

WRESTLING WITH GODS

TESSERACTS EIGHTEEN



SELECTED SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY STORIES EDITED BY
LIANA KERZNER AND JEROME STUEART



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Wrestling With Gods: Tesseract Eighteen
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Foreword

THE DISAPPEARING LION TRICK

by Jerome Stueart

IN ONE OF MY most vivid memories, I am four-years-old, escaping the nursery at our church. While my folks were attending the service, I found an abandoned room at the end of a dark hallway. In the room was a large stuffed lion. He had holes in him and a gash, and his stuffing was coming out, and someone had put him out here as the first step towards throwing him away. I remember curling up in his paws, because he was so huge compared to me, and putting my head in the crook of his furry neck, and talking to him until I fell asleep.

When the daycare attendants found me, they were upset, and they dragged me back into the nursery with all the other noisy kids. But I escaped again on another day, ran back to that room, back to that security— and found the room empty, and he was gone. But though they took him away, I never forgot that feeling of security and comfort in the arms of that ragged lion.



Lions were part of the narrative of stories I was receiving from multiple sources. I remember my mother gathering us every night in the hallway that joined our bedrooms. We'd bring our blankets, and cuddle with each other as she read. I remember the books: *Mother Goose*, *Fairy Tales*, *The Bible*, and the *Chronicles of Narnia*, with its talking lion and kids like me who found adventure.

When I was nine, my father became a Southern Baptist minister, and the Bible became the cement foundation of our entire lives. We started hearing the Bible every Sunday, even three times a week, as it moved from stories to self-help to the rules of my life, and lost a little in the evolution.

We shifted away from the stories I loved to the letters of Paul, and prophecies of prophets in very difficult circumstances. By the time I was eighteen, I had to escape the main service, go down the long hallway, and look into the Sunday school rooms of the children of our church to find the good stories. There they were, pinned up to the wall, almost inaccessible to me as an adult because I was supposed to have moved on to more “meatier” faith and religion.

I missed “Daniel in the Lion’s Den”. The holy man of God is surrounded by hungry lions, and must last the night. When they check in the morning, Daniel sits with peaceful lions because his God was there with him.

I missed Elijah who, in a great showdown of gods with the prophets of Ba’al on Mount Carmel, prayed for God to make a spectacular appearance, and God did.

I missed Ruth and Naomi traveling together, praying to find economic stability and a home again. I missed Esther who risked her life coming out as Hebrew to save her people.

I missed Jacob wrestling with the angel to grab something good for his family from the gods. This is the impetus for the theme of this anthology: struggling with faith, wrestling with gods.

These were stories told mostly now to the children— encouraging, empowering stories. They were people struggling, talking, in a relationship with their gods.

Bible stories, for me, showed faith was the great equalizer. In the stories, faith favours the wanderer over the settled, the outsider over the king, the captured slave over the captors, the boy over the giant, and the praying man over the predators. Jesus re-emphasizes that up-ended power dynamic when he gives his great speech, The Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the poor in spirit... the meek, the merciful...”

But as a teen, sitting in church, it seemed the only thing left for adults were sermons that curbed that power, that independence, and often insured obedience, guilt, and an acceptance

of suffering, endured for a promised Heaven. Welcome to the practical world of Christian living! There are no adventures here.

I felt a bait-and-switch had happened.

I had more questions. Like most people, I wanted to know why I was here? What were the stars way out there for? What was my purpose in life? Are there more truths to learn to become a better person?

I shifted my eyes to find story again— as is the case with most of us. I'd been led in through the wide, colorful, open door of stories into my faith, and I wanted them back.



Great Faiths have great stories. The form of story is the most perfect form for truth, I think. Story doesn't mean fiction— it just indicates form. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It has tension and struggle and resolution. Stories have quests, and they answer questions. They can be historically true, and they can be allegorically true. Stories are easier to share. You can pass on a story to a child. Religions understand that you must capture the minds of the young with great stories, and stories will hold them to the faith stronger than anything. They leave impressions on us.

Most faiths have a mixture of stories and creed. We've already talked about the use of story in the Bible. The *Mahabharata* is a long epic poem containing many stories of gods and humans important to the Hindu faith and culture. The *Qur'an* contains stories as well that guide Muslims. *Journey to the West*, *the Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *Gilgamesh*, the stories of Buddha. They all contain stories that hold cultural wisdom. Each of these texts have "fantastical elements": gods, miracles, great beasts and giants, powerful evil beings, good triumphing over evil. The world's most ancient stories helped establish cultures by putting wisdom in the form of story— to make them memorable.

They just happened to have fantastical elements, too. When ideas, concepts and creeds become too existential, it is the giants and the dragons and the jinn that give truth form and texture. How do I master my untamed, destructive impulses? You can knock that Goliath down. I can see a Goliath. I can remember a Goliath when I try to rein in my destructive tendencies.

Many of the texts above hold a sacred significance for millions of people. They created world cultures, and these conversations

and struggles of humans and gods established our relationship with the known and unknown.

In my life, they were great stories that helped remind me that God was with me, and that I too could struggle and search and doubt, and still be in a relationship with a god. But if I was told I'd outgrown them, where would I find more stories like these?



Since I'd already been led to believe in miracles, in "magic" (the power of God), and courageous heroes, I was overjoyed to discover fantasy and science fiction. They asked the big questions. Their characters struggled with the reasons they existed. They questioned the prevalence of war, inequality, poverty, and powerlessness.

Bilbo and Frodo, the smallest, meekest of races, the hobbits, end up being the most powerful in saving their world from destruction. Madeleine L'Engle's *Wrinkle in Time* series had an awkward young woman and her younger brother battling forces of evil for the good of the world— and there were centaurs, and mediums, and giant, pulsing brains of conformity. I kept revisiting Narnia, both a fantasy series and an allegory for Christian faith, and found new comfort in that speaking lion. Star Trek and Star Wars gave me great morality tales in space.

In the sacred texts, the holiest of people, Jesus, Mohammed, the Buddha, were the great equalizers in an unbalanced world, handing power to the powerless and taking the authority out of the hands of the temple, the government, and putting it back into the hands of the individual. With prayer, or concentration, or devotion, you and you and you could have miracles too.

Science fiction and fantasy reflected themes found in those sacred texts. They emphasized the weak over the powerful, the hobbits over the sorcerers, the rebels over the Empire. They said that great power came from strong belief and selfless motive, not in strong magic, weapons, or numbers. They celebrated good defeating evil. They had everyday people sacrificing themselves for the good of others.

And I found myself in science fiction and fantasy's not-so-holiest of people— the ones who struggled with what to do, who don't have all the answers. It's when they struggle and wrestle that I most identified with them. To me, they seemed

so much like those earlier Bible story characters, stumbling through questions and interactions with gods (or aliens or wizards or giants).

I could *be* these people too. I could make these mistakes. I could search and ask and doubt and struggle and wrestle like Frodo and Meg and Kirk and Luke and Bruce Wayne and Ripley and Tyrion— like they do with their enemies and their gods.

Science fiction and fantasy stories still hold truths if you want to wrestle.



So here we have 25 stories and poems of the strugglers, the wrestlers, the ones who want to understand; the ones who want to snatch power out of the hands of gods; the ones who struggle to turn disaster into hope.

You don't have to be a believer. You just have to believe in the powers of fantasy and science fiction to speak truth. Having authors tackle faith as a theme has brought us stories and poems where characters find the most impossible challenges, and contemplate the deeper mysteries in a most satisfying way.

We think you'll like these 25 offerings.

While I'm excited that they represent a wide spectrum of real world faiths, and a lot of created ones too, what makes me most excited is how they present the regular everyday people who search.

Like the best characters of sacred texts, their characters are flawed and gritty, wrestling with faith and belief, and not always surviving. They craft, lie, surprise, create, explore, rescue, abandon and betray themselves and those they love to try to figure out how to balance the supernatural in their own natural lives.

I was touched by many of these stories because I could see me making those same choices. They let me in.

And isn't that the most important thing when it comes to faith and religion? You feel comfortable with the ones that let you in. They may be old, ragged, with the stuffing pouring out, but they give you some peace, and they seem to whisper, *Talk to me.*





MECHA-JESUS

by Derwin Mak

FATHER XAVIER ITO, a researcher of the Pontifical Institute of Robotics and Artificial Intelligence, could not escape from androids even in rural Aomori Prefecture. He drove past fields of apples, rice, and garlic, all tended by agricultural androids.

He slowed as he approached the black van in front of him. The van, moving at twenty kilometers below the speed limit, had Japanese flags and loudspeakers mounted on it. A voice boomed from the loudspeakers:

“ANDROIDS TAKE JOBS FROM HUMANS! PROTECT THE HUMAN RACE! DESTROY ALL ANDROIDS!”

Such sound vans were common at political protests in big cities. Father Ito had never seen one in a rural area, though. He guessed that the van drove slowly so that the few remaining human farm workers could hear it.

He passed the van. The words “PROTECTORS OF HUMANITY” were painted in bold white characters on its side.

Over the years, the police had arrested the Protectors of Humanity for attacking androids. Ito hoped that they were not going to the village of Shingo. There he had to examine an android that resembled Jesus Christ.

He sped away, leaving the black van behind. Further ahead, a lane was closed because a crack ran through it. In a grassy field, a barn had fallen over. An earthquake had hit Aomori a week ago. Fortunately, it had been mild, and nobody had died.

Finally, Ito arrived at Shingo. As his car drove into the parking lot, an android pointed at an empty space.

"Please park in that space," the android said.

Ito recognized the android as an L-2 by its shiny plastic skin, glazed eyes, and electronic machine voice. Although it wore a parking attendant's uniform, nobody would confuse it with a human.

Ito switched to manual control and parked his car. He approached the android and asked, "Where is the Tomb of Christ?"

"Please park in that space," said the android, pointing at another empty spot.

Definitely an L-2, thought Ito. He looked around and saw a sign pointing to the Tomb of Christ. It lay in the woods.

As he walked on the path to the tomb, he passed vendors selling crosses and Jesus statues. A banner reading "WELCOME TO THE CHRIST FESTIVAL" hung on an arch over the path.

A tour guide told his guests, "Jesus did not die in Israel as the Christians say. Instead, his brother Isukiri substituted himself for Jesus on the cross. Jesus fled to Siberia, then to Shingo. He became a rice farmer, got married, had three children, and lived to be one hundred and six years old. Because of his foreign appearance, people called him the Big-Nosed Goblin."

Nobody in Shingo knew that Jesus had lived there until a Shinto priest discovered Jesus' last will and testament in 1936. Jesus apparently wrote in Japanese, four hundred years before the Japanese had any written language.

Nobody in Shingo admitted to believing that Jesus had lived there. However, nobody would turn away the tourists or their money either.

A middle-aged woman approached him and said, "Ah, you must be Father Ito. I can tell by your clothes."

Ito always wore a black suit and Roman collar when visiting a holy site, even one of dubious history. Shinto priests were there, and he respected them.

Father Ito bowed and gave his business card to the woman.

"I'm Fukuda Hiro, the Mayor of Shingo," said the woman. She handed her card to Ito. "I'm very pleased that the Vatican has honoured my request to verify that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ has occurred."

"I'm actually here to examine the android from an engineering standpoint," Ito said. The Pope had ignored all the messages that



COME ALL YE FAITHFUL

by Robert J. Sawyer

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"DAMNED SOCIAL ENGINEERS," said Boothby, frowning his freckled face. He looked at me, as if expecting an objection to the profanity, and seemed disappointed that I didn't rise to the bait.

"As you said earlier," I replied calmly, "it doesn't make any practical difference."

He tried to get me again: "Damn straight. Whether Jody and I just live together or are legally married shouldn't matter one whit to anyone but us."

I wasn't going to give him the pleasure of telling him it mattered to God; I just let him go on. "Anyway," he said, spreading hands that were also freckled, "since we have to be married before the Company will give us a license to have a baby, Jody's decided she wants the whole shebang: the cake, the fancy reception, the big service."

I nodded. "And that's where I come in."

"That's right, Padre." It seemed to tickle him to call me that. "Only you and Judge Hiromi can perform ceremonies here, and, well..."

"Her honour's office doesn't have room for a real ceremony, with a lot of attendees," I offered.

"That's it!" crowed Boothby, as if I'd put my finger on a heinous conspiracy. "That's exactly it. So, you see my predicament, Padre."

I nodded. "You're an atheist. You don't hold with any religious mumbo-jumbo. But, to please your bride-to-be, you're willing to have the ceremony here at Saint Teresa's."

"Right. But don't get the wrong idea about Jody. She's not..."

He trailed off. Anywhere else on Mars, declaring someone wasn't religious, wasn't a practicing Christian or Muslim or Jew, would be perfectly acceptable— indeed, would be the expected thing. Scientists, after all, looked askance at anyone who professed religion; it was as socially unacceptable as farting in an airlock.

But now Boothby was unsure about giving voice to what in all other circumstances would have been an easy disclaimer. He'd stopped in here at Saint Teresa's over his lunch hour to see if I would perform the service, but was afraid now that I'd turn him down if he revealed that I was being asked to unite two nonbelievers in the most holy of institutions.

He didn't understand why I was here— why the Archdiocese of New York had put up the money to bring a priest to Mars, despite the worldwide shortage of Catholic clergy. The Roman Catholic Church would always rather see two people married by clergy than living in sin— and so, since touching down at Utopia Planitia, I'd united putative Protestants, secular Jews, and more. And I'd gladly marry Boothby and his fiancée. "Not to worry," I said. "I'd be honoured if you had your ceremony here."

Boothby looked relieved. "Thank you," he replied. "Just, you know, not too many prayers."

I forced a smile. "Only the bare minimum."



Boothby wasn't alone. Almost everyone here thought having me on Mars was a waste of oxygen. But the New York Diocese was rich, and they knew that if the church didn't have a presence early on in Bradbury Colony, room would never be made for it.

There had been several priests who had wanted this job, many with much better theological credentials than I had. But two things were in my favor. First, I had low food requirements, doing fine on just 1200 calories a day. And second, I



A HEX, WITH BEES

by Tony Pi

Strangers will covet our timber, our land.
They'll teem: to log, to slash, to burn.
And lay waste to our kingdom green.

From the festers of the poisoned earth
Blooded by greed, their drones will rage
Hex them, sisters, join our destined war!

Cast yarrow stalks in the forest heart, and watch the wind throw fortunes down.
Read the trigrams to divine which treetop the dark-sweet goddess lairs,
Dreaming in her shrine of honeycomb. Learn how our queen must wake.

Go to her sanctum on a moonless night, bathed, bereft of flame and iron.
Offer her honey ere you climb. While singers below chant ancient prayers
Find her sacred hive and light a vine-torch to rouse her keepers from sleep.

Sing the comb and let the embers fall. Soldier bees stream like black water,
The roar of ten thousand spurring them on as they chase the raining fire.
Her guardians now gone Gently carve and catch her golden temple.

Escape from the heavens with her majesty safe in her waxen citadel.
Roast and eat the demon grubs, but harvest the brood-comb ambrosia.
Touch not the cocoon of the pupal god, for she must be coaxed forth at dawn.

On a lake's dim shores, pray to her. Burn incense, and taste the honeyed power.
When royal strength transforms you, speak your grievance with mellifluous voice:
What the god-queen hears in waking becomes her immortal ambition.



THE QUEEN IN THE POPLAR FOREST

by S. L. Nickerson

ALL THE OMENS meant it was a good morning for a hunt. Legends of the Bronze-Backed Bear have said that one drop of his blood dripped, into eyes, would cure cataracts; his saliva, boiled over hot coals for two hours should whittle away kidney stones; and his fur spun into bandages could soothe even the harshest burns. I, Queen Irashar of Nimur, would have his pelt to drape over my throne. My collection was nearing completion.

I alone tracked him uphill between slender poplars, with two spears and one shield in hand. Prints such as these, prints that dug into the earth deep as my thumb and marked even boulders, could belong to no other than the Bronze-Back Bear. Trees thickened, and up the mountainside pistachio trees overran the poplars. Their twisted, white limbs and shiny leaves made a tight canopy. The prints were farther apart, for he must have been running here, up and into a cave above me. The mouth was half-hidden by licorice bushes in full purple-white blossom.

I tucked the straight spear into the shield on my left arm, held the twisting spear in my right and entered the cave's mouth. At my birth, the gods allowed my father to choose one gift with which to bless me: at a short distance darkness was like daylight to me.

Small animal bones stuck up from the dirt floor, and the walls bore the scrapes of mighty claws. The footprints were so numerous that following any set became impossible. The cave

tunnels branched off like rivulets between river and ocean. This passage narrowed, and my breathing quickened.

A beast snarled behind me. I turned around and saw nothing but the fork I had just crossed. I walked backwards, shifting my gaze between both tunnels. My back brushed the cave wall and I stepped sideways. Something warm pressed against my side; I could feel the beast's moist breath upon my neck. I spun to face it, twisting spear up. Nothing.

I looked over my shoulder and caught a spark of bronze. I chased after it through the winding tunnels, never seeing more than that first gleam, but I could hear his paws pound the cave floor. He was always just beyond my sight. I heard him closer, near a bend, and with a sharp flick of my wrist I threw my twisting spear. It flew in an arc and I heard it pierce something on the other side, followed by a muffled scream. I walked around the bend to behold my prey.

My spear had not punctured a bear's bronze pelt, but a man's calf. He was a wild man with mahogany hair and beard tangles down to his thighs, and skin ruddy as baked river clay. He wore no clothes, leaving his entire hairy, and rather muscular, nudity open to my appraisal. If his face was not twisted in agony, I might have thought it handsome. He had dug his fingers into the dirt, clenched hard.

"You're trespassing in my forest," I said.

"Argg!" the beast-man said.

"Do you know what I am?"

"Urrraow!"

"I'll presume that is a 'no'." I looked from the claw scratches on the cave wall to the writhing man and knelt beside him. "Where is the Bronze-Backed Bear?"

"Gaaah?"

Any noise we made should have warned off the bear by now. I needed the beast-man alive. There was only one way he was going to lead me to trapping the bear, and it was not in this state. I yanked my bloodied spear out of his calf, taking muscle with it, and tied a strip of my tunic around his wound like I had seen my physician do. He shoved my shoulder with the heel of his palm, harder than I expected, causing me to stumble back.

I gasped. No one had pushed me since I was five.

But he seemed to be ignoring me, so caught up in his pain.



A CUT AND A PRAYER

by Janet K. Nicolson

SEVEN MONTHS PASS before Samar acknowledges that she can no longer feel Allah. In His place is a silent, depressive dread that interrupts her studies. Eventually, it consumes her waking hours until she cannot even pray without panicking. Since Allah is perfect, Samar knows the trouble is with her— and flesh problems have flesh solutions. Her fingers tremble as she taps out a number on her smart-phone; her soul shudders as she books an appointment with the Barber.

The day she visits the clinic, nimbus storm clouds paint the sky a muted taupe. Her hijab ripples in the gale, and she clutches her purse and denim jacket close to her chest. Her heart metaphorically skips as she trudges up the steps.

Inside, a nurse leads her through a corridor that snakes like spider silk, wrapping patients in the business of engineered neurological stimulation.

“Is this your first visit?” the woman asks gently.

Samar nods, wide amber eyes briefly meeting the nurse’s gaze. *Do you sin too?* she wonders, as they enter the treatment room. *Do you challenge Allah’s intentions?*

The styling chair is sterilized steel with white leather cushions. Samar gives the Barber a wavering smile as she settles into place. An older man, his face is framed by frameless glasses, graying whiskers, and a thin ring of hair.

“So, my dear.” He snaps on a pair of latex gloves and adjusts his lab coat. The smell wafts into Samar’s nose, gagging her. “What are we taking off today?”

"Taking off?" For a moment, Samar thinks she has gone to the wrong clinic. *I assume my fertility is fine. My clothes can remain where they are.*

"Ah, I see. You're new. I can show you." He retrieves a folder and withdraws several colorful printouts. They are painted with slice-cuts of a brain scan. "These are samples. Before, and after. Here, you can see under-activity in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which is the area commonly associated with hereditary depression. Does this make sense?"

She swallows slowly. "Yes."

"We will help your underdeveloped cortex pull its weight, and take some load from the other regions. Off the top, in places. It's where the name comes from. It takes no longer than a trim."

When Samar remains silent, he reaches for her file and riffles through her life. "Student, I see. Unmarried. Graduate studies. Lots of stress. Sociological religious development as your thesis. Interesting. You're devout." His lips twitch. "Doesn't your god bring you peace?"

"I am weak." Samar has whispered those words during her five daily prayers, her hundred daily wishes, and the infinite cries for help she has tossed on deaf family ears. "I pray and no matter what I ask, I cannot achieve it. I wish to love and serve Allah, but I can barely..."

The scarf comes off in a spiral into her hands. She squeezes it tightly between her fingers, her cheeks burning with shame as he sees exactly who she is.

"I live the five Pillars," she says, not knowing or even caring if he understands. "I pray, I volunteer, I fast. Last year I made the pilgrimage to Mecca. But the moment I feel close to Him, when I am about to touch Him, I become scared. I cannot do enough to please Him." *My soul is a desert.*

"Why, then, if it causes you stress?"

"Because I felt His love, before." She averts her eyes. "I want to again."

He retrieves a streamlined silver case from his workstation, cracks it open, and holds up a hair-thin, glimmering needle that is nearly the length of his hand. On the tip is a miniature processing system, powered by a solid-state lithium-ion nano-battery with a lifespan of six years. Samar has done her reading and knows it is a better option than pills, though that does not stop her shivering at the sight of the electrode.



UNDER THE IRON RAIN

by John Park

THE TRACK DETOURED for several hundred paces around a partially overgrown crater. Jason thought he should stop and look for fragments of metal in it — “Five minutes,” he muttered to himself; “there might be a month’s living in it” — but found he could not face the delay. His mule-cart jolted over stones and ruts for another twenty minutes before the track dipped toward the old highway that ran beside the river. “Stop now.”

In the shelter of a clump of elms Jason put down the object he had been holding in his lap. “Got to hide you now.” Its glossy black pane had soaked up the pale sunlight for the last two hours; the device would be ready. He carefully enfolded it in a length of flowered linen fabric and returned it to its hiding place in his traveling trunk. Then he picked up the reins and drove onto the cracked and rutted surface of the highway.

“Not so long now. There’ll be others along soon. Try to stop talking to yourself.”

An hour later he was on the bridge to the city, the planks between the stone arches rumbling under his wheels, and the river oozing below, gray and relentless.

Built in an earlier age, for a larger city, the gate was too wide for the amount of traffic. Its guards wore frayed, faded red and gold uniforms and carried gilded axes with chipped blades. The nearest guard, sallow, thin and gray-bearded, about Jason’s age, coughed in the dust raised by the traffic and held up his gauntleted hand.

“Your name and business, *Sieur*.”

Above them, the sky flickered. A piercing point of light crossed a patch of blue, leaving a white line scored behind it; it vanished behind cloud and then reappeared below, streaking towards the hills on the western horizon. Jason, the guards and the other waiting travelers stared towards the invisible impact, counting silently until the long-drawn mutter reached them like distant thunder.

Jason moistened his lips. "Not an omen, I pray."

"Just a harbinger of the ceremony, I'm sure. The Goddess's shield continues to defend us; long may it do so. And your name and business, if you would."

"I work in metal." Jason gave his name and handed the guard a silver coin. "I'm engaged to repair the avatar of the sky-god, of Fremden, in your main square."

The guard nodded and palmed the coin, and handed him a slip of paper printed from blunt type and signed with a scrawl. "Twenty days. You are to show this to any city officer that asks for it."

And then Jason was inside the walls. "City." his voice whispered. "She's here." He had forgotten the smells of a city: smoke, dung, incense.... The cart rolled from smooth asphalt to cracked asphalt, rattled on cobbles. He waited while four guards with whips and spears herded a dozen limping men in chains across his path. "The treadmill for you, is it?" he muttered. "The water pumps? But maybe that saves you from worse." Then he twitched the reins and turned onto the side street overhung by the upper storeys of grimy wooden buildings.

The street opened onto a large square bounded on two sides by gray stone walls patched with grimy brick. On a raised platform at the far end was a large granite slab, and over it loomed the pitted, blackened metal figure of a gigantic creature, something like an angry human male. Four young men were erecting scaffolding about the statue.

Beside the workers were two more red-uniformed guards with axes. Their officer bore a long-barreled firearm slung from a leather strap over his right shoulder. The weapon had a magazine in place behind its wide trigger guard; it was either a genuine relic or a remarkable copy.

Jason drove up to the officer and showed his pass.

"You're the artisan? Wick's been waiting for you." The officer pointed to a hut behind the statue.



THE SHADOWS OF GODS

by Mary-Jean Harris

SCALES OF THE DARKEST RUBY, flecked with tawny gold of the setting sun. And eyes; these were no mortal eyes, but black marbles glinting with flames. A long face curved outwards with nostrils fanning in and out in a faint rhythm that could have sustained life for centuries.

"He bites," the man whispered. A perk of a smile crept under the thin curls of his long black moustache.

"I'm not afraid," Toulouse insisted. His hand was approaching the viper, and he did not withdraw it. He understood snakes, at least as much as one could hope to, though he still kept his long fingers a good foot away from the viper's jaws. He knew well that mankind's knowledge about snakes was duplicitous: they were good and evil, tame and perilous, or Toulouse's favorite, "The devil and the angel in one hissing mystery," which his father's Sufi apprentice, Rayan, had once told him.

Toulouse was kneeling on the dusty stones beneath the man's cerulean silk canopy that was upheld by two wooden poles and fastened to the clay wall behind him. When a hot wind wound through the streets, the silk would flutter and cause sunlight to dapple over the faces of the man and his snake.

Toulouse looked into the eyes of the snake and asked, "What's his name?" He tilted his head and the snake swerved with him, stretching erect from the top of the lid of a sun-faded basket and revealing his pale red underbelly as if it were dusted with sands from the desert.

"He has not yet told me," the man said, sitting calm on a purple-dyed woven cushion. The man was rather old, or so he seemed to Toulouse, for he was older than Toulouse's father. Two black curls strung with silver hairs emerged from the sides of the man's turban above his ears. Although his attire was no finer than faded green trousers and a sheer cream-colored tunic, a star-shaped medallion of fine rose-tinted glass hung from a tarnished brass chain around his neck, and a silver-threaded cloth belt was tied high around his waist, entwined with a labyrinth of dark green snakes chasing one another's tails.

"My father told me that if you name them, they will take on the attributes of the name," Toulouse told the man. "Like Merkur— that was one of his older snakes."

"Not all snakes are Silvrien," the man said.

"Silvrien?" Toulouse asked.

The man looked to the snake as he added, "He is a Lucefate. Not for humans, as the Silvrien are, yet more intelligent." Although the man spoke well in Arabic, and slow enough for Toulouse to understand, his voice was accented with what seemed to be traces of an even older language that now only remained on the tongues of hermits and wanderers in the hills and deserts.

Toulouse wondered just how much these Lucefates could do with their intelligence. "Are they the ones that people tell stories of, the ones who use fire to control people and other animals?" he asked, rather excited by the prospect.

The man just smiled, his earthy eyes calm, yet Toulouse could see that he was familiar with these mysteries, and unlike most men, he did not smile in such a way as to belittle it as folly.

"I don't see why everything important has to be a secret," Toulouse muttered, casually inspecting the man's features for any hints that might betray the truth. He found none, and that in itself told Toulouse more than a morsel of cryptic wisdom might have. This man was one of *them*, someone like Toulouse's father who had come to Asia when Toulouse was a young child. Toulouse shared in the man's smile, and even without words, together they knew. Toulouse was not exactly sure *what* he knew, but knowing that he knew was enough for the time being.

Toulouse then felt a cool touch on his right hand as something wound around his wrist. It was the Lucefate snake, slowly coiling around him, winding tightly, but not enough to leave more than a slight impression afterwards. Toulouse flinched at



THE MACHINE

by David Clink

The machine's shadow turned strange
with every house, tree, and fence it passed over.

At times we could see into it—
insects with translucent bodies and opaque wings,

the flora and fauna of a different world,
unfamiliar mechanisms moving in odd ways.

We ran after the machine as fast as we could,
as if someone we loved was trapped inside.

The sound it made was air whipping around skyscrapers,
metal grinding against metal, two people fucking,

a symphony warming up, a woodpecker at full tilt,
a jet engine roaring, the industrial revolution.

The machine's outward beauty blinded us.
We felt its burn as it made its way over hillsides,

above the rooftops of cookie-cutter homes,
melting shingles, igniting the wood beams beneath.



BURNT OFFERINGS

by Mary Pletsch

I HANG SUSPENDED in the Lattice, streaming data directly into my cortex and programming code at the speed of thought.

The Galaxy-Spanning Lattice Sacristy of the Vendetrix Avengelis, our online temple and knowledge vault of Our Lady of Retribution, has only a few active users at this hour. Some are taking instruction in the faith from an acolyte, while others are reading sacred texts from our database or uploading this week's tributes to the Vendetrix into the archive, where they will be showcased for years to come. Seven soldiers in the uniforms of the Allmother's Army kneel in contemplation in the pews. I wonder if they are remembering comrades fallen, or praying for their own glories to come. One of them glances at me as I pass by and bows her head, paying me the reverence due a Shaman of the High Ones.

As I look about, it's easy to forget that what my mind perceives is in fact a virtual simulation peopled by avatars that represent users logging in from stations across the galaxy. It's easy to forget that my own avatar, this body that walks so easily and painlessly from the simulation start point in the nave up the central aisle, is not my true form. Then I notice that the flowers on the Vendetrix's high altar are monochrome red, flat and artificial looking, and I am reminded that I work in a world of artifice.

I suspect the blooms are a tribute from reverent but amateur programmers who found it more meaningful to create their own offering rather than pay an acolyte to build it on their behalf. I

suspend my reverie, my wishful thinking that the Lattice could encompass my entire reality; then I superimpose lines of data upon my surroundings, and I get to work. I study the code for the flowers and make some adjustments, piping orange and yellow hues through the petals. The flowers shimmer and reappear with a far more realistic looking color gradient, and I smile beneath my Shaman's cowl.

I am pondering changing the flooring — the white marble, though pretty, seems pale and sedate for the Sacristy of just desserts incarnate — when a flicker of light from overhead catches my eye.

The great stained glass window over the altar is a portrait of the Vendetrix Avengelis, resplendent in divine vengeance. Facets representing the blood of fallen foes decorate the bottom third of the glass in a cascade of ruby and crimson, while the figure of the Vendetrix herself is cast in fiery orange and gold. The Vendetrix's face eclipses the sun, rendering her features in shadow. She could be anyone, everyone, who has sought to repay a wrong in pounds of flesh.

My subconscious has prompted me to check the original code, and I obey without yet knowing why. Some later coder — not myself — has updated the Vendetrix's weapon. According to the code, when the window was first programmed, Our Lady of Retribution carried a now-obsolete Jury assault rifle, not the modern Prosecutor she now holds. Rendered in black steel, the shadow of the Prosecutor falls across the congregation of soldiers, a charge from on high, a torch passed from divine to mortal hands.

I wonder if any of those soldiers has ever given serious thought to refusing that torch, as I have sometimes considered refuting my position in the Sacristy. I pause a moment to reflect on how a private agnostic such as myself came to be wearing the Shaman's cowl; I muse when I ought to be combing the code. I compute faster than a conventionally augmented human, significantly faster than the average unaugmented brain, but my momentary lapse is long enough for the code aberration that my subconscious detected to manifest itself in the Temple around me.

The Vendetrix' window explodes inward in a cascade of shards.

Standing at the side of the altar, I take the brunt of the impact. I throw my arms before my face as though bone and steel could shield me. Even as I do so, the code scrolling across my mind's



ASCENSION

by Jennifer Rahn

BOBBY FONG barely felt the sting of Gravy's tattoo needle peppering his arm with new ink. He was dully aware of the lumpy cold compress jammed against his swollen lip and the throbbing pain of his lacerated right eye as he sat numbly, waiting for the latest mark of his success to be inscribed upon his skin.

"Woly shid," Gravy said repeatedly as he decorated the edges of his latest design with dragon scales. "You gave it to that sumbitch, Bobby. 49 kills. Man, you killah."

Bobby let his head fall back against the wall and the compress drop from his free hand. The painkillers were finally kicking in, giving him a buzz that did little to mask his internal despair. He tried to open his lacerated eye, almost passed out from the swell of pain, and groped for the compress, which he resmashed against his face as he wondered absently if Gravy would be saying the same things to Terror McTavish if he'd won tonight. The man had been a legend. Bobby had worshipped him as a kid, and felt no pride at having ended the aged fighter's reign. If anything, he felt fear for when the same thing would inevitably happen to him.

Bobby gazed blearily with his still working eye at the number 49 plastered over a skull by his wrist. 50 would go right across his forehead.

Something else had happened in the ring tonight, which bothered him deeply. He ran through it again, checking every second in his memory, asking himself repeatedly if he'd gotten it wrong. Had Terror let him win? In that very last moment, the

old dog had smiled like he'd just won the biggest tournament, and he'd stopped short of finishing the block that would have saved his life, and damn, if Bobby hadn't seen a golden aura rise up from the ginger-haired man's skin, enveloping him in sparks and radiating scalding heat.

The moment had ended, leaving Bobby in the cold arena light, pelted with the raging screams of the crowd surrounding him. Half of them wanted his blood, and the other half wanted to kill the half that threatened him. The whole thing had been hypercast through the entire sector, and nobody else seemed to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. As Bobby stood there, ignoring the ref who was trying to shove him back to his corner, just *staring* at McTavish, all he could see that was special about the man was how incredibly dead he was. So much for the new ink he had emblazoned across his back—some kind of new agey *Om* symbol. Staring at him had made Bobby feel like his own life force was being drained out towards that dead mass of ginger-haired meat lying on the canvas. The only blinding lights surrounding McTavish then were coming from the flashes of the frenzied paparazzi scurrying along the outside edges of the cage.

Bobby felt lost. McTavish had been his *idol*, the guy he watched on holovid when he needed to study technique for his own upcoming matches. What was he going to do now?

"Now you gonna fight only the big leaguers, bidch." Bobby slowly twisted his gaze upwards to give what he hoped was a disgusted look at his promoter. "You made me a lotta coin tonight, Bobs. Geez, I actually had my bets insured tonight, just in case. Thought I had a good chance of losing you, but you really are a *dog!* A pitbull!" Kenichi pulled out a fat wad and cast a chunk of it onto Bobby's lap. The amount was maybe a twentieth of the total. "There's some for you. Five grand because I'm feeling generous tonight. Bobby!" Kenichi scrunched his cheek and shook it. "You're going to make me a rich man! Never mind the winnings, I've already got sponsorships from Alday Spacecraft, Intergalactic Miners, and Nike. Hey, Gravy, pass him off to the medics when you're done, OK?"

"Sure thig, bodss."

"I've already paid for you, Bobs, so don't worry about the bill. Go find yourself a woman afterwards. I won't be calling you for the next week or so, so heal up, a'ight?"



THE FAITH CIRCUS

by Alyxandra Harvey

IN THE MARKETS of Navaar, they sell magic in blue glass bottles, love in red pouches stitched with gold, and luck in silver bells.

But instead of spell bottles and amulets, I only saw pitchers of hibiscus tea and pear cardamom cider, sticky honey cakes, and olives rolled in thyme and pink pepper. On a Ceremony day, the magic-sellers closed up shop, by order of the palace. The only magic allowed was in the arena, and it always ended in blood. Already, the healers were gathering ointments and salves.

Still, this part of the city I could understand, it was similar to the markets of Talathusia where anything could be purchased; from lapis lazuli beads, and albino monkeys to pomegranate oil.

But once we reached the sandstone walls circling the arena, the similarities ended.

Niches dug into the walls held the religious artefacts of countless peoples, even beyond the tribes of the Kishdjurien deserts. The Star Maiden of Allifreya, the Dragon Sisters, the Sun King, the Golden Cat, even one of the Desert Mothers I served. Magic rippled like heavy dew on a spider's web. It glistened and shivered and sparked light that caught the eye, only to vanish. I reached up to touch the collar the mercenaries had clamped around my neck.

Because they sold something else in Navaar.

They sold faith; but you never could tell if it was real.

Not until it was too late anyway.



Tiberius squinted up at the sky, wiping the sweat from the back of his neck.

The sun was red in the sky: a bad omen. Or a good one, according to Akhanum. His people sang special songs when the sun turned red. But they also worshipped cats and kept their bones in jars of gold dust. In the steppes, Tiberius remembered the women covering the cooking fires, in case the flames jumped to the barley fields to follow the sun. He'd been a shaman then, fed on the blood of horses and the ashes of such fires. Here he was just another arcane wearing the scorpion and forced into the arena by spear point and lion's tooth.

In the arena, they could pray to their gods and honor the magic such rites created— but only in the sand pits and the training circles. Only where the good folk of Navaar could profit by coin or entertainment. Anywhere else and the scorpions woke hungry. Some arcane tried to escape, but the city gates woke the scorpions as surely as magic did. And death was too simple, it was poisoned pain they offered instead. It was a battle no one could win.

So there was sand, blood, prayers, and the Raja with his ruby crown and his gilded throne. He sent warriors and outlander mercenaries to capture arcanes from temples near and far for his Faith Circus.

"New girl," Annis nudged Tiberius. Her black hair was coiled on her head, like the snakes tattooed around each forearm. Tiberius followed her gaze to the Faith Circus's most recent acquisition, an amber scorpion gleaming in the hollow of her throat. She wore her ritual regalia: silver coin headpiece and matching belt and a heavily embroidered choli with beaded ribbon ties.

Tiberius shook his head. "They brought in a Talathusian temple dancer. I give her a week before she's broken."

A second glance showed her wrists and ankles were bare of the bruises and raw welts left by chains. Sometimes, the devoted volunteered, eager to prove their gods' powers. They walked right onto the bloody sand without chains, ropes, or the prodding of guards. It never ended well.

"Curse Jada," Tiberius said. Jada was the silversmith who had first crafted the scorpion collars. "The temple dancer volunteered," he added, disgusted. "I give her a day."





THE SEVEN CREATIONS— BOOK ONE

by Halli Lilburn

IF ONLY I had more power like the Great Apostle I could transfigure matter and turn this gag and chains into dust. With that kind of power I could disintegrate the barricades and set everyone free. Chained to a pillar I sit on the stone floor of the front hall. The temple is under siege again. The number of non-believers grows larger every day.

“Prayer is forbidden!” an angry voice snaps my eyes open and jolts my head back, hitting the column behind me.

The guard shakes his weapon, stomps forward and rips the gag out of my mouth. My jaw clicks as it loosens from the strained position it held for the last five hours. The chapped skin on the edge of my mouth crumbles like a fault line in an earthquake.

“Who do you think you are?”

I manage to whisper, “I am a Disciple of the Seven Creations.”

He strikes my face with his hand. “You are a prisoner of the Freedom Consulate. We are in control of the Creations now.”

The sting from the slap sends heat racing up my cheek. I want to use my power to disperse the pain, but I don’t dare close my eyes again.

The Great Apostle is trapped in the Gate Room while the rebels attempt to break in. He is old and frail and I’m afraid that the rebels will not be merciful to him. They pound on the door, fire their weapons at it and bash tools against the walls, but after five hours they are still outside and the Great Apostle is still within.

The Great Apostle officiates over the Seven Gates of Creation: Light, Matter, Time, Thought, Energy, Life and Death. He practices the divine law of Apportionable Equity, opening and closing the Gates according to our needs. He maintains perfect balance in the universe. The only Gate he cannot fully close is Death. Death can always sneak out although at the age of six thousand, nine hundred it is evident he can at least delay it for a while.

He mentored me since childhood as a father figure and prophet ever since I joined the Discipleship. If my powers increase enough I might be privileged to see the Gates before I die, but visual proof is not something I seek after.

Some say the Gates don't exist. They say life is just a series of coincidences and no one can control it. People like the Freedom Consulate will go to great lengths to prove that no one is in charge of them. They say we have been fooled. They say the Great Apostle is just a crazy old man with a few magic tricks. What they don't realize is how they contradict themselves. If relying on the Seven Creations is for the weak, then how can they claim the right to control their own destiny? How would that be possible without the Gates? Imagine a world without order or discipline. They don't know what is good for them so they resort to tantrums like a disobedient child. A kite may want to be free of its string, but without it the kite crashes to the ground.

A woman in a tight black jumpsuit comes down around the curve in the grand staircase and hollers at the guard looming over me. "Bring her up."

"Yes sir," he responds. "Boss wants to talk to you." A contemptible smirk drifts across his face. He leans in close to unbuckle the chains around my feet and hands. The stench of his body odor is nauseating with breath like gaseous steam on my neck. He lingers there, sniffing my hair as if I were his prey. He coos in my ear. "The favorite of the Great Apostle. You will be very..." He pauses, his greedy eyes strolling up and down my body. "...useful." The slithering snake of chain sounds out a muffled tinkle as it drops from his hands.

"Where are we going?" I am yanked to my feet and a slow, painful tingle signals that blood is reaching back into my limbs.

"You're going to get the old man to open the door."

"Impossible," I involuntarily whisper, but he ignores me and pushes me towards the grand staircase.



The Rev. Mr. Alline Encounters an
Uncommon Light; or, Vapors of Nitre
as an Alarming Means:
A Found Poem

by John Bell

One evening
as I was taking a walk &
pondering on
my lost & undone condition,
all of a sudden
I was surrounded with an
uncommon light.

A blaze of fire,
it outshone the
sun at noon day.
I was immediately
plunged in keen despair &
the first conception I had was that
the great day of judgment
was come & time
at a period.

I stood with my face
towards the ground,
trembling in body &
sinking in mind, not
having power to
look nor ask for mercy.

My distress was so great
it continued for
half an hour.

When I lifted
up my eyes
I found the
day of judgment
was not come,
nor the world in flames.

There appeared
a large blaze of light
in the shape of a circle,
with that side next to me open,
as though it yawned after me.
As it drew very nigh me,
it closed up in a small compass,
then broke out in small sparkles
& vanished away.

It is no matter
whether the light
was one of the common phenomena
of nature,
such as exhaled vapors of nitre
that had gathered in the air,
for it was really
designed by God as an
alarming means, a miracle
sent to me in particular.

I thought very much
of the goodness of God
in giving me one moment more
for repentance
& was determined
to spend my
remaining moments
at the door of mercy,
begging for redeeming
love.



THE HARSH LIGHT OF MORNING

by David Jón Fuller

AS MARGARET HARROW stared into the unforgiving eyes of the Mountie outside her prison cell, the Holy Spirit whispered to her, *You must abandon your faith in God or you will die.*

She hugged herself in the incandescent light that filled the one-room police station. She didn't know what to think. Yet in a matter of hours, when sunlight streamed through the window across the room and between the bars of her jail cell, she would be reduced to ash.

I cannot, she whispered silently back. *I will not.*

You must, said the Holy Spirit.

The officer's face was dark, his brown eyes boring into her from across the tiny RCMP station. "I saw what you did to those kids."

She squinted her eyes shut and ran her tongue over her sharp teeth. For all the long years since her— encounter— with the departed Mr. Mackenzie, which she shuddered to think of, she had never felt as powerless. The decades now hung heavily on her shoulders, and this year, 1930, might well be her last.

It is time to acknowledge the truth, said the Holy Spirit.

What truth?

That there is no God.

Never!

The Mountie sat in a wooden chair that looked as though it had been at the station since the Boer War. His left leg was

crossed over his right, his left hand pinching the brim of his upside-down Stetson as it lay in his lap. The clock, spitting its loud ticks and tocks into the silence between him and Margaret, showed half past three. In the tiny village of MacDonald, large enough to house the isolated residential school and a train station to take Saskatchewan wheat to the markets of Winnipeg and Toronto, but little more, they were likely the only two not asleep. Surely he didn't need to guard her? Why, then, was he here, staring at her so? Was it because he was an Indian?

And the small, wooden crucifix that hung above the dark leaded window seemed to pierce her through the forehead. She had always avoided them, at the residential school. Stayed in her classroom in the basement, where she refused to have one put up. The sign had always made her feel weak; when the nuns, half-breeds and savages swarmed about her wearing them, the sight even *hurt* her as if she had swallowed a clutch of sewing needles. But she had never deserted her Lord. She knew He must be testing her.

She waited for an answer, now, in the warm cell as the hissing radiators blocked out the chill of a Saskatchewan autumn. But none came. Perhaps this was something different. But what? Her faith would remain strong. Only then would she be delivered, she knew.

But now, a doubt gnawed at her. How did she know the voice she had heard through the years, as her thirst for what she called her "Communion" grew insatiable, was that of the Holy Spirit? What if it were—

"I know what you are," said the Mountie. "What you can do to people. So don't 'ask' to leave. I made sure to throw the keys away outside. No one, not even me, will be able to find them until morning."

She looked him up and down. The anger in him was palpable; it hit her like a gust of prairie wind before a storm. His short-cropped hair was black as coal, his skin brown, the line of his nose showing her that he was one of them, an Indian. Resentment wafted out from him, in ways he probably didn't even realize, sitting there in his red serge, blue trousers and dust-covered boots. Since the Holy Spirit had begun guiding her, people's feelings, and sometimes even their thoughts, were as clear as the pages of a diary to her. She was also a shrewd guesser.

"I remember you," she said.



SUMMON THE SUN

by Carla Richards

RA SAT IN MY living room, in my bathrobe — the lavender one with ducks on it — soaking his feet in my foot spa. When I had summoned the Sun God, this was not what I expected.

“More hot,” he said, pointing at the foot spa. He managed to stop shivering long enough to bark the command with all the authority of an Egyptian deity with a present power base of one part-time Starbucks barista.

“Okay, fine. One more. But then you do something about the weather. I didn’t summon you here for this.” I pointed at the foot spa.

Ra looked at me, confused. “Hot,” he repeated. He had learned this little bit of English Helen Keller style, with me running his hand first under the cold tap, and then the hot. He didn’t like the cold — at all — this we had in common.

“I’m going. I’m going,” I muttered, putting the kettle on to boil. I fixed up his foot bath, and then returned to my job— trying to scrub the scorch marks the summoning ritual had left in the carpet. My damage deposit was toast.

To be honest, the fact that this spell had worked at all was a miracle. I had been kicked out of my coven because I kept forgetting the protective circle was closed, and stepping over it— it was a line of sand on the floor, after all. Okay, they had to restart the ritual every time I did that, but it’s not like I meant to. So, I hadn’t really thought this summoning spell I was doing all by myself would work. Which is maybe why I was pretty surprised when Ra arrived, curled on my floor in nothing but a

loincloth— shaking and shivering. Even so, he was kind of cute, in an all-powerful-bronze-living-god kind of way, but perhaps one is not supposed to say such things about a deity.

I wasn't sure how to communicate with him. But, by the time I gave up on the flooring situation, I had one idea. I scribbled a picture on a piece of paper, and when the demand for "Hot" came again, I was prepared. I shook my head firmly, and dried his feet one by one. This little bit of servitude seemed to please him enough that I was not smote down. I finished drying his feet, looked up, and — oh! — adjusted his bathrobe. Is it wrong here to tell you that Ra is hung like a minotaur? Though perhaps I shouldn't mix my mythologies. Anyhow —

I assisted Ra off the chair, and led him to the window. I kept my head slightly bowed. I don't know what he expected — masses of adorers, desert landscape. What he got was snow. The strip mall across the street, and snow. I pointed out the window, tapping at the glass, and then tapping at the sun I'd drawn.

Confusion. Clear confusion.

I opened the sliding door to my apartment's balcony. Wind that felt like flecks of ice burned my cheeks, and fluttered his robe.

"Cold," I said loudly, as if he were deaf, rather than a non-English speaker.

He recoiled from the window, and I slid the door closed.

I pointed at the sun picture. "Hot."

He pointed at the sun picture. "Ra."

"Yes. Sun. Ra. Hot." I fairly bounced on the spot. "You can fix the cold."

But he had already lost interest in the drawing. He picked up a pen, and looked at me as if to say 'what?'

"Pen," I told him.

He paused, then grabbed the lamp. The cord snapped from the outlet, and smacked the end table.

"Lamp," I said, gingerly taking the lamp from him, and returning it to the table.

He pointed at other things in the room, and I told him what they were. This was the most energetic I had seen Ra. I was hopeful. Finally, he pointed at the TV.

I flipped it on for him. I got to change the channel once before he snatched the remote. He was a man after all.

Luckily, and I mean that with all the sarcasm this situation demanded, there was a *Coronation Street* marathon on. Four



SO LOVED

by Matthew Hughes

“SO WHAT SHALL we do with the rough draft?”

I asked him.

He was contemplating the final version. “Dispose of it,” he said. “We won’t need it anymore.”

“But we put some good material in there.”

“Anything that was worth keeping went into the final draft,” he said, “which is perfect.”

“Still,” I said, “I like some of it.”

He made that noise he always makes when he’s dismissing something as trivial. And since everything is trivial in comparison to him, it was a noise I’d heard before. “Are you saying you want to keep it?” he said.

“Yes, I think so. Why not?”

“Well, look at it,” he said. “It’s just slapped together. There’s not a straight line or a smooth surface anywhere in it.”

“Straight lines and smooth surfaces aren’t everything.”

“No, but they *are* perfection,” he said. “Which was what we were aiming for. This was never more than a step along the way.”

“Sometimes you start out aiming for one place, then you take a turn and end up somewhere else, and you realize that the new place is pretty good, too.” I’d learned that from observing the draft.

“‘Pretty good’ is not good enough. Because it’s not perfect. It’s not even close to perfect,” he said. “It’s just... ‘pretty good.’”

“But pretty good is not bad. It can be okay.”

“But ‘okay’ is not okay when the goal is to achieve absolute, number-one, gleaming perfection.” He gave me that look he

gets when he's explaining things to the less perceptive, which again is a look I've seen before, since who's more perceptive than he is? "When we were putting the rough draft together," he said, "did we worry if something didn't balance just so?"

"No, we didn't worry."

"What was our basic measuring tool?"

"I know, I know. The bell curve," I said.

"The bell curve," he echoed. "And what do you get when you go by the bell curve?"

I knew, I knew. "Rough approximations."

"Exactly. Most of what you're working with clumps up in the middle of the distribution curve, so it's more or less right. But the farther out you get from the middle, in either direction, the wronger it gets, until it's just not right at all."

"Yes, but that's how you get variety."

"Did I ever say I wanted variety?"

"Well, you had us make all those variations on a theme. All those thousands of species of beetles."

"Yes, but as a precursor to what?"

I had to admit it. "Perfection. One perfect, ideal beetle."

"So was variety what I wanted to end up with?"

"No."

"What did I want?"

"Perfection."

"So what is variety, at best?"

I didn't want to answer.

"Come along," he said. "What is variety, at best?"

"Only a step on the way to perfection."

"Exactly. Just as, when we were doing the rough draft, we used fractals for all the edges, right?"

"Right."

"Why didn't we make the edges absolutely straight? Why did we let them be all jagged?"

"Because we were just sketching."

"Yes. Roughing it out. Hence the term, *rough* draft." He gave me that look that said, *What part of obvious are you having trouble with?* "So what do we want with the sketches now that we have the finished — that is, the perfect — piece?"

"Well," I said, "because some of them are just so..." I had to search for the right word, and finally came up with, "charming."

"Charming," he said, in that tone that means, *Is that what you think?*



THE MORAL OF THE STORY

by J. M. Frey

HER FINGERS BRUSH the soft skin, the small smooth of bone under thin flesh behind my left ear, brushing back through wiry hair to where I've got it pulled back in preparation for hard work. Lake water, brackish here where it mingles with the St. Lawrence, slides down the side of my neck, summoning goose pimples in its wake. The slick, cool brush of membrane kisses the lobe of my ear and I feel my eyes slide closed involuntarily, as natural as the slight gasp that parts my lips, inflates my lungs, brushes the taste of water and breeze and sunlight across my tongue.

"You came," the woman in the water says. Her voice is sibilant and filled with nearly inaudible clicks and hard-palate burrs, an accent never before heard in the lower plains of Quebec.

Never heard before the Melt caused all the water levels to rise. Never heard before the Great Dark came and killed all the technology. Never before the Daniel-Johnson dam stopped working, the regulating of the Manicouagan became too much and the river broke through its cement prison. Never before Baie-Comeau was overborne and drowned.

Possibly, perhaps — and maybe I flatter myself a little — never before in the whole of human history. But then, how could we have stories of things like her, if I'm the first to converse with one?

Arrogance is a sin. It's one of the sins that brought the Great Dark.

"I came," I say, opening my eyes. Sunlight on water dazzles like diamonds. I squint. It's a comfortable gesture. The lines beside my eyes folding into place is familiar, nearly soothing. "How could I stay away?"

"But did you come for *me*?" she teases, dipping her chin into the water in a gesture I've learned is meant to be coy, flirtatious. Dark hair slips and pools along the surface, shifting and curling like squid ink.

I sit back in the boat, take up my nets, and fling them over the side that she doesn't occupy. She whistles and clicks, face in the water, summoning fish. This is our deal. She fills my nets, I fill her mind, and we neither of us attempts to harm the other. Actively.



I had more hungry mouths to feed than fear of rumors, and that is what initially drove me out onto the unnatural lake. The stories said that there was something in the water that feeds on man-flesh. But I am no man, and we needed the fish.

For the first few weeks, it was subtle. An elongated shadow too far down to see clearly, too solid to be a school, but too large to be any breed of fish I had ever caught before. Sometimes, it was a splash on the surface of the otherwise calm lake. Once, my little rowboat lurched under my feet, against current, violent, *wrong*.

I was being hunted, I realized. Even as I harvested fish, something else sought to harvest me. The rumors were not *just* stories.

I stayed away for three days. On the fourth my youngest brother patted his stomach morosely and cried, unable to understand why he hungered so. Defeated by his tiny misery, I fetched my father's harpoon from the hunting shed, and made the short walk back to the rocky shoreline.

My little boat was tied up where I had left it, undisturbed. But, no, see— there were four long scratches in the wood of the stern, naked against the dark stain of tar sealant, brackish water, and age. I bent down, breath caught in the hollow of my throat, and splayed my palm against the slashes. They were finger-width apart from each other, come from a humanish hand.

There was a Creature in the lake. And it was mad at me.

Mad because I dared to fish? Or mad because I did not come back?



SOUL SURVIVOR

by Steve Stanton

JEREMY FOUND BECK cutting herself in a wash-room cubicle on the starship *New Babylon*, Day 37097, carving crimson curlicues in her upper thigh with a scalpel. She held a rag in her left hand to mop up the blood and touched it periodically to an angry wound. Both her legs had intricate mosaic patterns of welts and scars, a growing masterpiece of creative disfigurement.

"Can't sleep?" Jeremy asked, his voice flatlined with superficial calm.

"The demons are singing again," Beck said, wincing as her blade slivered through alabaster skin. Her black hair spiked up like the feathers of an eagle, a proud and ancient bird from the desolate world that had launched their ark generations ago.

"Come back to my cabin. I'll distract you from the music." Jeremy forced a smile as he hung weightless just outside the door. "You don't have to hurt yourself."

"It doesn't hurt, not really."

"Come back to bed anyway."

Beck paused in her work to look at him, her eyes beady and intense, fully dilated in the meagre shipboard illumination. "I've got to get home. My parents will be up soon for duty shift."

"We can't hide forever."

Beck frowned. "Don't start with me, Jeremy." She slid her blade into a pocket in her tunic. "My dad would blow an aneurysm."

Jeremy nodded. The Captain's daughter, Rebeka Elsigard Spinoza, forever distanced from a lowly apprentice in the Recycling Module— Beck was crazy and sexy, esoteric in the

head and a maniac in bed. He studied her with longing as she cleaned her fresh wound and gingerly pulled on her leggings. She was bony and gaunt, space-wasted like all of us, but her movements carried an elegant beauty, an economy of motion. "How was the song today?"

"Prophetic," she said as she floated forward. "Overwhelmingly glorious. The demon star is upon us."

Jeremy shook his head in common confidence. "Mothership says it's just a comet."

Beck squinted at him with distaste. "Mothership is a stupid machine. The comet is alive, Jeremy. The demons are coming."

"Sure, Beck," he said with a conciliatory grin. "Whatever you say."

She gave him a peck on the cheek as she squeezed by and brushed him with her breasts. "I know everyone thinks I'm a witch, but I don't care anymore. The music vibrates in my bones. It sings in my blood. I can't deny the truth."

"I wish I could hear it," Jeremy said. "I wish I could share the music with you."

Beck grabbed his arm with fresh intensity. "Come to a ceremony with me," she said, her dark eyes pleading. "You're as ready as you'll ever be. Time is short. The age of apostasy has ended."

A shadow of rejection clouded Beck's face at his involuntary grimace. Damn that hoary cult anyway! How had she been ensnared by those antiquated doctrines from old Earth? Cannibals and vampires? He would rather die than abase himself like that. God, what a mess. "I'll think about it," he said, wondering how he could possibly deny his lover this one heartfelt desire of communion.

Beck pressed her lips at his diversion. "Sure," she said. "I've got to go."



"She looks like a freak," Captain Spinoza muttered to his wife, Lenore, as they shared a squeeze tube of breakfast ration. "And all that fantasy about celestial music? The whole damn genome is deteriorating into madness!"

Lenore's eyes darted in the direction of her daughter's cabin. "Shush, Bill, Rebeka might hear you." She took the food tube and squirted a dab of recycled green paste onto her tongue.



EXOPLANET IV

by Erling Friis-Baastad

Our shy new neighbors
burrow back into their toxic clouds
study us through compound eyes
of green crystal

I can imagine
how we must appear to them—
mites stumbling over the pocked land
in a green haze

or frantic specks
milling before a block of stone
some local god dropped
onto our hard-won path

The wind here is akin to laughter
The planet guffaws and rocks fly
At least we are endured for now
moment by moment

Perhaps there is time enough
for someone to be born here
time for one small human to breathe
both in *and* out





CHROMATOPHORIC HISTORIES OF THE SEPIIDAE

by James Bambury

SEPIIDA

Take your places around me. I shall give you the story as it was given to me so many freezes ago; when I was young like you and ready to swim out into the deepest and coldest of waters.

We came from the darkness. Follow the first bit of Oza's brightness for four arcs and you will find yourself where you cannot see the bottom of the ocean. Long ago, our kind lived there. Those sisters were different from you and I; stupid and clear-skinned, blind and mute. They stumbled in the darkness and the spiny-ones fed on them. A few might leave clutches of eggs and some might grow up to do the same but we were no better off than the green you see around you that we eat at our leisure.

They say that when Sepiida was hatched she had the largest eyes. She looked out at the waters from her egg and learned more while waiting to hatch than most do before their first freeze. Where the others swam aimlessly into the claws of the spiny ones she sensed their approach and kept ahead of them. She grew larger and faster than any of her sisters and her eyes even sharper.

Eventually, she noticed the faint traces of Oza's light that reached the dark waters and she began to follow them. It became

warmer and brighter as she rose and she soon saw the light above her was not a single ray but a series of shimmering colors.

Then the patterns coalesced into words.

I am Oza. Welcome.

She swam upwards, broke the surface of the waters and looked directly at Oza. She was still clear-skinned and without any voice. Oza saw this and took the colors from the ocean and wrapped them around Sepiida. Her skin now danced with the same shimmering patterns that she had seen on the water only moments before.

Thank you, the patterns on her skin danced to Oza.

This is my gift to you, Oza replied. Now, share it with those where my light and voice cannot reach. This is your gift to use until the day all return and become light.

Sepiida turned back and swam towards the colder and darker waters.

She signalled as brightly as she could to any that could see her.

Follow me.

From the darkness came the ones like her, but small and silent. She shone again, brighter than before.

Follow me to Oza.

More came to her, away from the spiny-ones, but Sepiida knew there were more lost in the darkness. She summoned her strength and then shone with all the light that Oza had put into her. For an instant, all of the waters were permeated with the light, with Sepiida's message.

Go to Oza. Find your way.

And every one of our kind with eyes to see stopped what they were doing and made their way towards Sepiida. Something else happened, Sepiida's light was so luminous that it not only reached the others but bound to their skin the way that Oza's light bound to Sepiida's. The others found their own skins glowing with patterns and they gathered together, signalling to one another excitedly with their new-found voices.

Sepiida, however, had turned clear and her body had ceased, the gift of Oza expelled from her. Her last sight was that of the others gathering around her signalling their excitement and gratitude. She thanked Oza with her last thoughts as she felt herself caught in the currents back to the dark waters.

That is how Sepiida gave us the word and the light. We are imperfect reflections of her as she was an imperfect reflection



GANAPATI BAPPA MORIYA!

by Savithri Machiraju

*O Ganesha, with a crooked trunk and great body,
Whose brilliance is equal to ten million suns
Make my endeavors succeed, O Lord
And remove all obstacles from my path*

GANESHA, LOLLING IN his Himalayan abode atop Mount Kailasa, listened raptly to the prayer of his devotee on Earth. As soon as the prayer was finished, he opened his eyes and smiled at his two wives, Siddhi and Buddhi.

"You see? Even in America the people are so devoted to me," he said, and was about to twirl his moustache in emulation of the more macho gods, forgetting that he had an elephant head. Wincing a little at the fact that he could not grow a moustache, he relieved his feelings by rubbing his trunk instead.

"What's surprising about that? Why, the first temple built in America was yours, dear," said Siddhi.

"And because they started by worshipping the Remover of All Obstacles, there are so many temples of all gods established and succeeding in America," added Buddhi.

Ganesha's chest swelled with pride. "Shall we see what this devotee's desire is?" he said, and again turned his eyes to America, to what looked like a large warehouse in the business district of a metropolitan area, where a lady in a red silk sari was coming to the end of the *puja* ceremony of worship.

Lalita performed the final *harati*, moving the plate of flaming camphor in a large clockwise circle in front of the deity. She closed her eyes reverently. "Let my baby's business do well, Lord," she prayed, and opened her eyes to see her daughter waiting with ants in her pants.

"Done?" asked Maya, trying to hide her irritation.

"Did you do *namaste* to the god?" asked Lalita in turn.

"Oh, Mom!" Frustrated, Maya touched the fingertips of both hands together and produced a facsimile of a *namaste*.

As soon as that business was over, "Now take that away!" she said, pointing to the picture of Ganesha.

Lalita stared in amazement. "Take it away? Why?"

"When you said a *puja*, I figured that would just be a five minute deal and agreed. Now the puja's done, right? So why keep it?"

Lalita smiled fondly at her daughter's innocence. "Silly! The reason for putting the God here at the front desk isn't for a five minute puja. Every day, every minute, he should be there to look after you and your company."

Maya screamed. "What! You want him there always? Everyone who steps through the door should see him first? Mom! Do you know what my business is when you say this?"

Lalita looked at her in confusion. "Of course I know. You've been saying you wanted to start a Fitness and Yoga Center for ages."

"Yes. This is a *Fitness* Center. Do you know what that means? It means that the people who come here will lose weight, get their bodies back in shape, and will be slim and toned when they leave. You should put pictures of people with fabulous figures here, not a monstrosity like this!"

"Bite your tongue!" gasped Lalita, lightly slapping her cheeks in atonement.

She tried to tap her daughter's cheeks, too, but didn't succeed, as Maya pushed her hands away. Lalita snapped, "Is that the way to talk about god?"

"What's wrong with what I said? Look at that huge pot belly. Look at those big, floppy ears. Look at that trunk. Anyone who sees all that will think this is an Obesity and Ugliness Center, not a Fitness Center." Maya didn't mince her words.

"Shiva Shiva!" cried Lalita, covering her ears.

In Kailasa Ganesha jumped up from his seat, his body shaking, his trunk quivering, his breath coming fast as he stomped off.



ABOMINATIŌ

by Jen Laface and Andrew Czarnietzki

DR. LAMBERT FELT the shockwave hit, the loud bang echoing through the desolate camp. Dust filled the air, disturbed by the concussion. He almost dropped the body he was searching.

“Ho-leeee crap! Did you see that?” Ross the former salesman asked the group of school teachers, rig pigs, and whoever else was willing to join the scavenger expedition. His voice had the hope and desperation Dr. Lambert felt. They needed to find supplies soon. Maybe some plane had dropped off aid. Or simply crashed. It’d been a long time since anyone had seen a plane.

Ross was the only one to see it fall from the sky. Everyone looked up to a column of smoke rising in the distance under the sun. Mouths agape, their eyes wide with hope. The devout murmured that this was a sign of providence. Dr. Lambert thought it was just dumb luck. Their assumption that the crash was divine left him uncomfortable.

The other scavengers searching the bodies stopped, but Dr. Lambert carefully lowered the dead woman to the sand. She glistened from the faded remains of the Nigh’s golden ichor. The bodies they’d found were all the same—horribly contorted in a tableau of pain and anguish. They never made it out of the camp. Dr. Lambert had lost count how many times in the past year they’d found bodies in this condition.

The warmth of her body suggested she’d died only minutes ago, but the dust and decay in the camp hinted they’d been dead for months. The Nigh left its victims in a strange state of preservation. He checked that her eyes were closed and

paused, thinking better to fold her arms on her chest rather than flopped at the sides. She looked more at peace. Wishing he could do more for the woman's dignity, he was ushered by Leslie to join the gathering crowd.

The lanky woman kicked the ground impatiently. She rubbed her wrist, self-conscious of the yellowing bruise where Corey had grabbed her. Their self-appointed leader, Corey, didn't like any of "his flock" dilly-dallying. His outbursts were happening more frequently as they became more desperate for resources.

Dr. Lambert picked up his bag of precious medical supplies, hurrying more for Leslie's sake than his own. Corey left him alone for the most part. As the group's only medical doctor, he was valuable. Praying only went so far.

"We've been blessed," a familiar booming voice said.

Corey pointed in the direction of the crash, revealing several layers of yellow stains underneath the armpits of his shirt. Each stain marked the days they had left the camp like the rings of a tree.

All eyes fell on the tallest man in the group. Corey stood proud, despite weathered skin and gaunt cheeks. The years since the Nigh had been hard on him.

Dr. Lambert had learned quickly to wait for Corey to speak. This had been an easy lesson for him. He wished Leslie and the others would keep silent and not rock the boat. She often had good ideas, except she didn't know how to navigate the schoolyard politics.

Corey turned to survey the group, stone-faced and with a posture Dr. Lambert referred to as "leader-ly." It helped being a head taller than everyone else. The trucker hat came off, exposing his thinning blond hair and pink scalp to the sun. He wiped his forehead before speaking.

"Let's leave this and go check out the crash. This could be our deliverance," Corey said. The word "deliverance" hung in the air.

There were murmurs of objection through the small group. Leslie was the loudest.

"This is bad— we should stay away. I mean, we haven't seen a plane in years. It could be anything," Leslie said.

"Remember the bodies," Purjeet whispered. She couldn't stifle the fear in her voice. "They're always trying to get away



WHEN BONE SHIPS SAILED THE STARS

by David Fraser

When they approached the cliff
there was no turning back. It's then
they carved a ship from the hollow bone
of a great sea serpent's skull,
fashioned sails from its skin
before the creature rotted,
bleached by sun and water by the sea.
With each passing day, with tools
once forged in zero gravity, they worked,
etching runes and circuitry,
the rotting smell enough to make
the starving hurl their stomachs on the rocks.
At night in a cave, on an oak table
they unfolded all the stars in the milky way
and spread them like a map
lit by harnessed sun and candle light.

In them was a spirit not destroyed and they would gather
by the hot tide pools tempered by the sea,
and search late summer skies for answers,
make up stories for the questions that still remained.
Their solar barque was fitted with the tiny bones
of all the animals they loved, fingers from children
who'd died too young, and the long thin shanks
of the wasted ones who once had brought them home
in woven baskets and swaddling clothes.



THE LAST MAN ON EARTH

by Suzanne M. McNabb

I AM MILLIE, the lucky one.

The Castle is mine and you must stay away.

This is how it was in the beginning. All the girls and boys were starving or burning to death or caught in terrible storms. I survived because I am special. Many people wanted to go to the Castle but the Men kept them out, locking the double gates and shutting up the great doors. My father was friends with some of the Men who lived in the Castle. At first they were not sure but I proved myself so they taught me everything. That is why I was chosen above all others to keep the Castle as the time of the Men ended.

Mark told me often how clever I was.

I learned at a young age to switch the pumps, manual to auto. I memorized the screens to watch over the gas-jobbies. I wear the badge and I know where I can never go in the Castle. The Men taught me how to add oil, to tighten the packing, to clean the fine screens and how to clean the large screens on the intake. I know how to run the water purifier.

Now that they have all gone, I run the place just like they taught me: *Millie, Queen of the Castle*.

While girls my age were being raped or eaten in the south lands, I was sprouting breasts, watching *Fight Club*, *The Man Who Would be King* and *Fast and Furious*. I would have watched *Jackass* too but Anthony said it was evil and he broke the disk in two. With my feet on the desk, I read and reread Hitachi

manuals and Lee Child novels until I understood. Mark wrote down *Important Instructions* and printed them in a binder in case I forget while I ate *O Henrys* straight from the big box, listened to Johnny Cash and Johnny Horton. Mark cut the locks in the women's shower room and we sorted through all the things that I might need as I grew. The Men brought rifles into the Castle, smuggled in crates of food. We were lucky. We feasted on wild game and berries and watched news of the Great Burning on the Net until that died too.

From the highest windows of the Castle we could see the horizons of dark smoke on the south side of the deep valley all the way from the east to the west. Anthony said, *we are the last Men on earth now*. Some of the Men wept but I did not. We are the lucky ones. Finally the skies cleared but the radio and the net stayed dead.

The Burning didn't come this far north but still it affected the hot Units, or so the Men told me. The hot Units are different from the micro-turbines; somehow the heat made them unstable so the gas jobbies started up, to keep the heat in its place. My purpose as Queen is to mind the castle and They told me how important it is, more important than my curiosity about the world beyond the Castle, more important than the search for survivors, more important than being kissed by a boy. They teased me on this and I cried, *why would I want a boy to kiss me?* They laughed, their deep voices filling the control room as Anthony cooked venison and Fob beat Chachi at crib.

I was chosen to be spared the great horror.

Not that I didn't have to be strong. One by one, each Man lost his hair and the skin of his eyes turned white with scabs. Each grew weak and sick to his stomach. When I had seen enough to know what was going to happen next, I demanded the Men to do something. *Use the medicine from the First Aid room where I sleep*. Kenny slapped my shoulder. *We need you to be strong, Millie*.

While the Man could still walk, he unrolled a large six mil bag off the reel in the corner of the back room. *Out of respect for the rest of us*, Mark told me. To help him go faster, the Man would take the HF bottle out of the red safe-box and dab a little on his neck and carefully put the bottle back. Leaving his light suit and his heavy suit on the hook, he would leave for the hottest part of the Castle where we should never walk



WHERE THE SCORCHED MAN WALKS

by Megan Fennell

IT WAS TIME to say the old words, the true words, but I did not trust my voice to arrive without breaking. After a pause, Witch Mother spoke them for me.

“Our people do not die,” Witch Mother said, “but we go where the Scorched Man walks, and the Scorched Man shall guide us to peace.”

Poor Naza seemed unable to take any shred of comfort in the prayer. Her voice was in tatters from sobbing as she repeated the lines after Witch Mother. I softly murmured them along with her, bolstering her words with my own, offering what meagre strength I could.

My gaze remained on the small cloth-wrapped bundle at my knees. If I looked at Naza I might have wept as well, and a good Witch Daughter does not weep. But my head was only recently shorn in the fashion of the healers and the blue ink on my skin was so fresh that it still gleamed as though wet. Unshed tears burned behind my eyes like salt in a new wound. I had loved Naza since we were both children playing around the cooking fire together and I knew much more than a Witch Daughter should. I knew how badly Naza had wanted a son and knew that she had been eager enough to speak his name before he'd left her belly. My heart was broken for her, my mouth sour with fury at the unfairness of it, emotions unbecoming a healer. It was beyond my power to do anything but bear witness to her mourning now.

The air in the tent was stifling, thick with the smell of sickness and singed healers' herbs. I was no stranger to the scent of grief, but when the hide curtain covering the doorway was lifted and the clean evening air swept in to touch my face, I did breathe easier.

Ilan ducked through the doorway. He looked at the bundle that I tended and then quickly away as though the very sight of it had burned him. The dust of the approaching storm had caked in the tear-tracks on his cheeks, tracing pale lines over his rich brown skin, and I was reminded so suddenly and painfully of my father in the height of his grief that it knotted the breath in my throat.

"He is coming," Ilan said. There was dust in his hair and on his clothing and it fell from him as he moved to crouch next to Naza. "The Scorched Man is coming for him now."

She gave a broken wail and said my old name like a plea. As though there was anything that I could do to stop this, to return life to her little boy, to undo the past. She who knew me best of all knew that I had no power to change the course of the Scorched Man.

I bowed my head to tuck the infant's shroud more securely around his tiny unmoving chest and let the soft material swallow the tears that I could not keep from falling. With our shorn heads and simple dress, a Witch Daughter is left no way to hide her own sorrow.



There was a time Naza and I had danced like maidens, our hair whirling long and wild, the bangles at our wrists and ankles chiming a sweet harmony to the thump of the drums. We stomped our feet like we would pound the earth into wine beneath us. We danced until our bodies ached and the stars seemed to dip lower to spin about our heads, until we were both giddy and breathless, and only then did we stop.

Laughing, we moved out of the circle together, leaving it to Alimah and the other girls who fancied themselves the *real* dancers. Our movements were not so pretty by half, but Naza danced for joy and I only danced to forget myself for a while, and that was enough for us.

She clutched at my arm and pressed her blood-hot cheek against my shoulder when we sat down at the edge of the light. I could feel her smile on my skin.



Afterword

THE STRUGGLE TO WRESTLE WITH GODS

by Liana Kerzner

FOR MAGIC TO WORK, we must believe in it.

That's my own little personal artist's mantra. Any successful work of fiction needs a living spark; inspiration; magic. Writers must produce magic on demand over and over again, and that's not only difficult: it's unreliable. So we must believe.

This book, like the religious texts that in part inspired it, had two factors with which to contend in its creation: what it believed people could be, and what we must accept people are. We hope people can be open-minded, patient, eager to learn, and aware of other cultures. People are, however, tribal, insecure, awkward in new situations, and limited in our understanding. In order for this book to be accessible, we had to embrace both reality and our best hopes for humanity.

I don't think Jerome and I were consciously aware that the selection process involved belief, but looking back on the stories we accepted, that paradigm definitely emerged. We believed in these stories because they believed in themselves. They believed in themselves because they believed in something beyond themselves. These stories had to be beyond great to overcome the stigmas and disputes surrounding religion: they had to be magical.

We desperately wanted to minimize the culture war element of religiously-inspired stories, so we started the book with a story that introduces us to "A Jesus" instead of "The Jesus", to clarify our position on use of religious characters in fiction.

We had to draw this line to maintain a respectful approach to faith while still allowing artistic freedom. This is not a value judgment on the “rightness” of any given faith. It’s simply treating the various faiths the way they treat themselves. We offered the authors a chance to give us a few lines regarding the inspiration for their stories because even the “made up” faiths had inspirations from our world that deserved recognition.

We also had to address the appropriate place and role of Christianity in an interfaith anthology. It’s undeniable that Christianity is the most commonly-understood faith in the West, but we wanted to use it as an intake vehicle, not a baseline for “normal”.

I also felt strongly that an interpath anthology include representation from... I don’t know how to define the generalization, because no one is a “non-believer”. Everyone has a moral code and a collection of beliefs, even if they don’t involve a god. I’ve met atheists with greater moral convictions than some church-goers. In one atheist friend’s case, I credit “empathy through internet cat videos”, but I can’t prove causality.

I didn’t believe that atheists and agnostics needed to be included because I thought a great many atheists were going to read this book. I insisted because we can’t claim to believe that we are all creatures of a god, then cut away any section of humanity just because they believe differently. Of course, we had to be handed magical stories to represent the evidence-based contingent, and we were fortunate to receive the Sacristy’s agnostic Shaman and Millie’s “faith in manuals and movies”.

And this brings us to a major challenge we faced in selecting the stories: where to draw the line between fantasy, science-fiction, and faith, since all religions contain heavy doses of absorbed folklore and mysticism. We found that stories that didn’t provide enough of a fantasy/sci-fi element inadvertently risked demeaning the religion-based components, so we couldn’t include them. Others fused fantasy and faith with great technical skill, but didn’t give us a reason to emotionally connect with the craftsmanship. Holy books are less about gods and more about what people do in the service to those gods, and while both folklore and religion attempt to influence behavior through stories, all the religions I’ve looked into actually encourage people to think for themselves.

I know, I know, that's not how they're applied by many, but you can't blame a book for what people do with it. Religious texts are not easy things to understand. They're full of contradictions which are acknowledgements that life is a complicated equation, and there are no easy answers. "Jihad" means "to struggle in the way of Allah", "Israel" means "struggle with God". The word "passion" in a Christian context refers to the suffering of Christ, during which Jesus cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's no accident that in that moment, Jesus asks "why?" as opposed to just forsaking the God he believes forsook him. Religion is, at its core, a struggle to understand the "why?" of the world.

We wanted the book to reflect this struggle. In the modern world, we don't need religion for anything else: secular governments provide the "who" of our rule book, the legal code provides the "what and when", geopolitical borders provide the "where" and the media, licensing processes, and police services gives us the "how". But *why* are murder and theft wrong? *Why* should we be kind to animals? *Why* should women, minorities and aboriginals have equality? By grappling with ancient words of wisdom, I've found answers to these questions. Disagreeing with a deity put me in tune with my own power. WWJD can sometimes mean asking WTF?

We are at a turning point, thousands of years after the advent of monotheism, where people of faith need to take religion back from the fringe elements which are making it seem hateful and irrelevant. We hope that this book is a small step in reclaiming faith and religion for those of us that want it to be an important part of our lives without taking over our lives. The radicals have had their time. It's time for the rest of us to find our voices again, and show that each of our Gods likes a good challenge.

This means avoiding the OTP principle: the One True Patriarch— Apologies to numerous fandom shippers; I thought that term was catchy. Since we minimized patriarchy in the project's ideology, we didn't have to do anything else to make sure female characters and female authors were equally represented. Canada has so many excellent writers, male and female alike, that since we kept an open mind and accepted their stories on their own terms, we effortlessly ended up with pretty equal representation.

We do, however, have more work to do when it comes to racial representation, more specifically, encouraging submissions from writers representing minority groups. *Wrestling With Gods* contains a great mix of characters of color, (and chromatophoric cuttlefish) but we weren't able to include as many authors of color as I would have liked. The non-white authors who submitted are just as talented as their more privileged counterparts, but they didn't submit in sufficient numbers for us to create proportional representation. This is an issue the sci-fi/fantasy community needs to take seriously. This level of marginalization is neither natural nor positive.

What is positive is the mix of established authors, new authors, and established authors who were new to me. This book was a unique and specific creative challenge, and Jerome and I were pleased to see so many known names stepping out of their respective comfort zones, some even within their existing universes. The authors took real risks, challenged themselves, and the results speak for themselves. The poetry submissions were uniquely inspired as well. Once everything was selected, the table of contents came together with an eerie ease. I'm too much of a rationalist to claim divine intervention, but there were moments where I felt like someone was giving me a nod, if not active help. I think it's arrogance, however, to believe that God would direct specific attention to a Canadian sci-fi anthology.

I prefer to think it's magic. Because I believe in magic.

