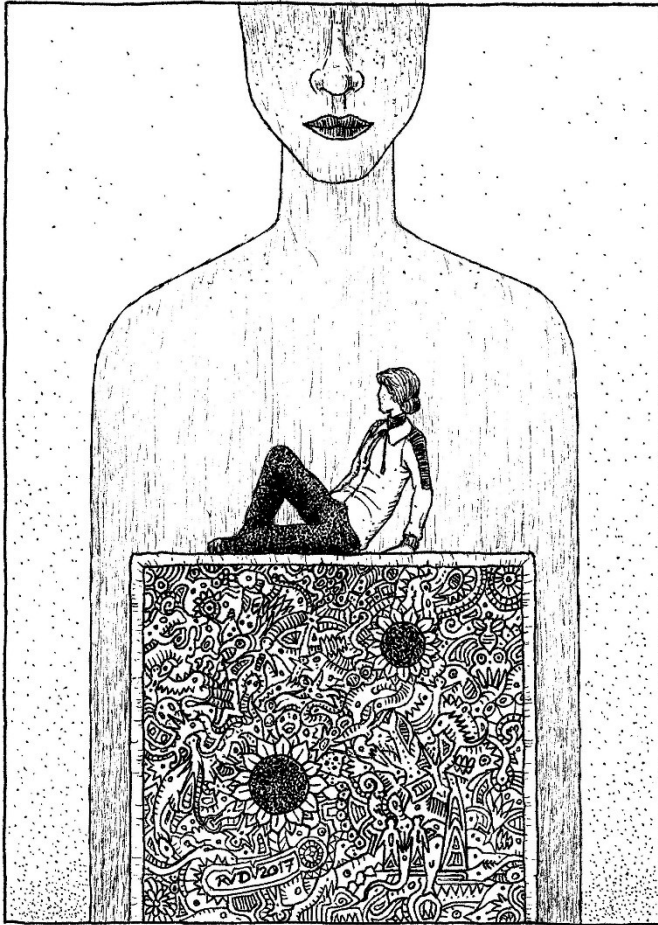
Mr Tuck nodded. He put his glasses back.

“I was merely performing my duty as your protector.”

Jane closed her fists. She approached the console and tear it up to pieces in a matter of seconds. With one final punch, she destroyed it, launching pieces everywhere. The whole room protested before it went silent.

“Come on, we have a lot of destroying to do.”

The Liberation of Shuna



Sue Nicholls

The Shunam crouched inside the mouth of a fissure and watched two climbers scramble up the rock face to his right. A man and a woman. The Shuman's body shivered with glee. This woman was the *One* he had been waiting for. Her yellow hair, tied into a knot, and her pale face, smattered with small brownish marks, were identical to the picture, its detail and form beyond the ability of any Shunam, that had appeared on the wall of the sacred Mindron Temple.

This Shunam, whose name was Ferdum, had been entrusted, on his 13th creation date, with the task of waiting for the woman. He had been standing at the gate to Shuna ever since. At first it had been a huge honour but now, he was 35 and felt the need of a *She*. He needed to pro-create before it was too late.

All morning he had chanted under his breath, asking the Gods to bring the woman to him and now, at last, his prayers were answered. When he returned to Shuna with this strange creature, he would be a hero. Every untrothed *She* in the country would wish to pro-create with him.

Ferdum reviewed his training. He must not frighten these two humans, he needed to lure the female into the fissure, where it was dark. Unlike Shunans, humans could not see in the dark.

*

Becky Lewis pulled herself over the final lip of the mountain and onto her feet. She wound in her rope and threw it to the ground grinning down at Jack Lucas. Jack's chest rose and fell as he lay on the ground. His harness, back pack and ropes lay

at his side, thrown off in haste so that he could flop onto his back.

‘We made it.’ Becky punched the air, then turned from him and inched back towards the edge of the rock shelf to study their path. ‘I didn’t think I was going to manage that last overhang.’

Jack leapt up and came to stand beside her. She felt his arm clasp her waist. ‘Yeah. I know. I was right behind you remember, dodging crumbling rock?’ Becky took another step forward and his grip on her, tightened. ‘Don’t go too close without your rope.’ He pulled her back and placed chilly lips on hers. She closed her eyes to return his deep kiss. A clammy mist began swirling round them and Becky shivered. Jack held her tighter.

They had climbed well above the tree-line. No life would exist up here without food and shelter, so it was with surprise that Becky heard a faint whimper. Her eyes shot open and her slowing heart upped its pace.

‘What was that?’ She pulled her head away from Jack, her eyes darting to right and left. The ground beneath their feet was more or less flat, and she could just make out, through the low cloud, a large boulder a few feet away. Behind her, the mountainous landscape was invisible unless the wet mist parted to reveal a ghostly peak. Nearby, to Becky’s right, a natural pathway ran around a small outcrop, and vanished into the fog.

‘Jack pulled her towards him. ‘I didn’t hear anything,’ he muttered and nuzzled her cheek.

Becky pushed his chest to free herself, and trudged away, down a slope towards the track, calling back, 'An animal, I think. It sounded in trouble.'

Her parents had learned long ago that when Becky put her mind to something, there was no point in arguing. From the age of 4 she had climbed to the top of every tree she could find, and conquered every mound or cliff they encountered. Becky's mother spent much of her life, looking the other way while Becky undertook some reckless feat or other. Her father took a more pragmatic approach and bought Becky suitable clothing and footwear, and taught her how to be safe.

The track Becky took, soon narrowed to a ledge, and scree disturbed by her boots, showered down the ravine as she clung to the side to keep from following it. Behind her Lucas was shouting at her to wait for him because she had left her rope. Ignoring his panicked tones, she struggled on, and in a minute or two his voice was muffled by a bend in the path, and the thickening cloud cover.

The narrow shelf now flattened and widened and Becky squinted through the vapour. A few feet away, a rock face towered above her into the clouds. They hadn't reached the top of the mountain after all. How could she and Jack have missed this?

When the piteous sound reached her again she cocked her head. It was definitely some animal in distress, but what it was doing this high up, was a puzzle. She pressed on, feeling the way with her hands. Lucas's scrabbling footsteps were catching her up. She could hear the tap, tap of his hammer.

Gravel and small boulders, disturbed by his boots, tumbled and bounced into the abyss to join the ones Becky had sent. Ignoring his cries, she moved on, her eyes straining for glimpses of terrain. The side of the crag was cold and slippery under her fingers and she felt, rather than saw, the flatter area beneath her feet, widening and the cliff edge receding. Still she clung for safety to the wall of stone and it was not long before her fumbling fingers encountered a sharp vertical lip. She shuffled closer and waved her hand around. It met space. Perhaps it was a crack, or maybe there was a drop, ahead. She regretted leaving her torch behind. Never mind. Her phone was in the inside pocket of her coat. She delved for it with her right hand, her left hand fingers clinging to a jutting rock.

Two noises made her jump. The first was Lucas, bursting around the corner from the ledge and shouting her name. The second was an ear-splitting yowl, right next to her ear. She pulled the free hand from her coat and raised it to protect her face. Something was very close to her. She could hear its labouring breath. She let go of the rock and tried to run but something gripped her wrist and dragged her into pitch blackness. Becky let out a shriek, '*Lucas,*' and the world went black.

When Becky had gone off along the track, Lucas, less gung-ho than his girlfriend, took time to re-don his harness and check his equipment before setting off in pursuit. He cursed her as he worked his way round the rocks, hammering in pitons and clipping himself to them. When he reached the spot where

the shelf widened and the rock face turned away from the edge, Becky's yell, and the howl of the unknown creature sent adrenaline pumping through his veins.

'*Becky. Are you OK?*' he shouted, but his words were whipped away. Suddenly a green glow loomed into the fog illuminating two figures against the cliff face. He squinted for a clearer view but they were gone. '*Becky*' he bellowed, 'Becky are you here?' He clutched his hammer. Cloud swirled round him and a baleful wind roared in his ears. He was alone. Totally alone.

Becky opened her eyes. She was lying on her back on something hard, and the air around her was filled with the sound of high, melodic voices singing the same, incomprehensible phrase, over and over. Her eyes focussed on a red domed ceiling upon which, weird, painted birds and other creatures were frozen in flight and battle. Perhaps she had died and was in Hell.

The chanting was some way away; it seemed to come from below. She swivelled her eyes to a vast wall to her left and then leapt in shock. A giant effigy of her face looked back at her. It must have been 20 metres high. There was the knot in her hair, and the freckles that had been the bane of her life in her teens. Questions swirled in her mind: How? Why? Where? It was impossible to gather them into coherent order, so terrified was she. She looked back at the ceiling and walked her fingers across the surface of her platform to edges, parallel and precise, the texture of polished marble.

They formed a rectangle that left a margin of about six inches all around her frame.

She twisted her head again, trying to see over the edge. She was high above the floor on a kind of pedestal. The hypnotic chanting was rising from an enormous crowd of figures gathered at its foot. This was too much and Becky released a piercing scream. It echoed round the vast space like a siren.

The chanting stopped.

Becky lay in the silence, unable to move but soon, curiosity overcame her fear. She pushed herself up into a seated position, swivelled round a quarter turn and dropped her legs over the edge of the parapet. The scale of the building awed her. From her lofty position, she leaned forward a little to study its layout. An enormous white floor stretched between walls of red and gold. Gathered upon it were, what must have been a thousand beings. Around and among them rose huge golden statues of strange, reptilian beasts, which reached up at her, snapping at her ankles. Their eyes and teeth were formed from coloured jewels that glinted and glared in the light.

The congregation were looking up, their faces almost but not quite, human. Hundreds of pairs of circular, bird-like eyes, stared at her and she jerked back breathing fast. This was too weird. She swivelled her eyes to right and left, up and down, looking for clues to her location. There were no windows up here but a strange greenish light that could have been from outside, bathed the floor and the backs of the crowd.

One of the beings broke away from the rest, and Becky watched him move towards the foot of her plinth. She doubled over to follow his path. He grasped a lever in the floor and tugged it towards his chest, and the platform began to move. She hung on as the fearsome statues and paintings swept smoothly upwards and Becky prepared to meet her destiny.

When she reached the ground without a jolt, she found herself face to face with her lift attendant. He opened a small, red-lipped mouth to reveal stumpy bejewelled teeth, and gurgled in a high-pitched voice, 'Welcome to Shuna oh Priestess.'

Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice would have observed, this fellow spoke her language. She screwed up her eyes and opened them again. She had to be dreaming, or more likely, she was in a coma. She must have fallen from that mountain ledge and was lying in a hospital somewhere, with Jack holding her hand. The thought gave her some comfort. Of course, this wasn't real. She marvelled at her brain's the capacity to conjure up such a convincing story. Well if this was a dream then she might as well have a bit of fun.

'Thanks,' she replied to the little man, and hopped to the floor. The crowd of beings standing before her were small in stature, maybe four feet six inches in height, and their lilac skin was smooth - you might call it polished. They reminded her of flexible statues. They were dressed in long purple robes and their toes projected from wooden soled sandals. There was not a hair on their heads and their pates shone in

the emerald light from ornately framed windows. She stuck out her hand. 'Becky Walker. Pleased to meet you.'

The character took her hand in a pair of icy palms, then dropped it. 'You are hot!' he exclaimed.

Becky grinned. 'Well thanks. That's what my boyfriend says.'

The little fellow shook his head in bafflement.

'Never mind,' Becky said. 'Some fell on stony ground.'

There was another shake of the purple head and Becky decided to give up. There was no point in making jokes if they weren't appreciated. 'So, where am I? and, by the way, who are you? In fact, what are you?'

The lilac face cleared. 'You are in the Mindron Temple of Shuna. I am a Shunam priest, my name is Ip.'

'But why am I here, Ip, and,' Becky stared up at the huge effigy of her face on the wall, 'Why the giant picture, ooh, and why was I up there?' She waved her hand at the place where she had woken up.

Ip bowed deeply, and behind him, the rustling congregation followed suit. 'Perhaps you would like to freshen up and have something to eat, Priestess,' he said in his piping voice, 'Afterwards, we can talk, and I will explain what I can.'

*

Becky followed Ip into a sleeping room at the top of a tower on the Western corner of the temple enclosure. As the door closed behind them, a key turn in the lock and Becky was

consumed for a moment by panic. Then she remembered that this was only a dream.

Ip led the way onto a carved, wooden balcony and for the first time Becky was outside. Straight away, two things struck her. The first was the temperature. Like Ip's hands, the air was bone numbingly cold. Becky shivered and Ip went to fetch her a blanket. The second surprise was the emerald green sky. 'It is an optical illusion,' Ip explained, handing her a downy quilt. 'There is a layer of toxic gas high above the atmosphere that filters the sunlight.'

The view was stunning. In many ways it looked like home, but the green light that fell on it, gave everything a bluish hue. Not far away was a forest. Some of the trees at its edge were ancient, with twisted limbs. In contrast, others towered over the landscape like battling giants, their pointed tops piercing the horizon. Far in the distance was a huge hill, cleft with a great fissure. The wound was the result, Ip told her, of a massive earth tremor that rocked the foundations of the land, burying thousands and destroying field upon field of crops.

Ip poured them both a drink of something green. He held up his glass and pursed his lips. 'There is not much of this Ibok fruit drink, left. When it has gone we will have nothing but water.'

Becky took a sip. It was delicious.

Ip settled into a seat opposite her and began to talk.

'Many shakras ago, at the beginning of time, the Gods decreed that our lives could go one of two ways, depending upon the people. We could either follow the sacred laws of peace, wisdom and kindness to one another, or we could be selfish, intolerant, and greedy. The first route would lead to eternal happiness. Our crops would flourish and the land would be massed with beauty and diversity. The second would result in famine, pestilence and natural disaster, and our land would be invaded by evil tribes. In short, we would exist in living hell.

Priests set up communities among the people, encouraging them to follow the sacred laws, and for a long time, all was peace and happiness. But it is the nature of Sharnams to want more. Some were not happy with their existence and, because most of had become so trusting, it was easy for that minority, to dupe them. The greed and eventual cruelty of these few Shunams led to a loss of honour among most, and our world began to change.

We Priests, tried in vain to restore what had been lost but as time went on, it seemed impossible. So, we built walls around our temples and removed ourselves from society, trying to live according to the sacred laws. We studied the many mantras of the Gods, and debated their meaning. There were many to read and they were in ancient language, open to interpretation; it took a very long time to get through them but eventually, one of our number, Hy, began translating a scripture called the Sunflower Mantra. As he worked, he realised that it was telling him that what we were doing was wrong. We should not shut ourselves away -

society needed us. The mantra stated that there would be a coming - a female to save the planet.

This was anathema to the priests, who had locked themselves away from all aspects of society, including the pleasure of females. There was fierce debate on the interpretation of the ancient language in the tome, and after much study, the High Priest decreed that the idea of a female being sent to change society was apocryphal and that it was bound to be a male.

We tried to follow the guidance of the Sunflower Mantra by sending out priests into the community to preach the old ways,' Ip told her, 'But many were murdered, or returned beaten and bleeding.

Meanwhile, the promised pestilence and famine began to hit the land. Food became scarce and earthquakes and plague beset us. We Priests, like the population outside our walls, were starving and we began to fight among ourselves.

Then, an inexplicable event occurred. The picture of you, which you observed in the temple, simply appeared overnight. There was great fear among the priesthood, but Hy, the one who had read the Sunflower Mantra, stood up before us all, and spoke of his belief that this portrait was of a female from another world, who would free us from the evil ways of society. This was his understanding of the mantra that he continued to analyse.

The Higher Priests returned to studying the work, and soon afterwards, announced that they agreed with Hy. They

recruited him to help interpret the writings further and with his help they read about a portal to your land.

The priests set a team of brothers to create the great altar upon which you awoke. It was to be the same height as your portrait, to elevate you to the height you deserved. The design and its dimensions were buried into the hieroglyphs in the Sunflower Mantra.

For many shakras since, a Sharnam has stood at the portal, awaiting your arrival.'

Becky stared at Ip. 'How do you think I can save you? I know nothing about you or your land. I don't have special powers. If what I think is correct, I'm not even a very good climber.'

'The mantra states that you will "turn the light, yellow and the flowers, red, and the people of the land will be happy and fed," Ip intoned, 'It does not tell us how that will happen.'

'Oh. Well that's no problem then, I'll get out my paint brush and get started.'

Ip shook his head once again, and looked at her. 'I do not understand you but I feel you are disrespecting our beliefs.'

'Too damned right I am.' Becky pounded her knee with a closed fist. 'I didn't notice any respect from you for *my* wellbeing or beliefs.'

Well, I am happy to listen to what you believe,' the Shunam said. 'It is possible that your beliefs can help us.'

'Look.' Becky leapt to her feet. 'What I believe is that you should return me to the portal and let me go back to my own land.' She could not help feeling involved in her own make-believe. 'You can see that I am not like you. For one thing I am a woman. The only woman here as far as I can make out. I believe that you should live together with women.' She realised that she was pointing her finger at Ip in a way her mother would have called rude, and she stuffed her hand into the pocket of her trousers. 'Women - females, are strong and compassionate. Let them bring peace to your society.'

Ip looked amazed. 'Females?' He stood up, presumably to meet her eyes, and failed because of his lack of stature so sat down again. 'Please, take a seat,' he begged. Becky dropped back onto the chair and folded her arms, and Ip leaned towards her, resting his forearms on his legs. His face, gleamed in the evening light as he looked into her eyes. 'Becky, our *Shes* are not clever. They are good for cleaning and serving and for raising children but they could never lead us.'

Ip's words were so infuriating, so unfair that Becky was afraid to speak in case she hit him. She could probably do the little Shunam quite a lot of damage, maybe throw him over the railings to splat on the ground below. That would show him the power of the female. If this was a dream it was incredibly convincing. She marvelled again at the power of her imagination.

She stood up and leaned over the balcony. 'Where are the other people in your land?' she asked. 'I can't see any towns or villages.'

'There is a city on the other side of the Temple. It stretches for several Thakka to the North East. Tomorrow, I will show you.' He rose to his feet. 'I will leave you now.' He tapped on the door with his knuckles and it opened. As he left he said, 'Sleep well, Priestess,' and closed the door. Becky stared at its carved panels and the key clunked in the lock.

Later, after washing, she sank into the embrace of her bed. As her eyelids dropped to her cheeks she realised that she hadn't thought about Jack all evening: a bit rude as he was probably sitting beside her in the hospital.

The city was laid out below them. Becky and Ip leaned on the balcony edge, a mirror image of the one that led off Becky's quarters, and took in the noise and activity on the streets below. Becky was interested to see small, brightly coloured vehicles passing up and down roads - roads marked with a line along their centre, much like the ones at home. These vehicles had no wheels and appeared to float, just above the surface, zipping along silently and hovering at junctions. At each intersection stood a Shunam, directing the traffic and allowing residents to cross. Down one street was a market. Its stalls were not rich with produce. There were a few, knobbly fruit and vegetables, some clothing and tools and even what looked like books. Becky wondered if there were any ibok fruit down there. 'Not one,' the priest told her. 'All our crops were destroyed in the great quake.'

She frowned as something occurred to her. 'I can't see any women.'

'*Shes* and children are not allowed on the main streets, they would get in the way of business,' said Ip.

'Where are they then?' Becky strained her eyes to more distant streets and could just about make out movement.

'There may be *Shes* in those streets you regard,' said Ip. 'If there are, you could not see them properly because they wear mist-gowns.' At her puzzled expression, Ip went on, 'Mist-gowns are exactly as you would imagine. They cover the female from head to foot in a fog-like material. The *She* can see out but only her special *He* can see in.

The edge of the balcony, bit into Becky's palms from the pressure of her grip. She remained silent for a moment. 'And how many adults live in the city?'

The Priest pursed his lips. 'Many. I do not know exactly. I suppose, in your language, several million.'

'How many are '*Shes*?'

'We do not count *Shes*.'

Becky arrived at a decision. She straightened up and looked Ip hard in the eye. 'I am sure I can help you,' she said. 'And you need to let me go out among your people.'

Ip nodded. 'I will have a mist-gown made for you.'

She was about to object but thought better of it.

There was a soft tap on her door and the sound of the key, turning. A young *She*, the first Becky had come across, bowed

herself in. A garment was draped over the *She's* arms, it shimmered and smoked in the dim air. With her circular eyes fixed on the ground, the *She* halted just over the threshold and the solid door swung shut.

'Hello.' Becky kept her voice low, afraid to frighten the quivering female. On tiptoe she approached the *she* and lifted the mist-gown from her outstretched arms. It was almost weightless.

She studied the Shunam in surprise. She was tall; taller in fact than Becky. Her skin was the same gleaming lilac as that of the priests but she had beautiful, thick waves of pure, white hair that descended to her waist. The front was caught up into an elaborate knot, keeping it from her face. Her muscular body was clothed in an ochre coloured tunic, divided into culottes that reached to her calves.

Her subservient demeanour was making Becky uncomfortable. She floated the mist-gown onto the bed and said, 'Thank you so much for this. I thought I would need an extra-long one as I am so much taller than these males, but I was wrong.' She smiled at the *She*. 'Are all *Shes* as tall as you?'

The girl remained motionless, and stared at the floor. Perhaps she didn't understand. Becky approached her and touched a cold shoulder - huh, it gave a new meaning to the phrase. The *She* flinched but did not move. Becky crouched lower and looked up into the girl's face. 'Please. Talk to me. I am so lonely here with all these men.'

The eyes swivelled to meet Becky's. 'I am called Mita. I made your gown. I hope it fits.' Her voice was different from that of the priests. No warbling and piping at all, but deep, musical tones, very like Becky's own.

'Well, Mita. I 'm pleased to meet you. Do you think we could stand up and talk face to face?'

Mita raised her face to Becky's and they both straightened up, laughing.

'Come and sit down with me.' Becky opened the balcony door and after a slight hesitation, Mita did as she had been asked and sat down, shuffling around in the chair, ill at ease.

There was so much to learn about the women of Shunam and Becky was longing to know how these physically superior beings had allowed themselves to become subjugated to such an extent.

Mita was not as articulate as Ip, which was hardly surprising, but as they talked, her inner strength became clear. This *She*, and others like her, had not allowed themselves to be truly to be oppressed. It became clear that the *Shes*, with their more powerful physiques, had built the houses and roads that Becky looked down upon earlier. Furthermore, the mist-gowns, far from defeating them, offered an opportunity for secret activities. There were clandestine organisations of women in different trades: builders, wood workers and seamstresses for example, and these groups had achieved an amazing sub-life in an underground maze of secret passages and meeting rooms, unsuspected by their *Hes*.

‘Mita. Do you know why I am here?’ Becky was curious to know whether the effigy of her face had appeared anywhere else in Shuna. ‘The Priests were expecting me because they had read ancient manuscripts that predicted my coming. They found their way to my land and brought me here.’

‘We *Shes* know your face.’ Said Mita. ‘We have been waiting for you too. I did not know that the Priests were expecting you, but it makes sense as they, unlike us, can read.’

‘Can your *Hes* read or is it only priests who are educated?’

‘Of course *Hes* can read. How else could they conduct business?’ Mita stared at Becky as if she were stupid. ‘Our *He* children learn to read at their school. Our *She* children learn a trade at theirs.’ Mita’s words faded into thought and Becky watched the inequity of this arrangement dawning on her.

‘So, your male children learn to read?’

‘Yes.’

Ip called on Becky the following morning. ‘You have your robe, I see.’

‘I do. I’ve tried it on. It’s amazing. I can’t tell I’m wearing it. Can you check it works?’ She raised the gown over her head and it floated over her. She could not feel it, even if she stretched her arms out to the side.

‘It is as it should be,’ Ip reported. I cannot see you but you can see me. Is that not so?’

‘Indeed,’ Becky said. ‘So, when can I leave?’

‘I will assign you a guard,’ said Ip, his face a mask.

Behind the mist, Becky’s face dropped. She swallowed and forced away her disappointment. ‘Thank you. I will need a guide.’

‘The guard will lead you through the main streets so you do not interfere with the trade. Where, then, do you wish to go?’

‘May I not speak to your traders and business *Hes*?’

‘They will not talk to you. You are a *She*. You have no place there.’

‘Fair enough. But will my guard be welcome in the back streets?’

‘It does not matter if he is welcome or not. He will go wherever he must, and will remain with you at all costs. You are our promised one and must be protected.’

Becky removed the robe and looked straight at IP. ‘I will think about where I wish to go, and let you know in the morning. Meanwhile, I would like to see Mita again. I would like her to do my hair before I leave.’

Ip bowed his head. ‘I will see to it immediately. Be ready to leave the compound at sunrise.’

The dawn threw green light in at the window as Becky donned her mist-gown and followed the guard from her

room. Her mind was reviewing the directions Mita had given her and the escape strategy they had devised. She spoke to the guard. 'Do you have a name, Sir?'

The guard did not answer. His face was stern as he held the door for her to pass through and closed it behind them both. Becky hesitated in the corridor, unsure of where to go, and the guard led her along long purple and golden passage ways, down wide flights of stairs with bannisters engraved with creatures, and eventually into the domed hall. The eyes in Becky's portrait, followed her progress, and her footsteps whispered off the walls. A movement caught Becky's eye and Ip stepped out of the shadows.

'Priestess, I wish you every fortune in your quest to save our world. I have faith that you will succeed but I warn you.' His eyes opened wide and he leaned his face into hers. 'If you forget that you have a duty to us all; if you run away and try to escape back to your own world, I promise that you will fail. The only way for you to return to the man with whom you climbed the mountain, is to make the sky yellow and the flowers red.' He stood back. Still looking at her. 'Do you understand?'

Demonstrating more certainty than she felt, Becky nodded. 'I do, Ip. I understand and I will achieve my mission.'

He nodded. 'Good. Then fortune be yours, Priestess.' He turned to a massive disk, set in the wall and with both hands, leaned on it. There was a rumble that echoed round the temple, and green light poured in through a towering crack in the wall.

Becky stepped out into the icy air. *Well dream*, she thought,
where will you take me next?

Emerging Worlds

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