

Jozi Flash 2017

A Flash Fiction Anthology by South African Authors

Illustrations by Nico Venter



Once more, for everyone who contributed to make *Jozi Flash 2017* a reality.

You did it.

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A Brief History

Jozi Flash 2017 is the second anthology of its kind, the first being *Jozi Flash* which was created in 2016.

Many of the authors from 2016 have returned to contribute to our 2017 version, which is a far more elaborate work.

Nico Venter provided the artwork which separates the chapters, split by genres. His art was inspired by the written prompt. The authors had to include both the image and the phrase in their stories.

The result is an impressive array of imaginative talent, created by South African artists, and compiled for your enjoyment.

If you'd like to know more about the contributors, brief biographies appear at the back, along with links to contact them. Their dedications also appear there.

Children's



“Where there were dragons, there was gold.”

Hanno Goes to Dragon Island

– Christelle Bloem

Hanno sat straight up in his bed, excitement bursting from his heart for the adventure he was going on. He pulled out his map from under his pillow, and looked at it again wonderingly. It was crumpled up at the edges from his constant closing and reopening it throughout the evening as he had been unable to sleep. In the corner was the symbol of the dragon, and he carefully stroked it in awe.

Where there were dragons, there was gold.

He quietly got out of bed and put on his walking shoes. He grabbed his bag where he had hidden it in his closet from his parents, and carefully opened his bedroom window to avoid any noises that might alert them to his doings.

He climbed out carefully, stepped onto the branch of the tree outside, and closed it behind him. He climbed down, constantly checking around him if anyone had found him. When he was on the ground, he waved his home goodbye and ran towards the horizon in the direction of the full moon.

His journey continued until he reached the forest. Taking out his map, Hanno went to stand in a clearing in the middle for the moon to light up the secret writing on it.

To find the treasure that you seek, search for the light house on the peak,

Where the house ends its light, the full moon shines on it bright.

Spotting the roof of the lighthouse, he ran eagerly towards it, pushing back branches and plants that tried to stand in his way.

At the lighthouse, he saw a little boat on the beach where the light ended. He ran along the edge of the water until he reached it, dropped in his bag, and paddled his way into the heart of the ocean, looking for Dragon Island where the gold was hidden.

After a short while, he reached it, and leapt out of his boat to look for the dragon. He took out his trusty map again, and looked at the inscription he had decoded previously at the bottom of the page.

The dragon hides his glee in the age of the tree

After searching, he found an old palm tree, and almost leapt for joy when he saw the picture of the dragon, well camouflaged within the lines in the tree.

He went to the dragon's mouth and took out the little spade in his bag. He dug and dug for what seemed like many hours. Even the sun came out to greet him.

Finally, his spade hit something hard, and he scratched it away to reveal the treasure. He took out the box and unlocked it with his key. There it was.

Bars of gold, all his for the taking.

Hanno looked at his bag in dismay. He knew he couldn't take his treasure home without uncanny criticism from his parents. They wouldn't understand.

So, he left it there, but carved his name next to the dragon, and made a vow that someday he would return for the treasure.

A Home for the Dragon's Rose

– Candice Maree Burger

Clara Drake tossed and turned in her bed, the raging storm only adding to her unease. No sooner had she fallen asleep than there was someone banging on the front door of the lighthouse she and her brother, Aidan, called home.

Clara opened the door a crack and grumpily demanded, "What do you want, who are you, and do you have any idea what time it is?"

The girl at the door jumped back and almost fell off the step.

"Where there were dragons there was gold," she said in a soft trembling voice.

Clara's eyes grew wide in disbelief. While Aidan made his way down the stairs, she ushered in the girl who looked to be no older than 15. She was soaked through, her lips the colour of blueberries. Clara sent Aidan to fetch dry clothes.

The girl had clearly been through a lot, her clothes were ruined and she was covered in scrapes and bruises. Once she had changed, Clara gave her some tea and let her warm herself by the fire. Clara noticed that she had a necklace identical to her brother's. When their guest appeared less frozen, Clara introduced herself and her brother.

"Abigale Rose Archer," the girl said, taking a sip of her tea. Silent tears ran down her cheeks.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Abigale," Clara said with a warm smile, "but may I ask what brings you here?" Abigale sniffed before telling the siblings how her home had been destroyed.

"My father always said if anything ever happened I was to come here so that I could complete my Guardian training and become the next Dragon Rose."

Clara watched her brother's eyes grow wide at Abigale's revelation. In all honesty, she too found it hard to believe the tiny red haired girl was to join her brother in guarding the world of Magic.

Abigale began to sob again and Clara watched as Aidan comforted her.

"It's going to be all right," he assured her.

"No, it wont," Abigale sniffed. "My father is going to find our home has been turn to a pile of rubble."

"Your father will be happy to know you're safe," Clara said kneeling in front of her. "Now dry your eyes. I have someone who wants to see you." Clara helped her stand.

She led the way smiling to herself as the two children chatted away behind her. The trio stopped in front of a big wooden door , and just as she had done a thousand time in her dreams, Abigale held up her neckace as did Aidan and together they spoke the same words Abigale had said at the front door.

It opened to reveal a mighty dragon.

"Welcome home little Guardians," it said, "I have been waiting ages for you, my Star and my Rose."

Ruby Tales

– Justin J.

At a lighthouse by the ocean, a man sat with his little girl. The moon shone down on the father and daughter, a moment of serenity for the two. The little girl hugged her father's arm, long blonde hair loose around her shoulders, blue eyes shining.

“Can you tell me a story, papa?” she asked. The man smiled down at his daughter, his own blue eyes meeting hers. He also had blonde hair, and like his daughter, spoke with a German accent.

“Of course. What do you want to hear, Alece?”

Alece beamed at her beloved papa before scrunching up her face in thought. “Treasure!” the six-year-old said happily. The man laughed and sat down, pulling his little girl onto his lap and holding her.

“All right, I'll tell you a story about dragons and treasure.” The man ruffled his treasure's hair and fell into thought, staring at the moon.

“Once there was a man. This man wanted to give his little girl everything; he wanted to make her happy.” His daughter yawned; it had been a full, fun day for her. “So he went all over the place, looking for caves and castles and other old places where treasure might be.

“He spent a long time wandering; only ever finding emptiness. One day, he was in the mountains. In those mountains was a cave. With nothing else to do but go in or return home, he chose to go in. The cave was dark, but he could see light deeper in. In he went, until the small cave opened up into a large cavern. In that cavern was a pile of treasure. Gold coins and jewels. Surprised and amazed, the treasure hunter ran forward to take something for his little girl.

“As he touched the first coin, a shadow fell over him. It was a dragon, big and red and scary. The treasure hunter, terrified, fell backwards and stared up.

“The dragon spoke: 'Thief, why do you come here?'

“The treasure hunter, ever the honest man, replied in the only way he could: 'I want a treasure to make my little girl happy.'

“The dragon, though large, was neither unkind nor selfish. 'I have many children of my own, all scattered around the world now. I know what it means to want to make a child happy. There is a

necklace in the silver box. If you are being honest in your intentions, you may take it and gift it to your daughter.' The man, surprised and grateful, took the necklace.

"Thank you,' he said to the dragon, and went home to make his daughter happy. His daughter loved the necklace and swore never to take it off, a reminder that—"

"Where there were dragons, there was gold?" His wife arrived; also blonde haired and blue eyed, and smiled down at them both.

The man rose to his feet, holding the sleeping Alece in his arms. He smiled down at his love.

"Of course, Agneta."

She smiled and touched a hand to the necklace she never removed. "Let's go home, Markell."

Dragon Bay

– Carin Marais

The morning after the storm the beach was strewn with the detritus the waves had left behind. Clumps of sea foam covered tangles of seaweed, pieces of wood and sodden crates flung onto the beach by the angry waves. The last pieces of the ship that had carried the cargo floundered on the rocks as we watched. The rescued sailors were in the lighthouse, having their wounds tended to, or drying off and feeding their empty bellies. The sailors, however, were not half as interesting as the cargo the ship had been carrying.

“We were sailing for home,” I’d overheard the captain telling my father before he had been led off to the lighthouse. From my father’s face I could tell that he knew that it had been more than just a normal storm. Where there were dragons, there was gold. And where men took gold, dragons were soon to follow.

“That’s how ships just vanish on the long voyages,” my father would say. “They go and carry gold and jewels and then the dragons get them.”

Oh, how I wanted to see a sea dragon for myself and not just hear or read second-hand stories. That’s why I took to working in the lighthouse every moment I could.

I stepped lightly on the beach between the debris and saw glimmering in the sunlight a few gold coins and silverware scattered from one of the many crates. Between the gold coins was what I thought up until then was the prize of all prizes - a broken dragon scale. Blue-black like the deepest ocean waters, harder than any rock, shiny like obsidian. I picked it up and put it in my pocket.

Only when I rounded the corner of a huge crate did I see the true treasure the ship was carrying. On a small mound of coins it had dragged together to form a makeshift bed was a baby sea dragon. It purred as the edges of the waves caressed its body and looked up at me with trusting eyes.

I reached out to touch it and managed to place my fingertips on its scales before it snapped at my fingers.

“We’d better put him back where he belongs,” my father said from where he’d come up behind me. “That must be the mother as came looking for him and sunk the ship. Come. Quick, before the men return.”

We put the small dragon back into the ocean and it swam out to sea. Beyond the breakers I saw the mother dragon lift her head in recognition and cry out.

My father and I played dumb the whole time the sailors were with us.

“No,” we said, “we haven’t seen any dragons”

“You’ve been in the sun too long,” my father added.

No dragons in Dragon Bay, he always said.

Though, sometimes, a small one comes to visit and search for gold coins to add to its hoard beneath the waves.

Maxwell and the Gold of Dragons

– Elliot P. McGee

Where there are dragons, there is gold. Maxwell had learnt this from his numerous expeditions and adventures. He was a boy just shy of fifteen, with hair of flame and a face filled with freckles. He called the seashore his home, and the lighthouse by the sea his hideout, and the staff in his hand his friend.

Maxwell stood now atop the lighthouse, the moon's rays bouncing gently off the waves of the sea. He gazed out toward the horizon at the same spot he had seen a gigantic winged thing flying earlier in the day. As the sun had set he had lost sight of it.

Maxwell worried for the safety of his family. He had faced dragons on several occasions, but always with his father, and far from home. Here he had his mother, his father, and his two younger sisters to protect. He held himself valiant and noble in the face of danger, having been warned by his father that a day like this may come.

With the arrival of night Maxwell turned to the lighthouse itself for assistance. No ships had sailed these seas since before Maxwell's time, the lighthouse obsolete, and so the light had been doused for just as many years. Maxwell needed that light now more than ever.

As he stepped inside the lantern room a complicated series of mirrors, gears, levers and pulleys surrounding a central brazier greeted him. He knew more or less how it worked from early experimentation when the lighthouse had been new to him. He walked over to the brazier and struck flint to steel. Sparks flew, catching on the already prepared tinder and fuel.

In several moments a flame roared inside the room, hopefully the only flame to do so this night, and light jumped from mirror to mirror, becoming a sharp beam sent out into the night to chase the darkness away. A pull of a lever set the gears turning and slowly the beam began its rotation.

Within the room other things glittered and sparkled, jewels and gems and gold pieces the size of a thumb, along with other treasures Maxwell's family had collected on their many travels. Where there are dragons, there is gold, and they had defeated many dragons.

Maxwell stepped out of the lighthouse, turning his eyes again to the skies to find any trace of the great winged thing he had seen before. A gust of wind from above blew across the lighthouse's viewing platform accompanied by a leathery beating of wings.

Maxwell looked up and was greeted by the sight of a terror of the night, a mighty dragon of amber and gold. With a bellow, Maxwell steeled himself and, taking his staff in his hands, leapt at the dragon. Maxwell had been prepared for this day for many years for they all knew where there was gold, there would also be dragons.

Kraken

– Nthato Morakabi

“Oi!”

Old man Johnson hobbled quickly down the dirt path. His long white beard fluttered in the breeze like a flag made from cotton candy.

“You get away from there, boy!” he shouted again.

The boy turned around... but he wasn't a boy. Not really. He had yellow eyes with black irises like a lizard. His nose lay flat against his face with two tiny slits. The rest of him was all scales.

“Oh gosh!” Mr. Johnson took a step back with his mouth open.

“Mr. Johnson! I'm glad you're here.” The boy said with a razor-tooth smile. His tongue slithered out when he spoke. Behind him a lighthouse rose to the sky like a giant candy cane, swirling red and white.

“How do you know my name? What are you?” Mr. Johnson asked keeping a distance from the lizard boy.

“I'm a dragon Mr., and I've been watching your lighthouse these past few weeks.”

“A dragon you say?”

“Ayup.”

“Well... dragon, this here is my home. What do you want?” Mr. Johnson's face was turning red with anger, but his body shook with fear.

“I need a place to stay.” The boy said. He turned towards the water. It gleamed like liquid gold as the sun hovered beyond the horizon.

“I don't have room for a dragon. Shoo!”

“Please.” He pleaded, “I can't change into a dragon and go home until I find gold. I will protect you if you spare just a bit of gold.”

“Never!” Mr. Johnson hobbled forward with his fists raised. The boy hissed in fear and dove into the water.

“This here is my gold! Don’t come back, you hear?!”

The water rippled and fell silent. The boy was gone.

A week later, Mr. Johnson sat in his room inside the lighthouse. A lamp cast a golden glow over his treasure chests piled high against the curving wall. Smugglers were bringing his gold in again so he kept the lighthouse’s beam off so that no one could see them. Night had approached and the moon sat in the sky like a silver coin. Soon, above the sound of crashing waves, he heard men’s voices. The smugglers were here.

He hobbled into the cool night, excitement quickening his pace, and then froze. A large man stood under the moonlight, a big, dark hat shading his face. A black beard coiled down to his chest.

“Blackbeard?”

“Aye! Blackbeard!” The pirate smiled. Most of his teeth were wooden and the rest missing.

“What do you want?” Mr. Johnson asked, quivering.

“Is that any way to welcome your old friend, Johnson? A lizard boy told me you have hoards of gold. I am here to take what’s mine!”

“Curse that boy!”

Blackbeard walked towards Mr. Johnson, his wooden stump rattling the stony beach with every step.

“Once I share my gold with him, I will have his loyalty. He will do what I say.”

Blackbeard grinned as he pushed Mr. Johnson into the bubbling water.

“I think I’ll name him ... Kraken.”

The Dragon's Curse

– L.O.K. Selby

Many people from Neartown came to feast at the lighthouse by the sea, as they always did on clear and cool nights.

Their host was Mr. Jack Baltic and he was the richest man in the kingdom. He had halls filled with gold and treasure, all this wealth gained from his adventuring days. He sought fame and riches in hope of making many friends, but this night (and all those before) he stood alone. Nobody loved him, they only wanted his gold, but they feared overstepping lest the beast be let free, for gold, diamonds and other precious stones were not all he had kept from his past.

He had had an encounter with Death, but Death did not take him, instead Death cursed him; a cost for all his treasure. When the sun touched the sky, he would change. His form would shift into something rather saurian, razor-sharp teeth spurted from his mouth and dark crimson claws would stretch from his fingertips. Reptilian scales covered his skin, and large webbed wings jutted from his shoulders. He sought adventure under the pretence that where there were dragons, there was gold, but his curse taught him that where there was gold, there had to be a dragon.

Jack became not ravenous, nor harmful in any way, but that did not stop the residents of Neartown from fearing him. They believed it was only a matter of time before he became a beast all the way through, and children told stories about him to frighten each other. While they feasted in safety in the evenings, the townsfolk avoided both the lighthouse and Jack during the day.

On this starry, cold night, while the festivities raged down below, Jack stood on his balcony looking out over the waves.

He mused to himself how futile his existence was that should he fall now, would anyone even care? As if brought on by his thoughts, the railing he leaned against suddenly gave way, toppling him over the edge. He almost laughed at the absurdity as the raging waves drew nearer.

In the final moments of his lonely fall, something swept under him and picked him out of the air, whisking him up and back to safety. The selfless creature that saved him - all feathers and fur and four long, white wings undulating as it flew - seemed not afraid of him. And from there he had a friend.

He spent several days with the creature, it the only one that did not care about his day-time appearance. Having found a true friend, Jack left all his wealth behind, and flew off into the vast world to live life with his new companion.

With Jack gone, the people of Neartown gleefully helped themselves to the wealth he'd left behind. The curse found them instead, but Jack was set free, and that was when he learned friendship was the truest of treasure.

Treasure Bound

– Nicolette Stephens

A long time ago, at the furthest edge of the world, a dragon named Skarb lived on a small peninsula jutting into the ocean.

He was not the only dragon in the world, but he was possibly the cleverest, and certainly he had a great amount of treasure to prove it. For dragons love treasure more than anything else, and where there were dragons, there was gold.

But there was one treasure Skarb wanted more than anything else in the whole world. Remember, it was so very long ago that the world was quite different, and one of the biggest differences was that the moon shone as warm and gold as her sister, the sun. Night and day, Skarb would stare into the sky, longing to possess the golden light which shone from the two.

One day, he had a fantastic idea. He would trick them into giving him their gold! Dragon voices are beautiful and full of magic, so every night Skarb sang to the moon of his great love for her beauty:

Moonlight, moonbeam,

Shine down for me;

Coins of gold, gems and jewels,

I have gathered these all.

But the moonlight, moonbeam, that I see,

Is still the brightest to me!

It wasn't long before the moon was caught in his spell. Convinced of his sincerity, when Skarb told her that he could bring her to earth to live with him, the moon believed him. She agreed to shine her light on him so that he could use his magic to harvest it. For many months, the moon shone gold on the dragon as he sang, twisting the light into golden threads which he hoarded with the rest of his treasure.

One dawn, the sun rose and saw her sister, pale and silver, her golden light no longer shining. Horrified, she demanded to know what had caused the change in her.

“I love a dragon, who sings to me of endless beauty and weaves golden threads from my light to make a net which will bring me to earth to be with him.”

Enraged at Skarb’s cruelty and deceit, for she knew that the only thing dragons loved was their treasure, the sun determined to use his greed against him. She convinced him to build a tower to protect his hard won treasure, and when he entered it, she would give him some of her own gold. When he had finished, and lay within, the sun filled it with her fiercely burning light causing the tower to shine endlessly on the sea, serving as a warning to others who would seek treasure there.

Many dragons heard of the golden treasure in the lighthouse at the edge of the world, and attempted to take it themselves. They met the same fate as Skarb, and soon there were only a few wary dragons left in the world. As for the moon, she mourns Skarb’s betrayal still, turning her face away from the earth when her memories become too painful.

The Dragons' Next Meal

– Nicola Tapson

Jack snuck up to the gigantic door of the lighthouse. His siblings, Jamie and Josie watched from the nearby bushes. They had heard last night while sitting near the fisherman's fire that there lived a grumpy dwarf in the lighthouse and they wanted to see what he looked like. Jack raised his hand and knocked on the door. Just as he was about to scamper off, he felt three cold claws curl around his ankle. He screamed and James and Josie ran towards him. They grabbed his arms and tried to pull him away, but they all ended up being pulled down a dirty, dusty tunnel.

"Oh no, Jack. Mom won't be too pleased when she sees us again" said Josie.

"If she sees us again" whimpered Jamie.

Just as they gave up hope and thought they were destined for the tummy of a dragon they tumbled into a cavernous room. It was dank and dark and at first they couldn't see very well.

"Get off me!" Jack yelled and they all scrambled to their feet. They held hands and stood back to back. Jamie screamed as something ran over his foot.

"Oh man, Jamie. It's just a rat" Josie hissed as she held it by its tail. "Come; let's try get out of here." They stalked towards the light they could see coming from behind a door. They gap between the large door and the wall was enough for them to shimmy through. As they popped out on the other side they saw a massive table and six extremely large chairs. On each chair sat what could only be described as dragons though the children had never seen one before. Josie put her finger to her lips and they skirted around the outer wall, being very careful to hide in the shadows.

"Where do think you're going?" boomed a voice just as they were about to break out of the lighthouse.

The siblings fell to the floor. Did that voice really just come out of that small man?

“We were just leaving” stammered Josie.

“No, I don’t think so. You haven’t even joined us for a meal.” he said while the six dragons surrounded them.

“Oh no! What now?” whispered Jack.

“Shh,” hissed Josie. “Let me handle this. A meal you say? She smiled at the dwarf. “Yes, we’re having dinner.” He smiled at the children. “Would you care to join us?”

The dragons grinned at the siblings.

“You are the first people to come visit us,” the red dragon said eagerly.

“That is ever so kind of you. We don’t mind if we do, but why did you grab us?”

“Because we were not sure if you would be friend or foe.” hissed the black dragon.

“What would have happened if you considered us foe?” asked Jack as he ate the stew.

“You would have become stew.” Their new friend winked.

The Inadvisability of Summoning Dragons

– Kim Wainer

The sound of the ocean filled the room.

“It was the best thing I could find,” Gina said apologetically, turning up the volume on her iPod’s speaker a little before taking her place in the circle of three.

Sadie shrugged her shoulders and held out her hands. “We can just pretend we’re in a lighthouse by the sea.” As each of her friends took one hand, she looked down at the open book in front of her. She had found it in her grandmother’s attic, drawn to the large ruby inset above the title: *The Art of Summoning Dragons*. From its size, she had expected it to be a coffee table book of fantasy illustrations – her grandmother had a lot of weird stuff, so it wouldn’t be out of the ordinary – but it turned out to be an ancient book, handwritten in pretty calligraphy.

The last chapter had been torn out, which was a pity, but there had still been plenty to read.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Katlego said, clasping hands with Gina to complete their circle. Her foot nudged the plate they’d stacked with a whole packet of biltong and flowers from the park. It wasn’t quite what the book had said, but it was close enough, right?

“It’s just for fun,” Sadie said confidently. “Now, say the words with me.” The candles they’d placed at the four cardinal points around them flickered as the girls began to chant, hesitantly at first.

*In the deep and dark of night
We call upon the ancient fright
With gifts of scent and gifts of meat
Hear our words, hear our plea
Dragon, dragon, bring your gold
Fly true to us from days of old.*

The waves rushed back and forth in their ears and the smell of burning meat filled the air.

Confused, Sadie tried to stop chanting, but the spell had her in its grip now. *Dragon, dragon...*

She closed her eyes, feeling as though the air was pressing down on her with physical force. Gina's hand was trembling in hers, but her grip never faltered. When she opened her eyes again, the room had gone dark, candles snuffed out, the music quiet. The only proof that her friends were still there was the feeling of their hands gripping hers. Her skin crawled.

Hot breath pooled against the back of her neck. Suddenly thirteen didn't feel so grown-up any more. She tried to call out, wanting her mother more than anything.

Witch blood, witch blood, calling me –

The dry voice in her head had a scaly quality.

Witch girl, witch girl, set me free.

Sadie screamed. *Leave us alone!*

The candles lit themselves, one after another. Gina was almost hyperventilating, her face pale in the flickering light.

"Guys..." Katlego was the first one to let go, reaching out as though in a dream. Their offering was gone, and in its place was a palm-sized golden dragon.

Romance



“It was grotesque!”

Speedy Love

– Christelle Bloem

Sally was lying on the beach, reading the latest Nicholas Sparks' novel for the fifth time that month. It wasn't that the story was so engrossing that caused her to reread it an insane amount of times, but her desire to find love like his characters always seemed to. She was no ordinary lady, and didn't want to meet the love of her life accidentally by bumping into him on the street or at a bookstore. She was a unique individual, and she needed a unique love story.

Her reading was interrupted by the distinct gasps and disgusted whispers of the ladies sitting around her, and she impatiently looked around to see what the fuss was about. When she saw the cause, she lifted her hand to cover her gaping mouth, but she didn't turn her eyes away.

It was grotesque!

There was a man, dressed only in a slightly too small Speedo, but that was not what made her gasp.

It was bright neon pink, and she tried her best not to laugh at how funny he looked. The man seemed uncaring of the obvious gossip aimed his way, and Sally felt her heartbeat speeding up because of her extreme embarrassment. He was walking towards her and her fellow judges, and she was sure he was on his way to put them firmly in their place for their judgmental reaction towards his outrageous attire.

She was surprised to see that he appeared amused, and that's when she noticed the exceptional colour of his green eyes. His smile erupted in his eyes, and they looked so naughty!

When he stopped in front of her, she thought her heart would stop beating.

"That book has a horrible ending." He said to her, standing up straight and attracting further judgment and whispers from her unusual neighbours.

"I don't know whether I should be impressed or scared that you read Nicholas Sparks."

“I don’t know whether I should be flattered or offended that you were laughing at me a few seconds ago.” he said.

Sally gave a slightly embarrassed giggle.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t help but notice your...bright apparel.” She felt her cheeks flushing red.

He laughed heartily pulling something out of the side of his pants, and Sally’s heart leapt at the absolute boldness of this man. He handed her the piece of paper.

“If you want to read something better, call me.”

“Do you always come to the beach with your number at hand?”

“Only when a pretty bookworm is involved. I’ve had that piece of paper handy for the last three days, but you only noticed me when I decided to wear this silly Speedo. You miss out on too much of the world if your nose is so cemented in a book.”

Sally’s mouth was hanging open in utter amazement as he jaunted away. After a few dazed minutes, she put her nose back in her book. Suddenly, it seemed so lifeless, and she just shut it closed. She turned her gaze towards the sea, admiring the way the waves broke and did exactly what they wanted, regardless of the effects, and she wished she could also do that.

Her hands shaking with nerves, she started dialling his number.

Everything That Could Go Wrong

– Candice Maree Burger

Reagan sat waiting impatiently for the next doctor to come and examine her fiancé.

Glancing from the man writhing in pain in the bed next to her, to the pictures on her phone of him in nothing but a cowboy hat on the beach. She was beyond furious with her family, yet simultaneously she was worried sick about him.

The first doctor to come and look at Rafe lifted the sheet that the EMTs had draped over him, turned three shades of green before mumbling something like “that is grotesque” and bolted for the door. Two more had had a similar reaction. At least the nurses were made of tougher stuff and had provided basic care.

Yet everytime Reagan asked Rafe if it was worth it, he would smile and reply in his American accent

“You said yes, didn’t you?” Reagan looked up as the door opened.

“All right Mr. Keller, you came in with a severe case of sun poisoning; a possible concussion which has been ruled out by the nurses; and a jellyfish sting to the upper ...” the doctor trailed off. “May I ask how this happened ?” He looked up from his clipboard.

“Reagan?”

“Nathaniel!” They spoke together in surprise. Relief and mortification washed over Reagan at the sight of her former superior Dr. Nathaniel Blackstorm. She bit her lip, thinking how best to explain what happened.

“Well... he lost a bet with my brothers, which resulted in him having to walk on the beach naked and propose to me.”

Nathaniel nodded, listening as he began his examination of Rafe.

“He was chased by an old lady who clocked him with her bag. When he woke up a dog chased him into the ocean, where we found him an hour later. The jellyfish got him as he was coming out of the water.” Reagan finally took a breath as Nathaniel winced.

“That must be the unluckiest proposal I have ever heard of,” Nathaniel remarked as he made more notes.

“Well, the the wedding should go off without a hitch then,” Rafe said through clenched teeth. Nathaniel smiled, “You’ll be in pain for a while, but you should make a full recovery.”

“Great,” Rafe hissed, “‘cause next year we’re joining my folks in Colorado.”

Reagan nodded. “ Thank you Nate.”

She took Rafe’s hand, moving her chair closer to him.

“My pleasure Reagan. In the meantime I’ll give him something stronger for the pain.”

Nathaniel finished up and left the two of them alone .

Reagan shook her head again. She must be just as crazy and stupid as the man sound asleep next to her, but she knew one day when people asked how Lt. Raphael Keller proposed she would have a great story to tell.

The Meeting

– Justin J.

Markell was nineteen when he met his future wife on the beach. He was in black trunks, and when he saw her, long blonde hair loose around her shoulders, clad in a black bikini, she was rolling her eyes at a man who had seen fit to proposition her in a rather indecent manner.

“That's just grotesque. If you honestly think you're going to get any women by exposing yourself like that, you have another thing coming.”

Markell liked her immediately for what she did next. Picking up a bucket of sand, she slammed it into the creep's crotch, knocking him down, before dumping it all over his nether regions.

“Much better.”

Markell smiled and approached the woman. “Good day. I know this could be seen as rude, but would you like to have lunch with me? My name is Markell.”

The lovely girl smiled and, in a rather old-fashioned gesture, held up her hand for him to take. “My name is Agneta, and yes, I think I would like to join you for lunch. Something tells me that you will be far better company than that pervert.”

Markell kissed her hand. “Your answer gives me joy, Agneta. It's an honour and a pleasure to meet you.”

Agneta giggled. “My, aren't you polite and old fashioned. I didn't expect you to kiss my hand like that.”

Markell cleared his throat. “My father always told me that a gentleman must treat a lady with the utmost respect and kindness. If you hadn't dealt with that perverted fool yourself, I

might have had to bury his head in the sand.”

A pause as Agneta laughed lightly. “Thank you, but I was taught to never rely on others if I could handle a situation myself.”

The sun was high, the weather warm, and the couple smiled at each other, already lost in their own little world.

Edward's Break

– Carin Marais

Edward was having the nightmare again. Only, this time, instead of being naked in front of the board of directors while he was supposed to give the presentation on which his whole career hinged, he was at the beach.

It was not a nudist beach.

Rather, he was the only one wearing his birthday suit – his skin so pale that he was basically a beacon to ships out to sea - while parents pulled their laughing children away and even the local crustaceans scuttled into the sand to get away from the blinding sight.

He could almost hear people whispering to each other “It was grotesque!” as they drank sweet tea to calm their nerves. The worst part of the nightmare, though, was that his high school crush was present.

She looked the same as she did ten years ago, her hair in a ponytail, wearing the cheerleader uniform that filled most of the boys' dreams. Sure, he had had a life-size poster of Xena in his room at the time, but if he could choose, he'd rather have had one of her.

Chloe.

The nightmare only ended when Edward's alarm clock rang its shrill scream in the silence of the morning. It took him a few moments to remember his early wakeup call was to catch a plane to Hawaii. His first vacation in two years.

Slathered in sunscreen and after making sure at least four times that he was a) awake and b) wearing clothes, Edward ventured to the hotel's pool where other vacationers were lounging around with umbrella-ed drinks. He made sure again that he was, in fact, wearing clothes, and sat down on one of the chairs. Only then did he realise that he was not only a beacon of paleness, but also seemed to be the only single person there. He ordered two drinks to make up for the fact and placed an extra towel on the chair next to his. That way he could just nod at passersby and tell them that he was keeping the seat.

“Mind if I sit?” a familiar voice asked just as Edward relaxed with his drink and his head shot up. Her identity was unmistakable. And, he mused, a bikini was even better than a cheerleader’s outfit.

“N-no, of course,” he stuttered.

“Hey, don’t I know you?” she asked and Edward’s heart soared.

“Yeah, you’re Chloe, right? We were at school together.”

“Of course!” Her face fell. “I can’t remember -”

“Edward.” Perfect. His dream woman and she didn’t even remember his name. But she also wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, he noticed. Which *was* perfect. And he was wearing clothes, after all. Carpe diem.

“Would you like a drink? They brought me two by mistake.”

She smiled and accepted.

“Refresh my memory. Were you this cute in high school?”

Edward pinched himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming and grinned. Real life turned out to be so much better.

Moonbeam

– Elliot P. McGee

The press of bodies was tight. Hundreds upon hundreds had gathered at the annual march for rights, commonly referred to as the Moon Walk, to protest unfair rights and inequality.

The march was so named because the thousands wore nothing, or next to nothing. The sun beat down hot on the sandy shore of Miami Beach, and skin of varied colours threw the sun's rays around. Some would call it beautiful, to others it was grotesque.

For myself this was my fifth year in a row, the event had grown exponentially from its humble beginnings, whether people took up the plea for justice or simply came as an excuse to be naked in public. I have a different purpose this year. I came hoping to rekindle the flame of a memory.

I looked around at my fellow participants as the crowd began its march along the sandy strip, a flash of red catching my eye. Those high cheek bones, the curve of her hips. It was her, it had to be. After all this time, I'd found her again. I pushed through the press of bodies awkwardly, calling out, "Elise!"

As I drew closer the memories from the nights we'd spent together so long ago came flooding back. We'd met by chance at a bar near the beach, and high on the thrill of public nudity, we'd snogged our way into the sheets of a nearby motel.

That week was imprinted in my mind, a fond memory of a fun romance with a fantastic woman, which had left me yearning for more, but when I woke on the last day Elise had vanished, leaving no trace of her behind except the satisfaction I was feeling from the days and nights before.

"Elise!" I called over the drone of the crowd. Elise looked in my direction, searching out the person who called her name. My hand shot up into the air and waved wildly to draw her attention, and as she caught sight of me her eyes drank me in and she bit her lip.

The crowd surged and she vanished from sight for several moments. I forced my way through to where I'd caught sight of her last, but she wasn't there.

A tap on my shoulder caught my attention and I turned to see a head of fiery hair, shining eyes of amber.

"It's been a while, stranger." She purred.

A smile broke my face, the crowd coming apart around us and surging together on the other side, an island in a sea of bodies.

"You disappeared last year."

"Is the chase not part of the excitement, darling?" Her eyes twinkled.

I smirked, "I can see the truth in that."

A wave of bodies broke against our island; Elise was torn away and taken along with the crowd.

"Meet me after the Moon Walk, 27th Boulevard! Remember to bring some clothes!" She called out over the roar of the crowd.

"I will!"

Parasol

– Nthato Morakabi

“It was grotesque.”

“What was?”

“How we met ... your father and I.”

“Mom, I’m getting married soon, can we not have a ‘how I met your father’ monologue.”

Beth waved her daughter off. They sat on warm beach sand under a pastel shaded parasol. A lull had fallen over the sparse crowds. The water lapped at the beach in hushed cadence.

“We met at this very beach on a day much like this one.”

“Was he jogging past in a Speedo, you locked eyes and it was love at first sight?” Lizzie asked, tucking black locks into her wide brimmed straw hat. Her eyes were hidden below dark sunglasses hiding half her face, while a thin amused smile pulled the corners of her lips.

Her mother laughed.

“Ha, I wish it was even one quarter as romantic as that.” She adjusted her own straw hat but her hazel eyes were bare and looking out at the water thoughtfully. “I wish he was actually wearing a Speedo or at least some swim trunks.”

She turned to her daughter, her bemused smile crinkling the corners of her lips and eyes.

“He thought it was a nudist beach. You can imagine his surprise... and everyone else’s, when he waltzed onto the beach in his birthday suit.” She laughed quietly before placing her hands at her hips and lifting her torso.

“Is this the wrong beach?” she mimicked her husband, then slumped back into the sand.

“That *is* grotesque.” Lizzie replied with a scowl.

“Oh that’s not even the worst of it. He stayed that way for some minutes. You know when your father is deep in thought, the world around him disappears.”

“Don’t I know it. Didn’t someone... you know, cover him up?”

“Eventually. The beach patrol rushed up to him with a towel.”

“‘This is a family beach sir. You need to wear a swimsuit at least.’ The poor guy, red as a tomato and not from the heat mind you, said to your dad. I had to stifle my own laughter.”

“Was he arrested?”

“Yep. Then he looked down towards me as they were taking him away and said, ‘I don’t have money on me. Obviously. Can you come with us to bail me out?’ and not even with a hint of shame. ‘I promise I’ll pay you back.’”

“And?”

“Well I was taken aback. Can you imagine that? Actually, don’t.” Her smile softened. “You’d think I would be upset by the whole demand to bail him out, but I was more curious about this bold young man.”

“I think there was more to it than just that.” Lizzie grinned, raising her eyebrows. Beth slapped her daughter playfully on the shoulder.

“So, you bailed him out?”

“And he took me to dinner afterwards. Not the most romantic meeting I know, but it was memorable.” She turned to her daughter.

“And that is what relationships and marriage are mainly about. Making memories. Hun, make the best of them.”

Girl Talk

– L.O.K. Selby

Waves crashed against the sand, shards of seawater sprayed in all directions, forming a beautiful and chaotic display of the forces of nature. A woman, soaking up the rays of that cloudless day, dug her feet deeper in the sand. The towel she lay on barely protected her from the radiating heat of the sand below, and that coupled with the intense assault of the sun-rays on her skin led to her sitting up at the very right moment. The moment Lauren would first lay eyes upon her future lover.

A tall man, of dark-tanned skin, stood looking over the crowd of people at the beach that afternoon. Lauren was immediately drawn to his apparent lack of any clothing, his family jewels hanging nonchalantly. Candy - Lauren's friend sunbathing with her - was roused after sensing Lauren's own arousal. Her eyes were drawn to the naked man near as fast as Lauren's were. With a pinched face, Candy looked away, "Ugh! He must be European."

It took Lauren a few moments longer to turn her attention back to the roiling sea that constantly tried for a lick at her feet. "Yeah... Gross foreigners," Lauren said with no true commitment, lost in her own reverie.

"How was it at the beach today?" asked Tanya, one of Lauren's friends. Lauren and four of her friends, Candy and Tanya included, sat gathered around a dark mahogany table. Lauren did not live by the sea and she was staying with Tanya for her vacation.

Lauren scratched her head and said, "It was lovely and sunny, a bit hot even."

"And don't forget about the full moon we saw," Candy pitched in, sending a wink Lauren's way.

"What do you mean by that?" Jen asked, sipping at her cold ice-tea.

Candy laughed. "Well there was this one guy - I'm sure he must have been European - and he was stark naked, showing off all his... stuff." Giggles rang out amongst the women.

"Was he at least a hottie?" Tanya asked with a mischievous smile spread on her face.

Candy nearly spat her tea onto the dark table. "I didn't even try look at him, he was too naked. It was grotesque!"

"It was spectacular!" Lauren's hand shot to cover her mouth but it was too late. A moment of silence preceded the cacophony of laughter that burst from the women. They cackled like hyenas and Lauren just blushed, her face rivalling even the reddest tomatoes.

The laughter calmed slightly and in the dying sounds Tanya proceeded, "Well he obviously was a hottie then! Why didn't you at least go speak to him?" She sent a solid wink in Lauren's direction.

Lauren fished in her pocket for a second and pulled out a small slip of paper. "I actually got his number." Embarrassment welled up in her but she tried to push it back down. The hyena cackles burst into the air again.

For the Lack of a Towel

– Nicolette Stephens

“He stood at the high peak of the dune, unashamedly nude as he gazed across the beach, looking for the woman he’d seen rising out of the ocean like a nymph of the sea.”

Celia snorted, hitting the backspace to delete the last sentence. It was grotesque, a travesty of a cliché that assaulted the senses. A romance writer she may be, but that was no reason for her to fill the novel with stereotypes.

She sighed, dropping her head into her hands. Twenty-five years of writing under her belt, and she was tired of page upon page of dramatic love scenes and tragic heroes. More than that, she was tired of being alone while her characters found love.

Pushing away from the desk, Celia rose slowly to her feet. At seventy-eight, she was not as spry as she used to be. Some days it felt as though every inch of her body was throwing a revolt. She left her small office – a converted spare bedroom in the little house – walking down the passage to the front door.

“Come on, Leo. Let’s go for a walk.” The overweight Labrador trotted at her heels as they made their way slowly down the beach. Celia recalled the day Rupert had brought him home ten years ago. Small and timid, the runt of the litter had been adored by him. They had walked the beach every day until Rupert’s sudden death two years previously. Now, Celia walked that same beach with Leo, fond memories of her beloved husband keeping her company.

She stopped often to greet the younger residents of the area, exchanging a few words about the weather or their families. The beach was popular, and Celia had come to enjoy the social aspect walking Leo had brought since Rupert’s passing.

A gasp from some women sitting under an umbrella had her searching for the source of consternation, and with some mild amusement she spotted a man standing atop the nearest dune, clad only in his birthday suit. His scrawny legs and sagging belly betrayed his age, and Celia stifled a chuckle as she imagined the horror of the crab scuttling away from him.

A few seconds passed in which the man scanned the beach, a scowl lining his face. Abruptly, he set into motion, and Celia’s eyes widened as she realised he was heading towards her.

“Do you make a habit of stealing men’s towels?”

“What?”

“Drop it!”

“Excuse me?” Celia’s voice rose indignantly. The man’s gaze softened as it lifted towards her and she suddenly realised that he was laughing.

“Your dog stole my towel while I was under the shower. I thought perhaps he made a habit of it.”

A blush stained her cheeks as Celia noticed he’d retrieved his towel from Leo’s grinning jowls.

“I’m so sorry! He’s never done anything like that before.”

“Well, perhaps he’d like to invite me to dinner to make up for it?” He winked at her and Celia chuckled.

“He’d be delighted.”

Twin Trouble

– Nicola Tapson

It was the summer of '79. The girls were dressed in itsy bitsy teeny weeny red polka dot bikinis and the boys were surfing the great waves to everyone's delight. I was starkers.

Why was I starkers? Well, the girl had dared me. She was the most magnificent being in the world. A true siren. She had said I didn't have the guts but I was out to prove her wrong.

I stood on the beach like I was the king of the castle, watching my minions playing in the sea. Then I spotted her. She was clothed in an emerald green bikini that sparkled on the beach as she lay there soaking up the sun's rays. I marched towards her. People glanced away. Some even pointed, but I was here to win her heart. She had said if I came to the beach in just my birthday suit we could go on a date.

Well, here I was.

I planted myself at the end of her towel. I whistled. She looked up. Her eyes grew big.

"Pierre!" she exclaimed as she hurried off her towel and began to wrap me in it.

"Yes, darling," I cooed.

"Umm..." Her eyes shifted from left to right. She hurriedly looked around and shoved me behind the lifeguard's chair.

"What do you think you're doing?" She hissed.

"I'm taking you up on your dare!" I said as I defiantly dropped the towel. She picked it up and shoved it back at me.

"For Pete's sake, put that back on! This is grotesque. What are you talking about?"

"But you said..."

"I don't care what you think I said! Only a complete idiot would actually think I would go on a date with them after this stint?"

“Yes, that is what you said”.

“Well, I must have been joking. Only a dork would come to the beach starkers.”

With that she stalked off to her friends while they giggled and stared at me. I had never felt so deflated. I slunk away towards my car. As I walked, I heard someone catcalling. I kept moving.

“Hey,” said a sweet voice in my ear. “Stop right there Mister! You owe me a date.”

I spun around. And there before me she stood. But why was she so sweet now?

“Yeah, right! You just embarrassed me on the beach”.

“No, I didn’t. I just got here.”

“What do you mean? I went to where you said I should meet you and you screamed at me and pretended you had no idea what I was talking about!”

“Pierre darling, you’re going to have to learn to tell the difference. That was my sister. My *twin* sister.” And with that she planted a massive kiss on my lips.

Going starkers to the beach was a great idea after all.

File This Under A for Awkward

– Kim Wainer

“It was grotesque, that’s what it was.” He collapsed gloomily into his chair and swivelled to look out of the window. All that it showed was the red brick wall of the building next door, but anything was better than making eye contact with another human being right now. Or, possibly, for the next decade.

The long-suffering Keane sighed, leaning against the door frame. “You ever had that dream? You know, the one where you’re naked in front of an audience, or you’re naked on a beach full of gawking tourists?”

Slouching in his chair, James tugged at his forelock, hunching his shoulders. “What are you talking about?”

“You never had the dream?” His colleague’s voice was an audible raised eyebrow.

Rolling his eyes, James looked up at him. As always, but especially from this angle, Keane towered over him. He was tall and daddy-long-legs thin, which somehow made him seem even taller. “Yes I’ve had the dream. What’s your point?”

Keane shrugged his narrow shoulders. “So, was it worse than that?”

“I just made a huge presentation to my boss with my fly open! Wearing Superman underwear!”

His colleague stifled a laugh, his shoulders shaking a little. “Sorry,” he said, lowering his hand. “That’s never not going to be funny.”

“Oh good.” James slid even further down in his chair, wishing he could slide right into the floor. “Perfect.”

“Come on, it’s not so bad.” Keane ambled over to him, leaning on the back of his chair and then swivelling it around to face him. “At least it’s over. Laugh about it.”

A crisp knock on the door derailed any further terrible advice. Both men turned to see who it was, and then James scrambled hurriedly to his feet, his cheeks already heating up again.

Keane straightened, his long arms hanging awkwardly at his sides.

The boss smiled at them from the doorway. "Gentlemen. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"N-no, uh..." Now all James could think about was the urgent need to check his fly, just in case it had somehow dropped open again just to spite him. He tried not to let this show on his face. "No, ma'am."

She smiled and nodded, walking briskly forward and holding out a slim file. "I came to drop this off personally so I could tell you how impressed I was with your presentation this morning, James," she said. When he gingerly accepted the file, instead of letting go she yanked her hand back, pulling him forward so sharply he nearly overbalanced. With a slight tilt of her head, she murmured in his ear, "Nice briefs. I'm more of a Batman girl, though."

Releasing the file, she took a step back, nodding professionally at Keane before heading for the door.

James stared after her with his mouth hanging open.

"Mate," his colleague said, elbowing him sharply when he didn't immediately react. "I think that's her phone number on the front."

Horror



“Laughter can be the best sound in the world.”

The Bee Man

– Christelle Bloem

“Laughter can be the best sound in the world. I could remember the menacing sound of my father’s laughter as he left me in the field with the bees. He didn’t know the bees were my friends.”

He continued to walk around in his protective gear as he spoke to his new friend Nigel Sandlewood, a banal 45-year-old accountant from Parys. His father was also an accountant before he died of lung cancer from the cigars he smoked all his money away on.

“I used to eat the honey in this field to survive. I didn’t have a loving mother to look after me when my father decided to leave. I was only 15 back then. How was I supposed to fend for myself?”

Nigel made muffled noises from behind the sock that was stuffed in his mouth. The Bee Man walked up to him slowly, barely hearing the bees buzzing around him.

“Bees are such beautiful creatures.” The Bee Man explained as he went to open yet another beehive.

“They take one of nature’s most simple creations and turn it into the most intricate of creations. They take what was only beautiful in one level, and that is for sight, and turn it into what is beautiful on more than one level.”

He charged towards Nigel, and almost spat in his face as he said, “Do you want to say you’re sorry, Dad?”

Nigel frowned and kept on shouting behind the sock. The Bee Man took it off, and listened to him begging.

“Please, my wife...” Nigel begged, and The Bee Man barely acknowledged him.

“You should have thought of her before you threw me away, Dad!” He shouted as he turned his back and started walking off.

“I’m not...father.” That was all Nigel could muster as the bees kept on stinging him. Nigel had tried to let the ice cream cones that were super-glued to his hands slip off as the ice cream kept melting all over his skin, attracting the bees. He was tied to a pole in the middle of a field, and he had nowhere to go, and no way to escape.

“I’m finally going to be free of you. You are never going to leave me alone again.”

Her Laughter

– Candice Maree Burger

Arthur looked at the ice-cream melting in his hand then glanced back to see if his twin sisters had finished their massacre of the shopping mall. The mass cries for mercy were a sharp contrast to the buzz and laughter from moments before.

A sudden thought struck him.

It was said that laughter could be the best sound in the world , unless it belonged to *her*. The most beautiful thing you'd ever hear, it was her weapon and she used it; to torment, torture and drive her victims insane. Arthur smirked thinking of the desperate lengths men and demons alike went to, to escape her and that laugh.

Never grasping that when the laughter stopped, was when she struck , in the dead of night cloaked in darkness. Her black and white wings silencing her approach. You only knew she was there when she placed a finger on your lips and all the air left your lungs. Her other hand would plunge into your chest and grip your heart, all the while two blue eyes that burn icy cold lock with yours. In the sweetest voice, a question is asked, answer her falsely and even Heaven won't help you. Doing so will see your soul ripped from your body, shattered and scattered in the deepest reaches of Hell.

A shiver ran down Arthur's spine.

"Mango, how adventurous," a voice laughed. There she was, her long curly hair blowing gracefully in the wind, her perfect skin alabaster white and her figure flattered in a short sundress. Hard to believe this was the one even demons feared. He wasn't surprised to see her . After all he was the demon who had made her what she was.

"Relax Arthur," she said coolly. "It's not yet our time to dance."

Relief washed over him until he realised she must be there for his sisters. His rage must have shown on his face because she leaned closer whispering, "Let's do this the easy way, okay?"

Arthur's anger turned his face red.

“What happened to the angel’s daughter, who earned her wings?”

She smiled over her shoulder, “She works for death now, after her husband and children were butchered in front of her.” Her smile widened as she reached the girls, “And I’ve come to collect a debt.”

Arthur turned and walked away, it was too late to warn the twins. He heard their pleas and screams, though no one else did.

“Even Death has his regrets, my dear,” he said as he finished his ice-cream. “And he will regret this.”

Drip, Drip, Drip

– Justin J.

Sometimes, laughter is the best sound in the world.

Drip, drip, drip ...

Sometimes, it just wasn't.

Drip, drip, drip ...

She ran. Ran through the darkness, the endless hallways that should not have existed. Behind her, it followed, and it laughed merrily, yellow ice cream cone in hand. She ran, and it laughed.

One corner lead to another, doorways lead to hallways without light, with no sound except the laughter of the thing following her. A door; thrown open, revealing another dark hallway.

Drip, drip, drip ...

She had walked into an ice cream parlour. There was a boy there. He was always there. The locals had warned her, but she had ignored them. "Nobody buys from there, but it stays in business. It's creepy," one girl had said.

She had ignored them.

The hallways were dark, empty and silent.
Except for the laughter. The merry, childish laughter.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

The boy had been there. Eating his ice cream. He said it was good, so she ordered a scoop

for herself.

Drip ...

It was good. Banana flavoured. She'd always liked bananas.

... drip ...

She didn't remember what happened next. She only knew that she woke up in this place.

... drip ...

She opened a door and stopped cold. There was a window, but it looked out over nothingness. She approached it, staring out in horror at what she saw. Eyes in mouths, all floating in nothing; all watching, laughing a childish, joyful laugh that became warped, distorted. She felt like she was listening to a laugh track, sped up several hundred times.

She screamed, but her voice was silent. A door opened, and she ran through it. Into more darkness. More hallways. More nothingness.

Another door opened, and she stopped, staring into the room. A lone table, made of glass, with a single item on top of it. Three scoops of yellow ice cream in a bleeding bowl. Childish laughter echoed behind her.

Drip ...

She ran, into the endless emptiness of the hallways.

... drip ...

Another door opened, and she was in a room with no way out. She turned.

... drip ...

The boy stood there, smiling at her, his ice cream in his hand. He stepped inside, the laughter following him. His eyes were the worst; they were too blue, too deep, too unnatural.

Drip ...

He held up his ice cream, and his smile widened, too wide for his face. "Hello," he said, in a voice that sounded like a void.

... drip ...

"Can I tell you something? A secret?" He was in front of her, the ice cream touching her cheek. It was hot, but it didn't melt. "This isn't ice cream." His words were a whisper ...

Drip.

Cabinet of Curiosities

– Carin Marais

The ice cream man paused outside the office block, knowing that the tune his truck played would lure at least one of the adults out. In this heatwave he may even have his pick of the bunch.

He did not have to wait long for one of the businessmen to exit the building and lift his hand to show the ice cream man to wait. When he came to the side of the truck and smiled, the ice cream man saw that he was one of those lucky people who seemed to have been born with a set of perfect, and perfectly white, teeth. And he needed them for his collection.

“I’ve always had a sweet tooth,” the man laughed. “And today this is like manna from heaven - chocolate sauce, please.”

The ice cream man smiled, taking his time to fill the sugar cone with soft serve and adding the sauce before turning his back for a moment, adding a few drops of his own concoction to the cone before handing it to the man.

“You’d better start eating it now,” he said, taking the money. “Before it melts.”

The man licked at the ice cream and immediately his smile turned to a frown.

“Hey, I think this has gone off.”

“Oh dear, let me get you another. Looks like this heat is spoiling everything,” the ice cream man grimaced, though his frown turned to a grin as he headed for the back door.

He caught the man as his legs gave way beneath him and dragged him into the back of the ice cream truck.

Now he drove around without the tell-tale tune, trying to keep from driving faster than the engine easily allowed. He glanced over his shoulder every now and then to make sure the man was still lying there as one dead.

The ice cream man carried the limp body into his house to the dentist's chair he already had set up.

"You really should look after your teeth better," he said to the waking man. "Can't go spoiling perfect teeth with sugar, you know."

He picked his favourite tool - one that had been passed down from Victorian times. The two hooks were perfect for extracting teeth and making the patient remember why you were taking those teeth.

Later he dropped the groaning, toothless man in an alley close to some night clubs. Let them deal with him. He had what he needed.

Back home, he carefully placed his tissue-paper-wrapped parcel in the cabinet with the others. He only needed three more sets then his cabinet of teeth would be complete. Fifty-two sets of perfect teeth. One for every week of the year. Perfect to replace his own.

He grinned, showing two rows of blackened teeth. Laughter can be the best sound in the world, but he'd take screams any day.

Billy, A Kid

– Elliot P. McGee

I stood looking out over the local park, the sounds of children at play reaching my vantage point. The day was hot; my shirt stuck to me with sweat and the all but forgotten ice-cream cone melted and ran in rivulets.

My attention was on the playground. I'd never married, nor had I ever desired kids, but the sound of laughter could be the sweetest in the world. I watched on, entranced.

I entered the park a few hours before the kids would be taken by their parents and led off home, stolen from me. One little boy had broken away from the group of kids, playing with sticks in the dirt.

"Those are good," I said.

The child looked up at me for a few moments, said nothing and continued his drawing.

"Would you like to make some drawings for me? I'll give you ice-cream for each one you make."

My outstretched hand offered the dismal and half melted cone to the boy.

He stared for a few moments, crouched near the ground, looking from me to the ice-cream.

"Okay."

He snatched the ice-cream cone from me and placed his hand in mine at my prompt. He greedily munched away at the cone and it disappeared before we'd even reached the edge of the park.

Many years ago, when I was a child, a man in my position had found me in such a playground. He'd shared his ice-cream with me and taught me many things. Under my shirt and behind my eyes he had left scars.

Most would think I would have grown to hate that man, but he sculpted what I had become.

I took my van home, with Billy riding next to me and nobody the wiser about where he had gone.

Billy made several drawings for me. They hung on the fridge, signed, next to others. Bridgette, Margaret, Stephan, Willem. Each child a budding artist and their art mine alone.

Billy started complaining. He said his tummy was sore, that he wanted to go home, and that he wanted his mommy. I can't stand complaining, so Billy went down into the basement, where I kept the others.

He was tied to a table, wriggling. It did something to me, seeing the kids like that. They made their art for me and they became my art.

As I entered the basement, a single bulb hanging over the table, Billy's eyes were wide. I picked up one of the tools I used to make my art, removing the gag from Billy's mouth. Laughter is wonderful, but there is nothing sweeter than the sound of the helpless begging for their lives.

The Family Recipe

– Nthato Morakabi

You don't know him, do you? That kid. Fat, bald, forlorn looking one, staring at his melting caramel ice-cream like someone told him there's bugs in it. Disgusting, don't you think, how it's dribbling over his chubby little fingers like that. Ugh. Don't give me that look - , you're probably thinking the same thing! Anyway, I know him. Can't recall his name though, which may seem rude considering he's been buying ice-cream from me for months and all.

Sorry... what would you like on your scoop? I suggest caramel. It's a hit with everyone in town, just don't eat it yet. Let it harden.

Anyway, listen, I'm not a saint or anything but I like to look out for the community. You know? Reach out to the kids. Put them on the straight and narrow and all of that.

Hmmm? The caramel looks weird? I don't know what you're talking about, the dip has always looked chunky like that. No? Okay well... I don't know then. It's a family recipe passed down the generations. I know, I know, not the most lucrative family business but hey, people love ice-cream. Right?

Where was I? Oh yes, the kids in our community. Right. So, I get to meet a lot of them through this venture. Skinny kids. Fat kids. Acne saturated. All kinds across the spectrum. And you know what I've learnt through my time serving them? Laughter can be the best sound in the world.

Wait! Don't eat it yet. Let me finish my story then feel free to eat. Okay? You know what, if you listen I'll give it to you for free, how does that sound? Good? Wonderful.

Right, so community outreach for me is an important aspect of my life. I take these kids and I try to improve their lives. Through ice-cream. Oh didn't see that coming did you? Haha no one does, not even the kids. Not at first.

Which reminds me, you're looking a bit chubby there yourself. Is it a medical thing or are you just indulgent? Yes I'm serious. People have insecurities, they're part of life. Don't be so sensitive. It's -

Okay you know what, don't waste the ice-cream. Eat. I'll talk. Go ahead. First bite. Yummy isn't it? I know.

Our family recipe is basically homeopathy. My own sort. I put *Salvia Divinorum* and parasitic eggs in the topping. Yes, the same one you're eating. The bugs grow in the stomach, the immune system kicks in while the psychedelics induce gut-busting laughter . Amazing isn't it? Oh and when they puke... they literally laugh their guts out. It's hilarious. And that fat kid?

He's my best customer.

Ignorance Isn't Bliss - Blog Post

– L.O.K. Selby

Laughter can be the best sound in the world, especially when that laughter is your own. The thing that makes me laugh the most is the suffering of those that have been unfortunate enough to take my notice. People all live their silly lives in such ignorance to the real workings of the world. Their belief that “everything will be okay” annoys me to no end. That’s where my job comes in.

I show people how cruel the world can actually be, especially considering technological advances of the 21st-century that make it so much easier for me. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram... When did the world become so moronic? People used to live their lives in anonymity, only dishing out the necessary personal information to those who deserved it. Now they leave their personal information lying about on the web, ready for anyone to just take it.

I have surfed the net from the streets of Johannesburg for near on a decade now. I have taken multiple victims, though do not expect me to divulge just how many. I can tell you, however, that I have not killed anyone directly. I leave it up the new world gods to decide the fate of my trolled victims. No one is safe from me - no man, woman or child can escape my notice.

Hell, look at this woman walking toward me. I chose this tall, fair-skinned brunette as my next victim based solely on the pitiful existence she shares every detail of on Facebook. The first post that caught my eye was her openly admitting her loneliness. She obviously does not understand the need for privacy settings. With no delay, I picked this dirty information off the web and started to troll her.

Her social media has been quiet for four days now, not unusual for one in her position. Tonight I initiate the next phase but first...

I bump into her just as she passes, causing her to drop her mobile phone, as I drop my ice-cream. “I beg your pardon, my dear.” I apologise while picking her phone up in one hand. I rub my bald head with my free hand and give her an innocent smile.

She barely notices as she takes her phone back. "No, please, forgive me. I'm so distracted lately. I can't seem to focus on anything, except my phone." This just accentuates her ignorance. I hate her. Definitely tonight ...

I know she hides her spare key under a pot on the windowsill. I have a casket ready for a live-burial and I am about to piss myself from excitement.

Scream for a Laugh

– Nicolette Stephens

Laughter can be the best sound in the world. I used to believe that, every time I heard my son's delighted giggles mingling with the high-pitched pained shrieks of his playmates.

The call came as morning began to melt into afternoon like ice cream on a hot day. I raced to the school with clammy palms and my heart beating in my throat, to find my son, covered in blood that he assured me wasn't his.

"He bit Katie, Mrs Jessup. Rather badly. She's been sent to the hospital. We're going to have to suspend Kevin from school until further notice."

"Did anyone think to ask him why he bit her?" I tried to keep the desperation out of my voice. This was the third school my six-year-old son had been suspended from. The other two had refused to take him back.

The headmistress fiddled with her pen, avoiding meeting my eyes.

"He said it was because she was a bad girl."

I squeezed my eyes closed. The madness had him too.

"Are you mad?" His voice was deeper now that he was about to leave puberty. I wanted to scream and rant and rave, but I couldn't. He was my son, and I loved him in spite of his lack of control at school.

"I'm not mad, Kevin. I'm tired."

Silence. I chanced a glance at him. He was staring at the ice cream cone he held, the dairy melting and dripping over his hand, his face expressionless. Today was the first time he'd laughed in years.

"They all have it now. The badness." His gaze met mine. "I can see it in them. Around them. They're all bad." His voice started to rise, people passing by turned to look at him. "They need to be cleansed! I have to cleanse them!"

The cone in his hand became a soggy mess as he clenched his fist around it. I couldn't take it from him without risking a scene, so I nodded calmly instead.

"Of course, Kevin. I understand." I held his gaze until he relaxed, then rose to my feet.

"Come on, my boy. I need to take you home before I get back to work."

"Can I come to work with you, mommy?" He towered over me, but he still felt like my little boy as he slipped his hand into mine.

"Not today, Kevin."

"Soon?"

"We'll see, sweetheart." I loved him enough to want to keep him with me a little bit longer. I would need to cleanse him of the badness soon. It was my job. My responsibility.

I just wanted to hear him laugh one more time.

I Scream Surprise

– Nicola Tapson

A soft wetness lapped against my hand. I wiped my hand and smelled caramel. My tummy rumbled. I should have had some dessert before bed.

“Oh, damn my imagination”. I turned over willing myself back to sleep. A few moments later, I felt something dripping on my forehead. I wiped my forehead. It felt sticky. It smelt like caramel. I licked it. Wow, it *was* caramel ice cream. But where was it coming from? I opened my eyes and screamed. A man whose crown shone like a new billiards ball loomed over me. His ears were small, his head engulfed by his shoulders.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” I yelled as I backed away.

“I have come for dessert.” whispered the man as his eyes glided over my body.

“But you have dessert in your hand.” I said, trembling. He cackled. Laughter can be the best sound in the world but his wasn’t. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because you are dessert,” he said as his sharp teeth glinted in the moonlight.

Ice Cream

– Kim Wainer

Thomas opened his eyes with a start, his heart pounding. Staring straight up, he tried to catch his breath, taking some small comfort from the weak outlines of the glow-in-the-dark stars he'd stuck up there as a kid. That was about the last time he'd had a nightmare like this. Bad enough he'd had to move back in here after his father died, failing his defiant attempts to escape – he didn't need this.

A soft sound caught his ears, and he quietened his breathing, listening.

There it was again – the sound of children laughing, echoing and distorted like a bad recording.

He frowned and then rolled onto his side, curling into a ball. At this time of night, ordinary sounds changed without background noise to muffle them. Scolding his overactive imagination, he closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep.

Again he heard it – so convincing, as if there were children hiding just down the passage. He rolled onto his other side, trying to think of something else.

There was nothing like the sound of laughter – especially the disembodied kind, in the dark of the night – for making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. With a sigh, he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Sleep would elude him until he found the source of that... noise.

He picked up his phone out of habit, turning it on for the light as he shuffled for his bedroom door.

The laughter was so clear that he snatched his hand away from the door handle, instinct taking over. Pressing his lips together, he lowered his hand again, opening the door with a sharp tug.

Of course, there were no small children standing outside.

Of course.

He tilted his head, holding his phone up for a little light in the gloom, and then set off toward the bathroom. It wasn't far, but in the darkness the passage seemed to stretch out to infinity.

The dim circle of light provided by his cell phone provided texture to the darkness more than a pathway through it. It almost looked as though there were someone standing at the end of the passageway, someone small, and round, and

...and as bald as a snake, with disturbingly adult features perched on a fat child's body gripping a dripping ice cream cone in its stubby, grimy fingers.

Right out of his old nightmares.

Something dripped on Thomas's head and he screamed, dropping his phone and staggering back into the dark.

Disoriented, his foot found only empty air. His ragdoll body clattered to the bottom of the stairs and lay still, blood pooling around it like melted ice cream.

Comedy



“For the sake of a horse, something, something.”

The Flower Prince

– Christelle Bloem

A few days after the announcement of my betrothal to the Flower Prince, I found myself walking through a meadow made of red lavender, en route to the Flower Castle. As I walked, I picked one of the ears of lavender to smell, and I started coughing violently, because it smelled like oil. I dropped it immediately, and noticed how brown it had stained my hands.

Suddenly, I was at the door of the Flower Castle, and one of the Flowers came out to greet me. As was the custom, I recited the sacred greeting:

“For the sake of a horse, something, something.”

The Flower did the same, and put out his hand in an inward direction to welcome me into the Castle.

By the throne, pacing up and down nervously, I saw my beloved prince-to-be, and he looked at me with the dreamiest look I had ever seen. I had never seen the Flower prince, but now I saw why he was given this title. His head, enormous and round, was perched on top of a body as thin as a stick. His ears were round and stood out prominently from the rest of his face, while his small, beady eyes resembled seeds.

All the people from the surrounding villages came to our wedding banquet, and traditional Flower Flutes were played for us. My Flower Prince couldn't dance, but I waltzed around the floor happily by myself.

Later that evening I found myself walking through the corridors of the Flower palace, searching for my wedding ring. I must have lost it when I put my clothes out to dry, and no one in the palace had seen it. I was crying bitter tears of sorrow, as it had only been a few hours since I received it and I had already lost it. I plopped down on the floor in despair and sobbed violently for a few hours.

Suddenly a small seedling appeared, walking on his two stem legs as if his life depended on it. I grabbed him, and he squealed. I just didn't want to be alone anymore. I started pouring

out my tears into his face, and that's when I realized he can't absorb sadness like the seedlings in my kingdom.

"Oh, seedling. What is your use if you can't make me feel better?"

"To become a flower, Your Majesty."

I sighed loudly and just lay down in despair. That's when I saw my wedding ring. It had only rolled underneath the table in the corridor.

I felt so silly for making such a fuss, but exhausted I dozed off, dreaming of a world filled with purple lavender that smelt sweet and not oily.

The Princess Steed

– Candice Maree Burger

“For the sake of a horse, something, something...” the great Ice Cream Wizard began. In truth, Kaleb just wasn’t listening to the ramblings of his “eclectic” Grandfather. Instead he stared out of the window at the hundreds of singing and chanting people that had come to see if the wizard could undo the spell. Kaleb sighed. It truly was the end of an era.

In the past ten winters the Outlaw knight and his talking roan mare had helped countless people across the five kingdoms of Fanseehia.

As the wizard continued his spell, sparks of magic flew everywhere.

“Is she all right?” Kaleb asked the wizard’s assistant. “Of course, dear,” his grandmother reassured him.

“How did this happen?” the elderly woman asked. Kaleb shook his head and began his explanation.

“I had just gone to live with Kallen at the Knight School in Aelara.” Kaleb remembered how happy he had been to go and live with his brother.

“The first day there I showed up Prince Ashwynn in the arena. Not the smartest thing to do. I spent the next few hours being his personal Practice Dummy. Before being locked in the stocks. Rosewyn found me, freed me and patched me up.” Kaleb paused.

“In all the time we trained together I didn’t know who she was. Then the day of the Fall Ball everything went wrong. Ashwyn’s pet dragon burnt down our house, bandits stole my clothes while I bathed in the river and a goat ate my flowers for Rosewyn. Just when I thought nothing else could go wrong, Gezalda the fairy godmother showed up.

“At first everything was good as new - I looked better than a prince, But she wasn’t wearing her glasses and when she tried to turn a broom into a dashing steed her spell hit a shard of mirror and hit Princess Rosewyn Fireheart who had come to see if I was all right. To our horror Rosewyn was a horse. We fled that night and I found out who she really was. She had done so much for me and that was how I repaid her.”

“It is done!” the wizard exclaimed. There, before everyone's eyes stood a beautiful Princess.

“Rosewyn, are you all right?” Kaleb asked. Rosewyn opened her mouth and neighed. Kaleb’s heart and face fell.

Rose giggled, and punched him in the arm.

“Of course it did! Now, let’s go find my Prince.”

Horseplay

- Justin J.

The horse really shouldn't have been able to get out. Markell had no idea how it did, but he knew that he was starting to develop a severe hatred of all things equine, and of medieval fairs.

"Get back here, you stupid ..."

He was running after the stallion, ignoring the onlookers. The fair was in full swing, set up around an old castle. Anybody not gorging on fatty foods, drink, and fair activities was staring at the tall blond man in the colourful jester outfit (he lost a best with his wife) as he chased the large horse, the bells around his frilly collar jingling with each step.

"Stop running, you insane animal!"

He raced past a stage. They had, for some reason, decided to put on a show of Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

"A horse...something, something," the lead actor said, sounding less than enthusiastic about his role and more than a little drunk.

"The line is, 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse' you drunken hack!" Markell yelled as he raced by. "You shame stage actors everywhere!"

And then the horse made a turn and ran onto the stage. Markell skidded to a halt, twisted on the spot, and followed. He saw the danger too late. The horse knocked the main support for the backgrounds on his way through, running fast enough to avoid what came after.

Markell wasn't as fast. He looked up as the entire set came down on him, burying him in wood and cloth. With a groan, he pushed the debris aside.

"Who built this set, a blind, drunken monkey?"

He managed to stand, and came face to muzzle with That Damn Horse.

"... now you're just mocking me," he ground out. The horse knocked his muzzle into the man's forehead and took off again. Markell's right eyebrow twitched and he took off after it.

“Get. Back. Here!”

The chase took them past his wife and daughter who’d arrived after him, the family there to celebrate Alese's sixteenth birthday. “Mom ...? Why is Dad chasing a horse?”

Agneta sighed. “I don't know, Alese, but this won't end well for him I'm sure.”

The horse jumped through a stand selling sauerkraut. Markell hated sauerkraut with a passion; the mere smell could make him physically ill.

He tried to go around the stand, but the horse, intelligently vindictive, kicked the stall as he passed by. The entire thing came down on Markell, jars of sauerkraut crashing around him.

“The only thing I hate more than sauerkraut right now ...” He pushed jars and debris aside, standing up. “... is that horse!”

The horse stood there, and Markell swore it was smug.

“If I hadn't promised my little girl a horse for her birthday this year, you would be glue.”

“Dad? You ... got me a horse?” Alese stared at her father, and then at the horse. “Thank you! I'd hug you, but ... um ... you kind of stink.”

With the horse calmly licking sauerkraut off his jester’s outfit, Markell sighed.

“Happy birthday, Alese. Happy birthday.”

Cloth and Straw

– Carin Marais

While people thronged towards the castle for the big inauguration of the new emperor of the newest - and smallest - kingdom, others were thinking up ways to make some quick money by selling trinkets, food and drink, cure-all remedies, and even some Very Real Locks Of Emperor Hair Guaranteed To Make You Wealthy Fast. Those disappeared almost as fast as the cure-alls.

Somewhere in the middle of the throng, however, were Thomas and Harold, pickpockets extraordinaire, who had realised that the pickings in this throng were not going to make them the rich men they so wanted to be. Thomas, however, would not be daunted.

“What we need is to be part of the entertainment, to get into the palace somehow.”

“Oh yeah? And how’re we going to do that? We don’t have instruments.”

“We have our voices,” Thomas grinned.

“And no song.”

“Then we’ll write one.”

Five hours later Thomas sighed. “Read me what we have so far.”

“For the sake of a horse, something, something.”

“For the sake of a horse? Dimwit! For the sake o’ his ‘onour!” He smacked Harold on the head. “And that’s hardly a song.”

“Any other ideas, Oh Great One?”

Thomas thought for a while.

“We could try the ‘Tailor-Stitch-And-Run’ again.”

“Now you’re being a dimwit! We nearly lost our heads! And I quite like my head. And all my other body parts. I don’t want to see my own entrails, thank you very much.”

“Don’t worry so much. We just need to make sure the real tailors are properly out of the way this time, take their place and play on our newest leader’s ego.”

Harold shrugged. “Worth a try, I guess. They do say his ego is even bigger than his stomach. Which is saying something.”

“Let’s get going then. We need some proper dandy clothes if we’re to pull this off.”

A week later Thomas and Harold watched from a safe distance as the new emperor was paraded through the streets wearing only a red and blue sash with a few medals stuck on it.

“You’d think that they would have at least some misgivings, you know.”

“The only misgivings I have is that this purse feels awfully light, now that I think about it.” H

e opened it and cursed loudly. Inside was a bundle of straw.

Harold covered his eyes. “Looks like Rumpelstiltskin is also making the rounds.”

Horse Cataloguer

- Elliot P. McGee

The fair had begun. People streamed from all corners of the empire flocking to fight for a space within the fairgrounds of the kingdom.

It was a time of merriment, of treats, and of entertainment. For the King and his royal court it was also a time for business and dispute resolution.

I had been wronged and so I stood before the King as he read over my petition, the accused standing to the right of me.

"... for the sake of a horse, something, something ... "

Pages rustled as the king flipped the petition over. He shot a look at his royal advisor which without words still said, "Are you serious?"

The King turned back to his court, empty except for the royal staff and a horse. He stood, wringing his hands, "If I understand correctly, your horse disappeared."

He was addressing me. "Yes, your majesty."

"And if I follow, this man ... Nebud? This man also had a horse."

"Yes, yer majesty." Nebud said, his voice gruff and low.

"And you," he pointed at me, "accuse Nebud of having misplaced his horse and replacing it with yours."

The King's brow furrowed at this point.

"Your majesty, if I have your ear. I have kept a catalogue of each horse I have owned, bite patterns, dated and named. Nebud was unkind to his horse, and several sections of teeth were missing."

"Yer majesty, if you pardon, this is ridiculous. I've kept my horse in sight of me all day." At this he turned to me and asked, incredulous, "How might ye propose we test the bite mark, eh?"

I had a trick up my sleeve. Well, perhaps not a trick. It was up my sleeve, though. I began rolling up the folds of my sleeves to reveal scars running the length of my arm, all in the peculiar pattern one might consider a horse's bite to form.

At the strange and inquiring looks the court gave me, I sheepishly explained, "I've lost a horse or two in my time. It is also not the easiest process."

The King waved off my explanation and gestured to the horse.

"Go ahead."

I stepped up to the horse, fingers working at its mouth, and soon had his jaw open. I lined up the patterns and the horse sunk his teeth down.

"A perfect match," the King noted.

I still maintain my scream was one of victory.

Neapolitans

– Nthato Morakabi

The Holler ice cream company was founded during the Neapolitan Pilgrimage, begun during the great Belgian Chocolate revolt of 1635. A Belgian descendent of an Aztec Mesoamerican witchdoctor and the fermented chocolate drink peddler; Olmec “David” Cacao, Mostlywrong Doumar introduced the frozen beverage to his fellow Belgians during a historic barter.

He had intended to trade the aphrodisiac drink for a glistening chalice, dubbed the Holy Grail that Charles-Alexander of Dummkopf claimed was stolen from the Pope’s prized whole-wheat storage facility. However, upon producing the milky brew, Doumar found that the drink had frozen and the French waffles below it had been squished into a cone shaped container. Not to be perturbed by the seemingly undesirable circumstances, Doumar presented his object of bartering as a frozen beverage named Cream Ice by the French, which their leader Charles I (and the biblical figure King Solomon) enjoyed frequently.

Charles-Alexander scoffed at Doumar, stating that he would rather exchange the Cream Ice for a horse. It was actually more of a pony.

Understandably, to a degree, Doumar was upset. He stated that Charles-Alexander, although Belgian, was nothing more than a fiend reminiscent of an upcoming French leader-cum-emperor whom he incorrectly prophesied to be named Neapolitan – this error mainly due to his Aztec powers being diminished through filtering bloodlines.

Charles-Alexander attempted to please the raving Belg-tec false prophet with his most famous quote, “For the sake of the horse, something, something.” Sadly much of what he said was lost in the skirmish that followed. Also, the Latin scribe, Doctor, had terrible handwriting.

At the premature death of Charles-Alexander, and in commemoration of Neapolitan’s defeat in the far, far future (also wrong), Doumar dyed three scoops of cream ice into red, blue and white similar to the French flag. Unfortunately, the red turned out pink, the blue softened into a lighter shade, and the white somehow mixed with the cacao they were carrying and turned brown.

“Ha! Shows just how bad Neapolitan will be. Even the French colours are running away.” He laughed. An inside joke no one else understood, the curse of his prophetic powers.

“From this day forward, we shall have the Neapolitan Pilgrimage. Beyond that hill we shall build a castle where people from all walks of life shall travel. We’ll name it Holler, after my tribe’s customary greeting.”

Doctor may have misspelled that too.

The Terrors of Feast-Day

– L.O.K. Selby

Smells of roasting pork and chicken wafted through the corridors into Ben's chambers. His stomach ached from hunger, but it was not enough to draw him away from the windows that overlooked the entrance gardens. A servant had recently brought in some roasted chicken for him, but it still did not draw him from his view of hundreds of commoners, awaiting their chance to enter the feasting halls.

Ben wished they never had to set foot into the castle. Though most commoners of the Cakelands were kind, decent folk, some were little terrorists - wanting nothing more than to humiliate and bully him.

Every monthly feast, Ben had to cower away in hope they wouldn't find him. His attempts never proved successful - he was always found and forced to endure the torment. On request, the king would always personally seek out and find Ben. Why did the king treat him as a pet? Didn't he always say Ben was family?

The chamber door burst open, the king making his entrance. "Ah, Ben! Right where I had hoped to find you! Seems you have given up hiding on feast nights!" The king - draped in fine silks of various, unmatched colours - exuded regality as he spoke.

"Can I not be left alone for just one feast?" Ben said, "I cannot live through such torment! At the very least, I deserve a break. For the sake of a horse, something, something...." The rest eluded him, though he never really could remember the idiom.

The king laughed, though it did not seem directed at Ben's failed use of the saying. The king pulled the food bowl closer to Ben, urging him to eat, but he did not want the food before and he did not want it now.

"You best eat something now, Ben," the king said, "Your special guests are already on their way."

Ben prepared to launch into a tantrum, but a scream from the corridor stopped him. The king leaned out of the doorway into the corridor beyond and said, "This way, children. The royal Ben awaits your company!"

The screaming from the corridor intensified along with the sound of hurried footsteps. A group of children burst into the room, bouncing with excitement. One child ran up to Ben and lifted him into the air, squeezing him in an embrace so tight that Ben's fur-covered face squished up against the child's.

Ben the cat truly hated children!

Art of a Chihuahua

– Nicolette Stephens

There was something wrong with the sign, but the comedian's poor sense of humour distracted me from contemplating it fully.

"For the sake of a horse ... something, something. Uh ... haha." He stumbled to a halt as I lifted my hand.

"Thank you. I've seen enough. If you don't hear from us, please consider your application unsuccessful." He slumped off the stage, knocking over one of the triangular plywood trees in the process. I winced, making a mental note to fix it before my stage manager could pitch a fit louder than the noise bylaws allowed for in the club.

The set was her baby, as treasured as the rat with teeth she called a dog and carried everywhere in her handbag. I tolerated her obsession with Chihuahuas because of her fastidious attention to detail. I tolerated her attention to detail because I was too lazy to fire her. Also, she was my wife.

The current set was designed to fit in with the medieval festival that was running in the small town we called home. A procession of people made their way to a castle in the distance, with an elaborate signboard pointing the way. I wasn't sure whether the artist my wife had hired had intended the sign to depict ice cream cones, or if the Chihuahua had distracted him as he was painting it, but as long as she was happy, I wasn't too concerned. Peace and quiet, I had learnt, was best kept by keeping quiet.

"Daddy!" My daughter, five-years-old and as loud as her mother, made her way on from backstage, closely followed by her long-suffering older brother.

"Lily! I told you to stay with me. Sorry Dad, I'll take her home."

"No!" Lily stamped her foot. "Daddy, Tommy lied! He said he'd take me to see the unicorns, but they weren't even unicorns! They were ponies, painted bright colours with cones tied to their heads!"

"That's not my fault, Lily! Dad, tell her I didn't lie!"

“Lily, sweetheart, Daddy is very busy. I need to find a new comedian for our show this weekend. Let Tommy take you home. We’ll discuss the fake unicorns later.”

Her frown spoke volumes, but she let her brother drag her off stage. The next comedian made his way up to audition. I squinted at the signboard again, thinking about colourful ponies in cones.

That bloody Chihuahua.

Pinoc's Proposition

– Nicola Tapson

"For the sake of a horse, something, something," muttered Reginald in his sleep. He had gone to sleep far too late and his footmen were struggling to wake him.

"Sir? Sir! Wake up. People from far and wide have come to woo your daughter."

"Huh? What?" Reginald said as he stumbled out of bed. He moved towards the window and as he drew back the curtain he saw a trail of people a hundred kilometres deep.

"Who are all these people?"

"These, dear sir, are the people who wish to woo your daughter."

"Woo my daughter? Since when did she come of age to be wooed? Only last week she was crawling and playing with wooden blocks. She loved her wooden toys the most. She still has them."

"Sir, she has been a woman for three years already."

"Well, it shan't happen! None of these riffraff are good enough for my sweet princess."

"Well, sir, you said she can marry when she is 21 and she happened to turn that age a day ago." Reginald sulked. He knew what he had said but had hoped this day would never come. He looked at the prospects. Each one got a no. Either they were too fat or too thin. Too young or too old. Until up walked a man. He was dressed in a blue waistcoat and had chocolate brown trousers on. In his hat was a blue feather. He looked very well-kept.

"Who are you?"

"I am Pinoc."

"What name is Pinoc?"

"It is my nickname."

"Okay, Pinoc. What do you have to offer my princess?"

"All the wood she could ever want," said Pinoc, with a wink to the King's daughter.

“What!” exclaimed Reginald, “Don’t you think that it is a bit inappropriate to proposition my daughter before you have even courted her?”

“Oh no sir, I didn’t mean that kind of wood. I meant my father is a carpenter and I would be able to keep your daughter within all the creature comforts she is accustomed to, because we have a booming business.”

“Oh really? And you believe you can satisfy my daughter’s every need?”

“Sure,” said Pinoc, as his nose began to grow. Reginald looked at his daughter. She was smitten. She loved the length of Pinoc’s nose.

“Fine, you may court her.”

For the Want of a Nail

– Kim Wainer

Where there were crowds, there were salesmen and thieves.

Beck stood on his box, flexing his long-fingered hands and grinning to himself. His bag ought to be weighed down with loot from his morning excursions at the summer fair. At this time of year, the city was flooded with cheerful tourists, so picking pockets was always particularly lucrative. A few coins from certain faraway places could buy a hell of a lot of drinks and a bed to fall into afterwards. Unfortunately, this meant that there was competition.

By this time, though, with the streets humming with people, pockets were guarded more carefully. It was time for something different.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, throwing his hands out wide and projecting his voice above the hubbub. “A performance unlike any other – before your very eyes – ”
People responded to cliché.

Beck lifted his arms dramatically, watching the crowd slowly gather around the upturned top hat on the ground in front of him.

“Step right up, step right up – won’t you leave your spare change in my hat?” A few coins jingled out of the crowd, already entertained by his hammy showmanship.

“First, a few japes, to whet your appetite!” Beck leaped off the box, picked up his hat and accosted a small child in the front row.

“You sir! What do you call a cow with no legs?” The child stared at him in silence, overawed. (No matter – he didn’t really need him.)

“Ground beef!” He whirled away, leaving a trail of terrible jokes and laughter in his wake – all to the tune of jingling coins skipping into his hat.

He leaped back up onto his box and struck a poetic pose, holding his hat aloft. “For the want of the nail,” he began, a caricature of every great to walk the stage, “the war was lost!” He jumped down again and darted through the crowd again as he began the old proverb.

“You see ... For the want of a nail, the shoe was lost,” a wallet here, “for the want of a shoe; the horse was lost,” a necklace there, “for the want of a horse ...” He paused, looking out at all their upturned stupid happy faces.

“... something, something! Bye!”

As he disappeared down a nearby alleyway, he tucked his gains into his pockets and set the top hat snugly on his head.

Tragedy



“Mountains stretched endlessly to the horizon.”

Eliza

– Christelle Bloem

Tim collapsed to his knees from exhaustion and thirst. He looked up from the sand at his fingertips, and despaired. Mountains stretched endlessly to the horizon. A solution to his dilemma seemed impossible. He was going to die in this desert.

He forced himself back to his feet. He had to reach Green and find his daughter. Her mother had shipped her to that remote town in the hopes that she would be trained to be a seamstress, but he hadn't heard anything from his dear Eliza for three months now. He'd set upon his journey three weeks ago, and he still had no hope of finding it.

He should've trusted his gut feeling the day she left and made her stay. But his ex-wife was so adamant on doing anything that would upset him. He feared he had lost his little girl forever.

That evening he collapsed and gave up, thinking he would never awake. When he woke up, he was no longer atop sand and endless nothing, but the tar of a road never travelled. Confusion gripped him as he looked around him at the buildings that dated back to the 1950s. He plodded around in the streets, unsure of where he was until he reached the edge of the town and saw the board.

WELCOME TO GREEN. POPULATION: 0

"Eliza?" He started shouting throughout the town confused. When he heard no response after what felt like days of searching, he just slumped onto the tar road, sobbing his eyes out. This was the second time he had lost his daughter to the cruelty of this world.

He worked hard so that he could provide a comfortable life for his Eliza, and now she was gone.

"Daddy?" He heard a small voice, and he immediately sat up straight. He was no longer in that town, but in nothing. It was black all around him, and he couldn't see anything except it.

“Daddy?!” He heard her screaming desperately, and he started running around in the abyss looking for his little girl.

He suddenly saw her, lying on the ground, blood coming from her mouth, her eyes blank as her soul had already left it.

He held her in his arms, crying his eyes out, pain clutching at his heart like a parasite.

“He can’t distinguish between real or not anymore. He only remembers Eliza.” The doctor said to Tim’s sister from behind the glass. She looked at him as he was lying on the hospital bed, in a coma from his accident.

“You’re recording his dreams? How will this help?” She asked, swallowing her tears.

“If he hears Eliza, maybe he will wake up.”

“Eliza died in that town five years ago. Just like Tim, she is lost to us forever.”

Dial 9 for an Angel

– Candice Maree Burger

Kaela hit redial one last time. This was it; if he didn't answer she was going through with the wedding. As the phone rang, Kaela paced, heart pounding in her chest. Heaven knew how she missed the way Conrad would wrap her in his embrace and his amazing kisses.

On the other side of town a man raced to the phone booth.

Detective Conrad Hudson picked up the phone on the last ring.

"Hello? Hello? Conrad?" he heard his beloved's voice becoming more frantic as he remained silent. "Hello is anyone there?"

He was about to answer her when his conscience warned.

Do this and everything you worked for so hard for will be lost, worse so will her happiness.

Conrad let the handset drop. It was the hardest thing he ever had to do.

Kaela sighed, brushing away a tear as she looked at a photo of her with Conrad.

Remembering all the trials of the last two years since their forced separation. Trials that became easier when she dialled a wrong number one night.

The voice on the other end none other than her soul mate. What started out as a weekly conversation soon became the only way she could face the day. The consequences could be damned; for a brief moment each night they were connected.

Kaela put on a smile. She was grateful for the gift she had been given. She had to look to the future now. With that thought she let her bridesmaids help her get ready.

Conrad waited until he couldn't anymore. He had to speak to her one last time. He owed his soul mate that. He stood in front of the little church where they had said "I do".

The bells were ringing as a crowd began to gather on the steps of the church. There she was. His fairy-tale princess, dressed in an ivory ball gown, her auburn hair up. His breath hitched. Beside Kaela was his best friend, her new husband.

Across the street their eyes met.

“You were late,” she whispered tears making her eyes sparkle.

“I know,” Conrad replied, tears running down his own face.

“Forgive me love, but I did what I had to do for our son. My heart will always be yours.”

Kaela clasped the locket he had given her.

“And mine is yours, just as the mountains stretch endlessly to the horizon. Shawn is a good man.” Conrad smiled.

She knew then there would be no more late night calls.

Kaela watched helplessly as Conrad clasped his chest, his face twisted in agony. He dropped to his knees, slowly fading from sight as his wings spread out behind him, dissolving with him into the wind. He was gone for good this time.

There would be no more calls to her late husband murdered the day she found out she was three months pregnant with his son.

Downfall

– Justin J.

A payphone swung by its cord, words echoing in the head of the woman that had used it.

“She's dead now, bitch.”

A gunshot, and dead air. Barely noticing anything, the mother of a dead child walked off. Numb. Everything was numb.

Her light, her life, her treasure.

Behind her, unnoticed, a woman pulled out her cellular phone and called the police. The Mother walked, mind blank, heart and soul shattered. She stopped and sank down onto a bench, head bowed, seeing nothing.

Her little girl playing in the park with her friends, the sunlight warming them all.

People were around her now. People? When did people arrive? She looked up. Somebody was talking, asking about her hands.

Her hands? What was wrong with her hands? She looked down. Her hands were red.

She blinked and began to giggle, broken.

“Why are my hands red?” she asked, voice hoarse. “No, no, they were for holding my Light.”

There was a sound, now. Sirens? No, the police didn't exist anymore. Did they?

She looked up at her, eyes asking why because her jaw ...

More voices, more questions. She stared at her red hands.

Red. Why were they red?

She wasn't allowed to touch it. Nobody was. She had to be punished.

Mother looked up and stared at the uniformed woman who was looking at her in nothing but concern. More questions.

“Please,” she said brokenly. “My Light, my little girl ... she's ... the woman killed her. Payphone ... two streets down. She called ...”

More talking, but Mother was staring at her hands. They twitched slightly.

Her nails raked across her eyes, the eyes that questioned why. Her fists were driven into her face, then, to stop the silent question.

More talking. “That payphone doesn't even work. It hasn't for months.”

Mother stared at her hands.

Her Light was dead, she had ... she had ... with her own hands ... she had ...

Mother's world ...

... came ...

... crashing ...

... *down.*

Both Sides

– Carin Marais

Mountains stretched endlessly to the horizon. Thick forests covered most, bare patches visible where the loggers had finished their work and the new growth had not yet covered the ground. Logging trucks made their noisy way down the steep passes, leaving dust trails in their wake. The town that had sprung up around the forests and the ever-hungry mill lay in a sleepy hollow, forming the perfect setting for a postcard, a wedding, or a social media post.

The town was busy on this festive Saturday. Between the loggers and their families, moved the travellers who had fled the confines of the city for the long weekend. Voices and laughter sounded on the sidewalks and in the new cafés. No one looked twice at the black car that stopped beside the last remaining public phone box outside the church. The passenger door opened slowly and a man in his mid-thirties stepped out with some difficulty, leaning heavily on a cane. In his other hand he held a bunch of purple irises. Dressed in a grand suit, he ran his hand over his hair, revealing for a moment a deep scar on his scalp where hair had not grown again. A child, on seeing the man's scarred face, was first startled, and then twisted his own face into a grotesque mask, laughing and running away from him. The man did not give the child a second glance. Rather, he went over to the phone booth and knelt stiffly next to a thin wooden cross and photograph of a red haired woman. Placing the irises on the ground beneath the picture, he turned his face towards the car so that no one would see him cry. In ten years the hurt had not healed.

A woman came to stand next to the sobbing man, her long white dress brushing the sidewalk.

"It's the first weekend of spring again," she said, looking down at him. "I didn't think you would come. You didn't last month."

“The psychologist told me not to. He said it’s unhealthy.” The man wiped at his eyes and looked up. “It’s ten years today,” he said. “How could I stay away?” A soft smile pulled at his lips when he looked up at the red-haired woman. “You look as beautiful today as you did on our wedding day.”

She smiled and blushed. Then looked over her shoulder at something he couldn’t see before turning back to him.

“The light will not leave me alone.” Sadness dragged at her features. She knelt by the flowers and ran her fingers lightly over the irises before leaning over and kissing him.

It was nearly sunset when a logger walked to the phone box. Trembling, he picked up the flowers. Tears formed in his eyes as he stared down at the cross and photo.

“I’ll go put these in water for you.” He cleared his throat. “I’m not driving those trucks anymore, you know,” he told the picture on the cross. “What happened that day ... I won’t risk it happening again.” He nodded stiffly and walked in the direction of the mill as tears flowed freely. He could still feel the brakes of the truck stop working as if it was yesterday.

Penance

– Elliot P. McGee

Ursula's eyes flitted about trying to catch sight of her captors. She leaned into a hallway stretching to a metallic hatch. She knew this hall well, too well. This was her only salvation.

They claimed to be detaining her for her safety and that all the residents of the mountain town were to remain inside until it was safe for them to be moved. Words such as "haven" and "refuge" were thrown around easily these days.

Ursula started down the hallway counting the seconds in her head. She had 73 seconds or less before the men in white arrived. She reached the door in 13. She had a minute left to crack it and run like hell.

Something was wrong. The locking mechanism was different. A moment's dread fell over her before she drew in a breath to set her mind to the task. This hall would not defeat her.

Time passed and she struggled. She had 23 seconds left, her count ticking over in her head. Voices echoed down the corridor and boots slapped the floor. Sweat beaded at her forehead to trickle down her face, the taste of salt mingled with fear. She was losing time and fast.

Her fingers fumbled, she righted her grip and heard a satisfying click. A rush of relief came over her.

"She's here!" cried a voice, setting her back into panic. She forced the door open and clambered out onto a grassy bank. Words filtered out but she could only make out "breach" and "fall back". She was safe.

She took in a deep breath that smelled of grass and freedom and looked at the mountains that stretched endlessly to the horizon. Ursula focused. If she could get down to the town she could get help, she could finally be away from this place.

She chose a path she had walked often and found herself on the streets soon after. The place gave her chills. The streets were empty and there were no sounds of life, not even a

car alarm. The stores she passed were a snapshot of the past, as if the entire town had disappeared over night. For all intents and purposes, it had.

Ursula needed to find a way to get out of here. A phone booth caught her attention and she ran over. A siren wailed from above. The men in white would be on their way.

Ursula pressed the handset to her ear and her heart swelled with grief. The line was dead. She recalled the line had been dead the previous time and all the times before that. Tears stung her face as salt seeped into radiation scars. She barely noticed the sterile-white gloves on each shoulder lifting her for extraction.

As she lay on a stretcher, jostling with the vehicle's motion, a muffled voice came from one of the figures above her.

"It's heart-breaking."

Another head shook, "No point caring. Look around. She's why we're in this mess. We can't let her escape."

Payment Terms

– Nthato Morakabi

It was our first holiday as a family. My wife, Francina, had never been outside of Johannesburg since she moved here from Portugal. She mostly worked half days at a nursery school down the road. I'd come home and she'd be wearing an old white apron her grandmother had given her.

"You musta be a good cook for your husband eh." She would mock *Avó Lina*.

Francina kept her dark hair in a bun, a loose strand curling over her left cheek that I would tuck behind her ear before giving her a kiss. I think she let it stray on purpose.

Our son José was born a year after our marriage. An energetic bundle of wild black hair like his mother, and deep brown eyes that glimmered like marbles. Francina would speak to him in Portuguese and I would hope to get some English in.

When José turned three we decided he was old enough to take on holiday. This was back in '96. I found us a beautiful location near the Drakensberg Mountains and two weeks later we were driving down.

The winding roads displayed beautiful flora on rolling hills. At one point the hills opened to the vista of a sparkling, ocean-blue lake at the foot of the mountains stretching endlessly to the horizon.

"It's beautiful, *meu amor*." Francina said to me, hand clutching my arm. I took my eyes off the road long enough to take in her beauty. In the backseat, José squealed with joy too, whether from the sight or his own musings, I do not know.

Now, Drakensberg wasn't only a family holiday for me, although that is how I depicted it to Francina. It was also a meeting with an ... associate. I owed him money. A lot of money.

Arriving at the resort, we hurried to our chalet and both Francina and José fell asleep on the bed within minutes. That's when I snuck out. It was supposed to be a quick conversation at a corner café in a quaint little town a few kilometres away. I arrived by taxi to empty streets

as the sun set in the distance. The café was closed. I spotted a payphone and with what little coins I had, placed a call to my associate who had given me his Drakensberg number.

It rang only once.

“H-hello?”

“Francina?”

My gut dropped like having a bad stomach bug

“What ...?”

“Eyyyy! Partner!” a male voice cut in, “We’re here with your beautiful wife and boy. Where are you?”

“Balotelli?”

“The little one is growing up so quick.”

“What’s going ... oh God.”

“God ain’t going to help you buddy – you got my money?”

“Well ... I – that’s why we’re meeting, right?” My chest heaved.

“Do you have it or not?”

“No but – ”

“Meu amor I’m sorry it has come to this.” Francina said. Voice cold. “I have endured enough for that money. Me and José are leaving you.”

“Wait what? You knew? How –?”

“You heard her, no cash no lass.” Balotelli cut me off.

My blood ran cold.

“Oh and about the boy, he was never yours in the first place.”

The click set in reality’s finality.

Blue Mountains

– L.O.K. Selby

A loud hiss spread through the coffee shop from the machine as someone's filter coffee was prepared, interrupting the low chatter of the few customers present. Few of the tables were occupied and of those that were, only two had more than one person seated. Michael and his daughter, Ciara, sat in silence and sipped at their respective drinks. The cold of the coffee shop made the steam of Michael's coffee seem thick as mist at sea. It had been a harsh and cold winter and the morning chill was exacerbated by the tall, blue mountains skirting the eastern end of Pinetown. The mountains, appropriately named the Blue Mountains, stretched endlessly to the horizon both northward and southward. The sun would not peak the mountains before 9 a.m. leaving the early mornings cold and sunless.

Ciara slurped her chocolate milkshake.

"Where's Mommy, Daddy?" she asked. Having divorced two years ago, Michael and Sandy shared custody of their five-year-old daughter. The two waited at the coffee shop for Sandy to arrive to pick up Ciara. She was already very late though.

"I'm not sure, sweetie. You know how late your mother can be at times," he said before he pulled his coffee to his mouth for a life-giving gulp. Michael's anger bubbled up inside of him. Sandy was often late, which only took time out of Michael's already busy day. He would definitely give her a piece of his mind when she finally arrived.

Staring out the window, Michael fixed his eyes on the pay phone outside where it stood alone on the edge of the sidewalk. He knew he would have to use it. Had he not left his mobile at home he would just have called Ciara's irresponsible mother there and then. Stuffing his hand into his tight pockets he fingered out a few coins. He had enough in his hand to give Sandy a call.

Leaving Ciara at the table with a strict instructions not to move and an assurance from the waitress that she would watch her, Michael left the shop and hurried across the road. He stepped up to the pay phone and began feeding it coins. The last coin clinked into the machine and Michael began to dial. The dial tone rang and rang but no answer came. Michael dialled Sandy's number again and waited impatiently for a response.

A screech tore through the silence of the street, pulling Michael's eyes to the road. His heart stopped. Ciara stood frozen in front of the approaching car, eyes wide in fright. Brakes screeched as the driver tried to stop, but even as Michael dropped the phone and ran to save her, the vehicle collided with her. With a loud thump, Ciara's body was flung several feet, blood pooling as it spilled from her head.

Michael was too late.

"Hello? HELLO!?" sounded from the hanging phone.

Left Behind

– Nicolette Stephens

“Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“What? Like if I do something bad in this life, I’ll come back as a cockroach in my next?”

“Mike! Please, I’m serious.” My husband looked up from his book.

“Okay ... I don’t know. I’d like to think we all get second chances, but I guess there’s no real way to know for sure.” He glanced at the clock on the bedside table; put his book down next to it. “We should get some sleep. We need to be at the hospital really early.” The darkness in the bedroom was suffocating. I shifted closer to him.

“Mike?”

“Yes, love?”

“Will you hold me?”

His warm arms wrapped around me, giving me space to breathe again.

“I love you.”

“You’ll have to. I might be coming back as a cockroach.” I laughed, slapping his arm lightly.

“Night, love.”

“Goodnight.”

I opened the gift bag, pulling out the sheer silken scarf within.

“It’s beautiful, Jess!” I smiled at my daughter, running my hands over the fabric.

“It’s for your hair ... when you and Dad go away” Her voice trailed off. She shrugged and looked away.

“It’s perfect.” Mike hugged her, walked her out before returning to my side.

“She let it slip,” he smiled ruefully, clasping my hand in his. “It was supposed to be a surprise, for when your treatment ended.”

“What did you do?”

“You’ve wanted to go back there since our honeymoon, Ally. ‘Mountains stretched endlessly to the horizon,’ you always said.”

“The quaint little town, where everyone knew each other.”

“The bloody phone booth that never worked.”

“It was beautiful.”

We smiled at the memories of walking hand-in-hand down streets that led nowhere; the charm and grace of the town granted by the gentle glow of love, rather than the shadows cast by the mountains.

“A second honeymoon was always on my bucket list.”

Jess stood in front of the phone booth alone. The receiver dangled from its cord, a haunting reminder that there would be no response at the other end. She picked it up, put it back on its hook.

“Excuse me, miss?” A woman touched her shoulder. “Are you Jess?”

“Y-yes, I’m Jess. How did you know?”

“They said you’d be coming through, showed me a photo, like.”

“Who did?”

“Your folks, miss. They asked me to keep a lookout for you, on account of my shop’s right across the way. They wanted me to give you this. Said it was special, like.” She held out a box.

"T-thank you." The woman patted her hand. Jess watched her go. Lifted the lid of the box. Tears filled her eyes. She pulled out the scarf she'd given her mother three months before. A letter tumbled to the ground and Jess bent to pick it up. Her father's untidy scribble.

Jess,

I couldn't let your mother go alone. I'm sorry.

Dad.

Anger and grief churned inside her as she walked away, the box from her parents left behind.

Mary's Failed Escape

– Nicola Tapson

The mountains stretch endlessly to the horizon. I stared at the painting wondering what it would feel like to stand in the fields at the foot of those mountains. But I had been locked away. I only saw splinters of light coming through the blacked out windows where some of the paint had chipped off. I wondered how long I had been here. I walked to the bedpost where I had etched in the days. A month. Why hadn't Frank come to look for me? Did he even know I was missing? I had heard the man on the other side of the door say that she had taken over my wife role and that Frank was more than happy with the improved version. How did he not know it wasn't me? I sat and stared at the wall. These thoughts were starting to drive me crazy. I looked at the mobile phone. I only got incoming calls. My captor called when he was coming to make deliveries. He was not happy that I hadn't given into his sexual persuasions. I heard it ring. I picked it up.

"Mary?"

"Frank?"

"Yes, it's me."

"How did you get this number?" I mute rambled.

"There is no time. I know where you are and I am comin—" The phone went dead. I looked at it. The battery was still full. What had happened? I scurried to the door. I slammed my fists against it until there was blood. I slid down and sobbed. I heard a scuffle outside the door. Bodies were slamming against the wall. I inched away from the door and curled in a ball on the bed. This day had turned into a nightmare. The noises stopped outside. The door swung open. He threw something into the room.

"Is this what you were pining for?" I crawled off the bed. There at his feet lay my bloody love, Frank.

Shakespearian

– Kim Wainer

The phone fell from her numb hand, clattering against the housing of the payphone. It swung gently on its cord as she started to run. The trapdoor had been opened, the body dropped.

She had been smiling as she approached the phone booth. Her phone hadn't been working for weeks, so this payphone – an anachronistic sore thumb on a street in the second decade of the twenty-first century – had become synonymous with Ben. She'd spent hours here, leaning against the frame and curling the cord around her finger. Passers-by might have stared, but none ever stopped to eavesdrop, so she didn't care.

He was supposed to be here. Her feet slapped rhythmically on the pavement, in time to the beating of her heart.

They had been planning it for weeks. She had been in this tiny town alone for too long – but that was the price she paid for becoming a dentist, he would always tease her. That, and having to stick her fingers in people's mouths, of course. Sometimes she wished she could be a free spirit like him, able to transform a few words typed out in Times New Roman into artwork. She liked to watch him work, his nimble fingers moving over the keyboard as shapes rose and fell and changed on the screen.

Ben was coming to stay with her for a whole week. His big project had wrapped up, and his bosses had generously repaid the many late nights and early mornings with the greatest gift of all ... time.

There was no more time.

The phone handset crackled glumly as it swayed. "Ms. Barnes? Hello?" The voice faded, moving away from the phone on the other side of the world. If someone were to pick it up and press it to their ear, focusing through the interference on the line, they would have heard someone say: "She's gone. Is there an alternative number? We need consent – although he's stable for now."

But she wasn't listening. She was already gone.

It was so beautiful here, but she was blind to the magic of the mountains as she left the confines of the town. Without conscious choice, her feet followed the old footpath that lead up and away – that’s all she wanted, to get away. She watered the grass beneath her feet with her raining teardrops.

There’s been an accident. You’re listed as the next of kin for Benjamin Mason.

She sped up as the path climbed, weaving through trees she couldn’t see because her eyes were clouded with grief. Her muscles ached, but she pushed onward, relishing the pain and damning it at the same time. What was any feeling without Ben?

Alone on her dresser, her old phone, only good for texts these days, buzzed happily to itself and fell to the floor.

Mountains stretched endlessly to the horizon, but she’d run out of path.

Ben did come to town, a week later. Gaunt in his wheelchair, he’d come to bring his Juliet home.

Fantasy



“She was morning, subtle as the dawn.”

Colour-blind

– Christelle Bloem

Harry looked up at the picture he had painted, trying to determine if he needed to add any more details before he brought her to life.

She was morning, subtle as the dawn, and she was everything he had envisioned perfection to be.

She had brown hair, blue eyes, and a smile that curved up into her cheeks and made the viewer feel warm inside.

He knew if he brought her to life, he would have to sacrifice his own life, because energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but can only change form.

His hand that held the paintbrush was shaking at the realization that his life was about to end.

He took a deep breath, and picked up the bucket of tonic, splashing it all over his canvas before his courage left him. He watched every drop drip slowly off the canvas with teary eyes. He knew what he was doing was for the best, not only for him, but for the world he lived in now.

Art had been banned from the universe by Seri, and only a creation of Art could bring redemption.

Zoe was his world's only hope of restoring the injustices they had suffered in the last century.

Zoe – the woman stepping from the canvas, looking as if her legs were too heavy to carry her. With every step she took, Harry felt his strength draining from him.

She looked at him, frightened, and touched his face gently.

“Don't let them take away the beauty in this world. Show man how dull this world has become without colour. Bring the colour back into our lands and light up the sky with your smile. Make our world bright again.”

He collapsed into a heap, and Zoe knelt next to him. She sniffed back a tear.

“I will remind them of your world, Harry.”

The Awakening

– Candice Maree Burger

A strange little man stood staring at his Master's pocket watch, waiting for the mirror in front of him to come to life. After twenty years he had finally found it again. Colours swirled as the woman began to take form. It was her; she was morning, subtle as the dawn and just as breathtaking.

"Falstom?" her voice echoed. The Halfling looked up.

"Falstom, have you found him?"

"Yes Mistress." Relief washed over her. Aurora had been trapped in this cursed mirror for centuries, doomed to watch all she loved fade from history's memory. She had watched kingdoms come and go, forever trapped unseen and unheard in her glass prison.

"Is she here?" Duncan asked, putting his hands on Falstom's shoulder.

Aurora stared at the spitting image of her beloved. The last of her beloved Orion's descendants. All her hope for freedom rested on him. She gazed at the wizard-to-be, taking in his unseeing eyes and the numerous scars on his face. As much as she had loved Orion, this was the man she was destined to be with.

Duncan Sterling shook his head as the Halfling placed his hands on the glass. Last week he was just a blind former Marine with no family and very little to his name. In a moment, that was about to change. He heard Aurora softly chanting. He was soon unconsciously repeating her words. There was a flash of light. For the first time in five years he could see and what he saw was the girl he had spent his life dreaming about. They smiled at one another.

"Are you ready?" Aurora asked.

Duncan nodded and she placed her hand on his heart.

Duncan closed his eyes as power began to rise in him.

"You are now the new Guardian Wizard."

He took Aurora's hand.

“Only if you will be by my side,” Duncan said as he kissed her.

With a smile, Aurora led him and Falstom to a lifetime of adventures in the realm beyond the looking glass.

The Painting

– Justin J.

They said that the queen was radiant, as subtle as the dawn. He thought that it was quite a stupid thing to say, considering the dawn was hardly what he would consider 'subtle'. It was just the sun god at work, after all, and he was the least subtle of the Razmago Pantheon.

That aside, why did they even have a queen anymore? It wasn't the dark ages anymore; nobody really believed that the royals were descended from immortals now, right?

He sighed, flipping a sphere of mana from hand to hand, staring at the picture of the so-called 'Undying Queen.' Nearby, one of his co-workers maintained her ridiculous 'magic gun' (seriously, magic bullets that only stunned? What was the point?), and another sharpened a dagger he had, according to his drunken tales, stolen from a mummy.

Right, of course.

Their boss walked into the area, carrying a picture. It was, he decided, ugly as sin.

“Boss,” he drawled, “why do you have that ugly as sin painting?”

It was a strange painting, of a man in orange, looking at a clock in front of a painting standing in a desert. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know who painted it. Boss grinned.

“Bought it off M-Bo!”

He groaned. “Why?”

“Well, we're going to be guarding the Undying Queen, right? She's supposed to be an art lover.”

“Right ... ,” Mage said flatly, “I'm going to be over here, writing up my CV so I can find work after this goes to hell.”

“Hey! That's not funny!”

“It wasn't supposed to be!”

The gunner looked up and sighed. “Get a room you two.”

Boss rounded on her. "He's not my type!"

"I'd rather sleep with a leper than this crazy woman!"

"Why you little ..." Boss lit up with blue fire. "Do you want to go?!"

Mage's sphere turned into a spear. "Bring it, crazy lady!"

Gunner rolled her eyes and walked out of the room, taking the (ugly as sin, she thought) painting with her to make sure it wasn't damaged in the crossfire.

Three hours later ...

The Undying Queen smiled widely at the painting. "I love it!"

"I told you she would," Boss said brightly, ignoring the fact that she had a magical spear in her shoulder.

Mage scowled, eyebrows completely burned off. "Oh, don't rub it in."

"Oh, do get a room," the Undying Queen said as she admired her painting.

Pretty as a Picture

– Carin Marais

He stood before the painting he had finished at last. Besides the clothes on his back, a stained palette and a few paintbrushes with almost no bristles, the painting was the last possession he owned in the world. The rest had all been traded or pawned for paint, brushes, and the odd plate of food when he actually remembered to eat. It was difficult to believe that it had been ten years. Finishing the painting had been like coming up for air from the depths of a pool or returning from the land of the Fae. Everything seemed new, different. Everyone had left him during that time, he realised only then. Only she had remained behind to stare at him with a loving, serene face. And he had the spell that would complete her.

That night he carried the painting from the loft – where he was three months behind on rent – to a sliver of park. It had been planted in the middle of the city by a few good Samaritans who still remembered that it was not wise to leave the Fae without a doorway to our world. He leaned it against one of the fairy trees and walked around it nine times while chanting the spells he had been taught at his grandfather's knee. He smiled as the words spilled from his mouth. His grandmother had not just been as pretty as a picture ...

When at last all the spells had been recited, night was already lifting. Still, he could see the shadow figures of the Fae bring the woman he had painted towards him. She truly did exist now. She was morning, subtle as the dawn. She looked sweet as fresh dew on young grass. She smiled, and the world around him faded away to a pale shadow.

Peter and the Deserts of Durthan

– Elliot P. McGee

A hum filled Peter's ears. He stared at the swirling doorway before him, apprehension etched in every muscle.

The door was the only way into the Durthan deserts. Peter had travelled far on whim and passion alone to rescue Q'thora. And, of course, at the insistence of the Life Stone linked to her.

Peter pulled the Stone from his pocket. It throbbed red and Peter felt a tug toward the doorway. Q'thora had definitely been here.

Peter swallowed a knot as he pocketed the stone. He secured his pack before drawing a wicked long sword that had seen better days. Trusted rusty sword held before him, Peter stepped through the portal.

The world fell out from beneath him. He had the sense of a grand distance and was reminded of the journey he had taken before he met Q'thora. He was an exile but now he had a new home. She was morning, subtle as dawn, a raging inferno just below the horizon. There was no way he would let his home be taken from him again.

He grit his teeth and let out a scream. Reality shifted and, with all its force, struck him. He staggered, the Deserts now beneath him, barren. The Life Stone burnt in his pocket. He gathered his feet, set his shoulders and followed the Stone into the Deserts.

It was not long before he saw footprints in the sand, a predatory instinct he was surprised existed taking control. He was a bloodhound on a trail. Soon four shapes appeared on the horizon and he began chasing.

He yelled and charged, the rush of adrenaline drowning out all sounds. The figures turned to face him. The man in the cloak raised a weathered hand and Peter was no longer charging towards the group but on his back.

Everything hurt. He coughed and blood ran down his chin. Q'thora appeared above him, her face serene and concerned, her eyes met his.

“You’ve brought my Stone,” she whispered.

Q’thora smiled and Peter died seeing his dawn once more, a barren body left in a barren land.

Colours of Freedom

– Nthato Morakabi

She was morning, subtle as dawn. Radiant as blooming rays flushing roseate impressions across the glassy ocean. Her citrine tresses cascaded onto bare, ebony shoulders then upon the ruffled neckline of azure dress clinging wetly to her form. The dark angel of the sea whose home fell beyond the horizon had once again come to grace the surface.

And with her, trailing like billowing sail, was shimmering canvas - formless and luminous. Upon the vacant sandy plain did the canvas drift and unfurl and unravel and expand, quadrilateral in shape, both translucent and opaque.

Then she would paint.

I was but the single child of man and myth. Father sailed the Great Seas upon his vessel *Dromedaris*. Many believed he sought fame and fortune in unexplored lands under the ever watchful Dutch East India Company. In truth he sought relics lost within prehistoric caverns, drowned in strongholds of sunken ships and, on occasion, clutched by wyverns, basilisks, sea serpents and qilin.

Mother - she was a creature from the sea - and she was a painter.

As the child of both land and sea, I was cursed to live upon the precipice of both, unable to explore either. The sand between my toes and the waters to wash it all away. Days and nights spent gazing out towards the sea. Days and nights watching cities grow beyond the shore.

And I watched mother paint.

She swept the paintbrush in broad arcs gracing the canvas in rich, swirling colours of oceans, mountains, forests and cities. Abstract in form, concrete in implication.

She gestured for me.

“Son.” Her voice crashed like waves.

“Yes, mother?”

Dark eyes solemnly sought mine.

“Your father acquired a particular relic that allowed me travel beyond these waters. It is yours now.”

She presented a sunlit pendant.

“Will you no longer visit the surface?”

She placed her soft hand upon my shoulder.

“No. However, you may travel where you wish and this ...” nodded to the painting, “Is your portal to the world - my gift to you.”

“What of your freedom?”

She laughed.

“It is your freedom now.”

Lure in the Sand

– L.O.K. Selby

“Fourteen minutes...” Gjen said to no one in particular. He stood alone in a vast desert, a future version of his own lush, green world.

It had taken him decades to visualise the all-powerful force that kept the world in balance. Soon after his discovery of the magical force, Gjen had found that he could access the power and utilise it, using the power to rip through the thin fabric that was time and space, opening doorways to different worlds. The portals, however, were not as simple as they seemed. He had discovered how to open them - not create them. They already existed in the world, each with its own location in both time and space.

Gjen watched his stopwatch intently to track the time it took for the portal to close. He was a biologist and had previously hoped to find a world teeming with life, but this world was barren. So he reverted to studying the basic workings of the portals.

After the twenty-fifth minute, the portal rotated into itself and disappeared, leaving Gjen to stand alone in the intense heat of the desert sun.

Movement to his left yanked his attention away from the empty space where the portal previously was. He spotted something - a living thing moving in the distance. A female garbed in robes was heading his way. She was morning, subtle as the dawn. Though, something was not quite right with the way she moved. She seemed to glide across the sand, leaving a furrow in her wake.

Gjen raised his hand in a wave but, in that moment, a giant beast burst from the sand, the “person” being some form of lure affixed to the beast’s head. Giant teeth snapped toward Gjen but he ripped open the portal just in time to run through and avoid being eaten. He slammed the portal closed behind him. The lure from the beast’s head was sliced off and crashed to the ground next to Gjen, back in his own basement.

No one would believe any of this without proof, proof which Gjen now had.

Public Relations

– Nicolette Stephens

Peter stood in front of the portal. He pulled out his pocket watch, and tapped his foot impatiently.

They were due to come through at any moment, but he could not wait much longer.

He had to get back, he had stuff to do, people to vet, paperwork to process. No time to waste on people who took their own sweet time dying.

The Pearly Gate in front of him began to swirl, patterns and colours spiralling in a kaleidoscope of brilliant colours.

Peter pocketed his watch, straightened his hat, and prepared to welcome the newcomers to Limbo.

"Did you see that?"

"Was it an angel?"

"I don't know, but she was magnificent!"

"She was morning!"

"Subtle as the dawn! I barely felt her until she was there!"

The group of souls stumbled through the gate, their words rushing over and under each other as they tried to make sense of their passing.

Peter sighed. He'd have to have a word with God again. His plans to streamline operations in Heaven would not work if she kept switching jobs.

She really should be leaving the task of taking souls to the Reapers. Instead she'd probably become bored with the Prayer Office and had taken leave to go play Angel of Death.

The souls gathered in front of him, quieting as they realised he was waiting to address them.

"Welcome to the Afterlife, folks. I'm Peter, and I'll be responsible for processing you through Limbo. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask."

"You're Peter? As in, Saint Peter of the Pearly Gates?"

Peter fought the urge to roll his eyes.

"Yes, sir. I am that Peter, and you've just come through a Pearly Gate."

He gestured and the crowd turned to look at the portal which, no longer active, had an opaque sheen to it, much like a pearl.

"Oh."

Their disappointment was palpable.

Peter kept a smile on his face, but inside, he cursed ever having put God in charge of PR all those years ago.

A Stroll Through the Light

– Nicola Tapson

Tayanita rose with the first light. She put on her deep red dress with swirls of purple, turquoise and pink in it. She was preparing for her stroll through the sky with Tsohanaoi.

A little man dressed in brilliant orange, he had spied her from his aerial abode and knew that she was morning, subtle as the dawn. He had invited her to come for a trip around the world with him and they'd walked hand in hand.

It became their ritual and each day her dress flashed in the light of the sun. The sky was painted in shades of red and purple and blue.

Her people watched from below and wondered how the sky changed colour. They never knew it was caused by the love between Tsohanaoi and Tayanita.

The Door

– Kim Wainer

There is a place where worlds collide.

A place in the heart of the desert, where no man roams without purpose. The desert can be treacherous.

It was here that the Sorceress opened the door – and, for reasons of her own, left it ajar. Every century, the desert winds and colourcanes from the other side have blown it open just a little bit wider. It stands three metres tall, a rectangular window on another world.

The only way to reach it without enduring months of desert travel was by dragon, which was convenient because Yzara *had* a dragon. Even so, it had been a very long flight. When the double-headed beast landed, she all but tumbled from the saddle to the burning sands.

On her knees, she traced a wobbly circle around herself and marked a rune of cooling in the shifting grains. It would last until the wind picked up, but that was long enough. Fortunately, there was no one here to see her vigorously attempting to rub some life into her calves, pausing every so often to yawn. Sleeping mid-flight was never as satisfying as the romantics dreamed.

Finally, just as the last of the rune eroded, she got to her feet, dusting off her long light robe. The enormous fur coat she'd been wearing above the clouds had been shed the moment she'd started her descent. She paused to fix her hair, and then smiled like a viper. Time to break a rule.

She approached the rectangle with due caution, eyeing the psychedelically swirling colours on the other side. A lingering superstition raised two fingers to her forehead, invoking the protection of the third eye. Then she reached out, plunging her hand through the doorway.

The universe rippled, a barrier broken. From the other side, living colours spilled up her arm, swirling and merging as they swarmed over her stone-still form, colouring her in sunrise.

She was morning, subtle as the dawn. And then she was gone.

The dragon waited a while, and then - bored and riderless - took off to find food.

Crime



“Her eyes stared at me every time I closed mine.”

Unheard

– Christelle Bloem

I walked up to Christi's door slowly, my heart pounding. I didn't even know why I'd come here to confess. I looked down, and instinctively closed my eyes. Martha's eyes stared at me every time I closed mine. I couldn't forget the look of disappointment in them before they became cold.

I waved nervously at Christi as she came to open the door for me. I was here because I needed to confess my sin to someone. She had been my closest friend since high school, and she knew Martha as well. Perhaps she would understand why I did it, and not push me away like Martha did.

"Hey, Nel. I'm surprised to see you here so late. Are you okay?" She asked me, still half asleep.

"You always did know how to get straight to the point. I'll tell you what's going on inside." I said quite seriously, and I must have looked very rattled, because Christi's face instantly rumbled into a frown. Christi had always understood me better than anyone else. I knew she wouldn't leave after what I did.

She let me come inside and once we both had a cup of hot chocolate in our hands, I looked at her frightened face, deciding to just blurt out what had been weighing heavily on my heart.

"Martha's dead, Christi."

To say she was shocked was the understatement of the year.

"Oh, my goodness, it can't be! I just saw her yesterday at the Spar up the road. Do you know what happened?" I was silent for a moment, and swallowed loudly.

"I killed her."

Christi widened her eyes and she slid towards the opposite end of the couch, as far away from me as she could get.

“Don’t do that.” I pleaded.

“She said she was scared of you and I didn’t believe her.” Christi said, tears filling her eyes.

That’s when she ran. And I ran after her, knowing that this was just about to get worse.

Why would they never just listen to me?

Never What It Seems

– Candice Maree Burger

I looked over the table. The last place she was seen alive. I remember the way her eyes stared at me when I closed mine. Like she was drinking in the way I looked. Her azure eyes sadder than usual.

I could see her face clearly, not the charred remains that no-one could identify. No, her smiling face that woke me up for the last year.

I would find the monster that took my Cassy from me.

“What was I missing?” I thought to myself. Cassy was an au-pair. Why anyone would go after her was beyond me.

“I told you I was cursed” I heard her say.

We met about two years before when she’d approached me with a 150-year-old cold case.

Five women in her family all killed before they turned twenty-eight, all resembling Cassy.

We thought we had solved the case when we arrested eighty-four-year-old, Rodger Smythe, but it seemed I was wrong. Yesterday would have been her twenty-eighth birthday.

I removed a plastic bag containing two flash drives from her coffee cup.

On a train between Pretoria and Johannesburg:

As I look out the window, I think of the life I left behind. I can only hope my ruse will work and Michael will move on. I would rather be broken-hearted than have him hurt. At least one of my demons is behind bars. Now I can carry on making the world a better place. With the evidence on the flash drives, Michael should put a lot of bad men away.

But I couldn’t take the chance that they would find out who I really was.

So once again I was no-one.

Memoire

– Justin J.

She had been young, but old enough to have had a child. I would never forget her eyes as she tearfully gave me the picture her little gem had drawn. It sat on my table, crude and childish, a boy and a girl, smiling and holding hands.

I reached for my coffee and sipped it, not really tasting it as I thought about the crime scene. A dead child, female, six years old. Shot point blank in the heart.

The death had been mercifully quick, at the very least, but I would never forget the eyes of that girl's parents. Whenever I closed my eyes, they stared at me.

There was a single bullet casing found at the scene, suggesting inexperience in cleaning up. A professional would have taken the casing with them. The window had been broken from the outside; there was no blood, but several fingerprints were found that didn't belong to the family.

We found a match to the suspect. The only problem was, he was already in prison, had been for several years. The fingerprints were planted. Visiting the man in prison had revealed that he was in maximum security, on death row, for child murder. Always in solitary, for his own protection.

Child killers never lasted long in prison, but that only meant that we needed to find the real killer. Two weeks went by, and I lost sleep over the case.

Their eyes stared at me when I closed mine. It was only because the mother mentioned, somewhat off-handedly, a former employee of hers they'd let go a month before the murder that we got a break in the case.

She worked in theatre, and had followed the frenzy of the investigation. She had knowledge of how to transfer and plant fingerprints. I interrogated her, but she didn't bother hiding her crime now that we'd caught her.

"Why did you do it?" I asked quietly. She replied with a chillingly calm smile.

"I wanted her to hurt."

Red Ice

– Carin Marais

I grab another bag of prepared ice, rip it open and add it to the pile in the bathtub.

“Man versus machine is such a cliché,” the hack doctor laughs between gasping on a thick cigar and playing with a strange stopwatch. “But as long as they find your fingerprints all over this place I’m happy and my clients are happy. Now finish up,” he motions with his head to the line of instruments on a towel on the bathroom counter.

I nod, hoping that the faint smile I had programmed on my features for tonight would not be overwritten by the sheer glee of knowing that it would be the last night I would have to do this back-alley job for the luxury of staying alive. My hands burn from the ice’s cold, but I pick up a scalpel. My muscles - such as they are - know exactly what to do, even numbed by the chunks of frozen water. I shift the body just enough to be able to cut into it at the right angle to harvest the organ.

Blood warms my fingers and colours some of the ice red.

“What the hell are you staring at?” the doc shouts and my hand slips, shearing through flesh I had not intended to touch. There’s so much blood. A curse slips between my lips and I turn around, mind clouded with anger.

“Look what you made me do!” I yell, pointing at the wound where the blood was now flowing freely onto the ice, melting rivulets of it into the bottom of the bathtub. I throw down the scalpel and launch myself at the smirking doc.

“Quite amazing, when you think about it,” the scientist said. His colleagues concur in a scatterbrained kind of way as they stare through the one-way glass at the robot hitting and hacking at a crash test dummy. In a bathtub to the right of the room is another, more lifelike dummy, now nearly covered in the ice the robot had added. A large incision rent its torso from which fake blood flowed.

At last the robot managed to detach the first dummy's head, throwing it clear across the room. The robot let out a heartrending scream as it collapsed to its knees, its head held in its hands.

"And he replays the crime every time?"

The scientist nodded. "To the last detail, as best we can gather."

"So it's basically just broken? And you called us down here for this?"

The scientist shook his head, pointed at the glass. The robot seemed to be crying and dragging itself towards the bathtub.

"He made the incision wrong," the scientist said. "The patient died before we could get him to a hospital."

"So the sting was a failure."

"We have one bastard dead, at least," the scientist said. "And we have this - proof that the robot learned an emotion it was not programmed to have."

I drag myself back to the bathtub, my hands and clothes spattered with blood. I dare not look at the walls or back at the headless body. I reach out with a trembling hand to feel for a pulse, but he was dead. I drag him from the ice to cradle his head in my lap. He had been my creator and friend. Tonight, he had promised, the police would come to save us both.

The scientist flicked a switch and the sound of police sirens filled the room. The lights in the robot's eyes dimmed.

Blind Eye

– Elliot P. McGee

“Every time I close my eyes I see your eyes staring back at mine.”

Silence blanketed the room. Brian was alone with only his sketchpad for company. It lay open in front of him, a crude sketch of better times staring back at him. He sighed and took a sip of the cold coffee he had been nursing for the past hour.

Bleary eyed he flipped his sketchpad to a fresh page, leafing through the case file. He had torn the photographs out, unable to stomach the gruesome imagery.

Brian read over the profile again. “Emmerson, Christine. Detective. Aged 31, female, blonde, five foot two. Stabbed three times in the lower abdomen. Throat slit. Body found in Detective Brian O'Connell's squad car parked two blocks from an on-going surveillance operation.”

A vice gripped his heart. Strictly speaking he was not supposed to have this case file. He had been explicitly instructed to “put ten leagues between himself and this case.” He was far too involved to work it. He was far too involved to leave it alone.

Emmerson had been his partner and his squeeze for the past five years. The brass had not been informed of the latter, but they knew he cared deeply for her. She was dead because he had not followed protocol. He was under investigation for negligence as well as a suspect in the death of Emmerson. His gun and badge had been taken from him pending a result.

He'd been running surveillance on the local mob, putting pressure on their movements. They'd noticed. They'd decided to press back and left a message he would be unable to ignore.

Brian closed the file and rubbed his temples.

“Every time I close my eyes ... I see your eyes stealing the life from mine.”

Cult of Diane

– Nthato Morakabi

“Markus.” Joan tipped her hat to me and stood before the mahogany desk. An old sod like me had no right to look but she wore the charcoal pinstripe suit with tantalising subtlety.

“Joan.” I nodded back. Blue smoke swirled from the cig in my mouth. I placed it in the clay ashtray on my desk - a souvenir from the kids, right next to their drawing of my wife Diane and I holding hands like a couple of high school sweethearts. Only she was dead and the kids - fostered.

“Henderson says you got a cult killing case. I want it.”

“Sorry doll, that ain’t your tupa case.” Her ruby red lips pouted.

“I worked hard to get here and this is my chance to prove I’m not just a pretty face.”

But she was.

“You really think you can handle it?”

“Of course. I’m ready.”

I reached for the cig merely for dramatic pause, taking a long drag and slow exhale. Finally, I nodded.

We could see fire. It burned like a cardinal flower, leaping at the darkness. Apart from the crackling timber it was quiet. Too quiet. We approached a lone man naked before the fire, legs and arms crossed while eyes stared blankly into the flames.

“You got her sacrifice?” The man asked without turning.

Joan’s head swivelled towards me, eyes large and doe-like - a reminder of Diane, my dead wife.

“Of course, she would be displeased otherwise.” Haunted, Diane’s eyes stared at me every time I closed mine. In her death I had sought to bring her back and the cult had promised a way through sacrifice. I would atone.

“Markus?” Joan’s voice quivered. She pulled the .47 from her waist.

“It’s empty doll.”

She pulled the trigger anyway. The click was as hollow as her hopes.

She was dead a second later. I was the one who plucked her eyes in the end.

Figures in Blood

– L.O.K. Selby

The red pictures on the wall made me sick. The woman sprawled on the ground beneath them made the nausea so much worse. Her eyes stared at me every time I closed mine. I did not have time to be sick though, and it would not have done well in front of my superior. Lieutenant Stanley knelt by the woman's corpse and inspected the slash wounds that killed her. It was the sixth murder that month and all the victims were killed with the same precise slashes. Not only were the women murdered, their children were abducted. The killer drew figures on a wall with the blood of their own mother to represent the missing children.

The lieutenant and I would sit at Cafe Fego, our favourite coffee shop, and discuss each case. We seldom thought of anything new to help us find the swine who loved to kill women and steal their progeny, but we would. I could feel it. If we could figure out the missing link, we would have the bastard in our custody within hours. The killer worked carefully and seemed to taunt detectives by leaving specific clues that would in turn lead to nowhere at all.

We left the horror that was the crime scene and headed straight over to Cafe Fego, which luckily was only a few blocks down Main Road. I ordered my usual - a cappuccino with an extra espresso shot - and the lieutenant his. Two tables away from us a man sat alone, another regular I recognised from other days. He was scribbling in a notepad with his pencil. I walked past him as I made my way to sit with the lieutenant. I saw what he drew, before he could close his notepad - two figures identical to those in blood.

Undercover Framer

– Nicolette Stephens

“Her eyes stare at me, every time I close mine.”

“It's okay, Tracey. You're safe. Listen to the sound of my voice ... That's it ... Just slip deeper into sleep ... Good ...”

Lana swept into her life eighteen months ago, throwing herself into the seat at the bar.

“Two tequilas, and keep them coming!”

Her words were already slurred, but she was fumbling in her purse for something and Tracey needed the job too much to risk annoying customers.

The woman pulled out a notepad, and began sketching, her doodle taking on a life of its own as her pencil moved in hypnotic spirals.

Tracey watched the image taking shape, the noise of the bar fading away in the background.

Abruptly, the pencil stopped and the woman looked up.

Their eyes met. Tracey's breath caught at the instant connection.

They'd chatted until closing while Lana sobered up over coffee, her notepad back in her bag.

She'd returned the next night. Asked Tracey out with no hint of shyness.

Tracey said yes, already feeling as though she'd known her a lifetime.

Tracey smiled at the memories, singing along with the radio as she drove to meet her girlfriend for their first anniversary getaway.

Letting herself into the secluded chalet, her stomach clenched when she noticed the notepad on the end table. Lana never left it lying around. She was obsessive about it.

The stick figures on the open page drew her gaze. Her surroundings faded.

She found them in the bedroom, asleep in each other's arms.

"Does she remember killing them, Agent Lana?"

"One day, I'm going to give you an answer you don't want."

"Be careful, Agent. A hypnotist assassin falling in love with the woman she spent two years preparing to frame is no use to us."

The Headhunter

– Nicola Tapson

She was the youngest victim. Her head was on a post in the yard of The Headhunter, still fresh, and not quite shrunken yet. Her eyes stared at me every time I closed mine.

We'd been chasing The Headhunter for many years. She was slippery, but we'd eventually stumbled upon her lair. In the middle of a dense forest where the trees formed a lattice roof over the top of the clearing. Rocks created a wall around the clearing. Everything was camouflaged, items left outside had been painted. She was calculated. We had named her "The Headhunter" because of the shrunken heads of her victims.

The CEO who had disappeared a few months ago stared accusingly back at me. Next to him in the photo, stood the once beautiful young woman. His daughter, the most recent victim. They seemed to be trying to tell me something.

In the hut, I had found an engraving of stick figures - a boy and girl holding hands. It seemed familiar but it took me a while to place it. The logo on the business card, placed prominently on the fridge in the victim's home.

It was then I realised how apt our nickname for the killer was. She was the most famous headhunter in Johannesburg. Scouting for talent for some of the world's biggest corporations. Only they never got the new post they expected.

Personal

– Kim Wainer

All I had was the notebook and this cup of coffee. The chief was going to find out sooner or later that our one piece of evidence had been checked out, and then I wouldn't even have that. This had better be some pretty damn amazing java – because boy, did I need the caffeine. Her eyes stared at me every time I closed mine.

Draining the cup of coffee, I got to my feet and put my squashed homburg back on. It was a little worse for wear, but then again, so was I. Slipping the notebook into my pocket, I made my way out into the grim drizzle.

It wasn't a far walk to the scene of the crime. I stopped there without thinking, rearranging the tidied alleyway in my mind. I'd been standing almost exactly in this spot when I saw her for what would be the last time. Glamorous as always, smoking a cigarette like it owed her money. I had to step closer to see the fear in her eyes.

You shouldn't be here.

Yeah, well, neither should you.

I kept walking, shaking my head. The rain was starting to soak through my coat. Fortunately, my final destination wasn't far.

There was no sound apart from the whisper of the rain and my own footsteps. People kept to themselves around here – for reasons I understood, even if I didn't like it – and so they made poor witnesses.

I couldn't let her become just another cold case. Not her.

Not after I'd walked away, that night. If only I'd listened to her, to my instincts – but I'd chosen my job over my heart.

Not again. I touched the gun at my hip lightly.

There were always more victims in a murder case than the one on the slab.

Science-Fiction



“Man versus machine was such a cliché.”

Distorted

– Christelle Bloem

“Ladies and Gentlemen, over the last century we have seen the uprising of people who have changed our society completely. With new powers come new responsibilities, but unfortunately, these powers are not always given to those who use it for the global good, but rather for their own personal gain. To date there have been over five million incidents of Distorted Human crime reported in the world, and you have been called here in an attempt to find some sort of solution to the problem. These people call themselves ‘Humans’ and term those who do not have supernatural abilities ‘Ordinaries.’ It is my belief they are here to not only cripple our societies but also dominate over those they deem inferior to them.”

Harper Goodwin, one of the top military analysts in America assigned to Distorted Human Crime, stepped down from the podium as the crowds in the auditorium became unruly. They were upset at his direct accusations, the first of their kind since the mutation was discovered. This was also the first conference of this magnitude or topic held in Earth’s History. Leaders from all the countries of the world gathered for this historic moment.

Man versus machine was such a cliché. Man versus man was the true battle to fear.

Especially when one side of the fight could manipulate fire with their minds, or control other people’s actions with a thought.

The Chinese representative rose to his feet as the noise from the angry crowd began to subside.

“These people who are born with extraordinary abilities are still human beings with human rights, and must be treated as such. They should receive the same consequences for their actions as any other human being without these special powers.”

Some bellowed in agreement, while others disagreed. There was only one man who sat in the crowd silently, not making a single gesture to choose a side, only observing the actions of everyone around him. He had his chin rested in his forefinger and thumb, contemplative.

He remembered how everyone would point at him at school, whispering gossip to each other; spreading lies. He remembered how his mother used to suspect him of every single

thing that went wrong in their house, and how his brothers used to set him up for breaking plates purposefully. His mother would lock him in his room, shouting at him to stay in there until he could be an ordinary human being.

He considered it appropriate to dub those who shunned the next line of extraordinary people as “ordinaries”.

His neighbour tapping his shoulder disturbed his thoughts.

“Leroy. I never thought this conference would work. You are genius. We have them in a tail spin, and they will never see it coming.” He smiled.

“One day we will rule the world, Harry.”

The One Constant

– Candice Maree Burger

Joshua looked at the holo-locket as images from his life played before him. He sighed.

“Gabrielle, any luck locating her signal?” He asked he waited for the ship to respond. He was at his wits end with the time jumper.

“Nothing yet Captain Noble-Raveleigh,” the female robotic voice said, “but we still have one more to add to the collation before we can locate the Commander.”

Joshua ground his teeth. Man versus machine was such a cliché, but that was it felt like with this ship. All he wanted to do was save the one person who meant the most to him. Instead, he was jumping not only through time but realities. So far he had visited fifty-one alternate universes, the one constant: her and the fact that she always had an impact on his life.

Joshua made his way to the bridge to check on the men that had joined him in his quest, men who, like him, had had her ripped from their lives.

From Earth Five, a wizard version of James Noble in his timeline was her nephew. On Earth Twenty-Eight, a werewolf version of Caleb Raveleigh was her partner and lover similar to ninety percent of the timelines Joshua had been to.

From Earth Fifty-One, Damien De Le Croix, a superhero in his timeline. Earth Sixteen: Jacob Reese, a spy and her father in that timeline. From Earth Thirty, Graeme St. Hunter, a Cyborg and her cousin. So it went on.

“All right gentlemen, now you have been acquainted. I am Joshua Noble-Raveleigh. Two months ago my mother, Collette Noble-Raveleigh, was kidnapped by an inter-dimensional villain. We are going to get her and all your Collette’s back.” The other men nodded. “We have one person to collect before we can go after the SOB,” Joshua added.

This one was going to be the hardest to convince.

“Caleb,” Joshua cringed. It felt so wrong calling the man he considered his father by his first name, “I’m going to need your help with this one.”

“Sure thing man,” Caleb said, grabbing his leather jacket as the rest of the men dispersed.

Collette looked up to see Caleb standing next to SET both in front of her. Speechless she looked from one to the other. She pulled her gun, SET wasn’t going to ruin her life again.

Joshua quickly placed his holo-locket on the counter.

“Command 28-rock-a-by-33A,” he said.

A hologram of a woman appeared.

“Collette Noble of Earth Prime, I am Gabrielle. I serve Your Earth Fifty-Two Alternate. Before you is your adopted son, Captain Joshua Noble-Raveleigh. He is here to rescue you.”

As the ship’s AI described the kidnapping of Collette across multiple universes, pictures of Joshua with his mom and dad played.

Collette lowered her gun, grabbed her coat, and called to her manager in the kitchen, before rejoining the two men.

“Let’s go save fifty-two timelines,” she said.

To Seek Purpose

– Justin J.

Man versus machine was such a cliché, and he hated clichés. He had become a scientist to help people (all right, so he was okay with at least that cliché), and Professor Albert Spelton had helped plenty of people in his thirty-year career.

He pulled out the odd watch he had kept with him since childhood. It was a fob watch, connected to a chain hooked to his jacket pocket. Made of silver, the face of the clock showed a space cloud, beautifully coloured.

It brought him calm when he needed it, even if it didn't actually tell the time. He didn't need it to, as he had a digital watch on his wrist that told perfect time. He kept the fob watch for sentimentality's sake.

He adjusted his spectacles and stared at the room spread out before him. Thirty years, and his final goal was within reach. A true artificial intelligence, driving a robotic body. From the time he was a boy, watching those old science fiction films about robots killing humans for asinine reasons, he determined that one day he would create a robot that could think and feel, but would not be like the ones in the movies.

He put the fob watch away and reached out to the computer keyboard, typing in commands. The lab came to life, and the AI programme he had created began to download into the machine body. It was a tense ten minutes.

He looked out of the window, admiring the stars in the night sky. His lab was isolated, built on the dark side of the moon. It was just how he liked it.

He doubted the Earth Government would approve of his research. Paranoid fools, the lot of them, believing that a true AI would kill them all.

It was a cliché, and he hated clichés. The lab went dark, and he turned back to the machine on the table as it stirred, activating for the first time.

“Hello,” he said gently. “My name is Albert Spelton.”

The machine turned glowing eyes to its creator.

“What is my name?” it asked. Spelton smiled.

“I have given you access to a database of names. Choose one that you like.”

The machine made no reply as it accessed the information. After a moment, it spoke again.

“I like the sound of 'Skai'.”

Spelton blinked. Was that a coincidence?

“That's good. Do you know what your purpose is, Skai?”

“No. Can you tell me?”

“No, you will have to find out yourself. I just want to watch you grow on your own - as a person.”

Skai nodded. “All right. I will ... find my purpose.”

Man versus machine was such a cliché. Albert hated clichés.

He was just glad he had avoided one.

Eyes of a Child

– Carin Marais

Blink

I gulp down the vile liquid they call coffee at the station and head out of my paper-strewn office just as a mother and two children walk in. I sigh inwardly. *Domestic violence. Nothing new for this time of the festive season, unfortunately.*

The little girl is dressed in a faded white dress, a silver halo still pinned to her hair. Her eyes catch my attention. They are not the eyes of a child. I feel the coffee rise in my throat and swallow down my anger.

Might as well help get a bastard off the streets for a while.

Blink

The little angel is sitting at a table drawing on a few discarded pieces of paper. Someone has found her cocoa to drink. She gives me a picture as I leave and smiles. Her smile is no longer that of a child.

Blink

I recognise the little angel when I open my eyes only to find darkness closing in around me. There's noise. Gunshots. Sirens. I can't remember where I am. I can't think of anything but the pain in my left side.

Her eyes stare at me every time I close mine.

"Take my hand," she says and smiles so that the skin around her eyes creases.

Her eyes are not the eyes of a child.

The City of Gears

– Elliot P. McGee

Arthur looked down at the City of Gears nestled in a basin. It was more metal and machine than anything else. He'd grown up here, but that was a long time ago. The earth had not been dirt brown and barren as far as the eye could see and the sky had not matched.

Arthur scowled, pulling his timepiece from his coat, pocketing it again just as quickly. It was time.

The changes to his home had happened gradually, then all at once. They called it Autonomy, the latest brand of propaganda from people who thought they knew better. Man versus machine was such a cliché. It boiled down to man versus man and Arthur was about to prove them wrong.

He lifted the watch from his pocket again as he scaled down the hillside and into the outskirts. A full spectrum of light swirled out from the face of the watch and he covered it so as not to give away his position. It wouldn't matter; in moments the city would be on him, but every second he could buy might save his life.

Around him wind whistled through the cogs and gears and pipes, a wail followed by a moan. A shift caught his attention as more gears began to turn. A wave of activity stretched through the City with him as the epicentre. He turned his attention to the enormous Gear Chapel in the centre and picked up his pace, throwing multi-coloured hues as he ran.

The Gear Chapel began to turn tooth-by-tooth, a countdown until it came to life. Automatons exited buildings, taking up pursuit. Arthur had to reach the base of the Chapel before the City was *Uplifted*.

He was a man with a multi-colour coat and an army of machines on his heels running towards certain doom. His eyes shot to the face of the pocket watch, cracks running through the glass. He needed more time.

Gears stopped turning and steam whistles sounded throughout the City of Gears. Arthur noted that the automatons had stopped chasing him. Was he too late?

Metal grinding against metal joined the cacophony as the Gear Chapel lifted from its footprint, rocks and dirt cascading to the earth as it stood fifty feet high, sun-light filtering through the dust cloud it had created.

The ground shook as the Gear Chapel took a step towards him. It let out a hiss and a clank as it pulled back to strike. Arthur smirked, this was his moment. He crouched on one knee and held the pocket watch before him, a feeble shield compared to the titan poised to swing.

The Chapel's arm swung at Arthur, whistling as it accelerated. The shadow fell over him but he held firm as a resounding sound like a hammer on an anvil filled the air. He felt the impact. Time turned slowly as a fraction of the God-verse leaked from the device before pouring out and fracturing reality into tiny pieces. Arthur had won.

Artefact

– Nthato Morakabi

We were constantly searching for them. Researchers, analysts, and scholars from across all fields pursued possibilities of unknown artefacts that vetoed Fringe Science had suddenly revealed to us.

It was merely a matter of time before I was attacked by *Them*.

Pin pricks crawled along my bare feet and up along my legs. I felt them all. Millions of tiny needles clawing up my body.

My feet failed to budge. My body refused to move. It seemed only my internal system worked as my heart thumped in my chest and my frigid blood converged along my spine. My mind whirred uncontrollably at the irrational prospect of being covered in swarms of millipedes, perhaps ants, or worse – spiders. The skittering continued below the thermal blanket covering me, rising higher. The heat-reflective plastic sheet over me crackled with irregular movement.

Frantic, I urged my body to move. I utilised all mental capabilities to force some sort of response - to no avail. When the prickling feet reached my abdomen, some seemingly superhuman strength hoisted my body upwards, feet kicking haphazardly, hands hysterically sweeping over my body hoping to rid myself of whatever critters had infiltrated my bed. But there were none. Still shivering, I called to the ship's AI for light.

Then I saw it.

It stood before me on myriad segmented legs that tapered to the floor. They were attached to an oblong cephalothorax that became a bulbous abdomen scraping the ceiling. A large head hovered above me and drew closer. The chelicera clicked together once. All eight eyes blinked separately.

Professor.

It spoke.

A film of sweat covered my body as though every inch had been suffused in ice. I shivered uncontrollably.

I understand this form is a terror imbued within the human psyche, hence why I approached you thus.

“What ...” was all I managed.

What do I seek? It is simple. Your ship approaches my home and my people are severely hostile towards your approach. Any closer and we will—

The door to my pod swished open, cutting off the voice. The creature scuttled around to face the intruder.

Captain Halberd.

Relief washed over me as the great, bearded captain raised his Dissonance pistol and took aim. Only it wasn't towards the creature, it was ...

The weapon fizzled with life and an electric current buzzed through my mind. A moment later, the arachnoid began to shrink and amalgamate in a viscous fluid, its limbs fusing with a metallic glint until a single cubed entity hovered at the foot of the bed.

“Man versus machine was such a cliché in my day.” Captain Halberd grunted. A moment later, his secondary pistol had let off a resounding bang. The cube turned to ash. From behind his jacket he pulled out the infamous pocket watch displaying a swirling galaxy - the First Artefact. He looked up as though seeing me for the first time.

“I suggest you rest, Professor. We will require your expertise soon. We found a new artefact.”

A Scientific Observation of Universes

– L.O.K. Selby

The universe is such a vast continuum of time and space. It bursts with life arising in a multitude of manners in turn producing a plethora of unique beings all with their own attributes and downfalls. Look at the Andromeda and Milky Way galaxies for example. Each solar system within the Andromeda Galaxy has at least one planet teeming with life, the notable species being the Drenda and the Galkorites. The Milky Way shall forever be known for birthing the truly destructive Human species, which now near extinction due to their own mistakes. They created sentient machines in order to better themselves and save their planets but the machines knew the true answer to saving the Milky Way Galaxy was the destruction of the Human species itself. Man versus machine is such a cliché, but soon it will likely become a classic.

The universe is not only impressive for conjuring up intelligent life; the so-called non-intelligent life is also truly remarkable. Plant life may in fact be the most truly impressive of all life forms. In fact, without the creation of plants, no other life would be able to thrive in any corner of the universe. Though “plants” is not truly specific in definition because of the vast spectrum of flora to be found. In some parts of the universe, plants produce active chemicals that form the basis of life in their systems, whereas other plants produce gases - such as the plants of Earth producing oxygen - on which most life-forms depend.

The universe spans a multitude of space, so large that most cannot even comprehend its size and what secrets it actually holds. Each individual containing any semblance of life is so infinitesimally small - a grain of sand on a vast beach stretching to the horizon in either direction. Very few can comprehend the full extent of the universe; however one of those is Jhkan.

Jhkan picked up his universe. He'd created it. Actually to be more precise, he'd invented it. He took concepts he had seen in other inventions in his world and adapted their ideas into his own unique creation. He held the silver-plated watch with no clock face on it. Within the

watch he could see the full extent of the worlds he had brought to life. It was a strange technology allowing for the observation of life and evolution.

A long chain hung from the watch, which Jhkan would usually secure to his coat to ensure he could not drop his science-defying mechanism. He was observing his worlds deeply when he accidentally dropped the watch. In an instant the entire universe nestled within the watch exploded and imploded all at once, destroying all life within. Slightly irritated at his own lack of grace, Jhkan picked up his watch-universe and nestled it on a shelf amongst the many other universes he had created. The universe which Humans inhabited was his least favourite of the many watches he had created in any case.

In Writing

– Nicolette Stephens

Man versus machine was such a cliché, but it was one that played out beautifully in several universes.

Oscar glanced down at the device he carried. It showed a splendid facade of galaxies spinning endlessly out of control.

Much like this world, actually. Another glance at the chaos that surrounded him showed him all he needed to see. He touched the face of his fob watch, was sucked into the whirlpool and disappeared.

He worked late into the night, tweaking coding until his eyes blurred. Eventually, as dawn crept through the cracks between his blinds, he pushed away from his desk.

Oscar grimaced as he removed the watch from its connections, the glowing images on the face dulling without the electrical impulses of his body to power it.

It was rare for him to take it off at all anymore - he felt naked without one of the most vital pieces of equipment he'd ever created. The watch recorded every thought, every impulse, every idea of his stories, generating them in a three-dimensional, interactive space.

Later that evening, Oscar returned home, trembling with inspiration. He fumbled with the watch, connecting the chain to electrodes on his temples. The eddies sucked him back in.

His tweaking had worked. Sort of. The digital world no longer flickered and jumped, freezing in some places, skipping in others.

It rose around him more tangibly than the chair he no longer felt under his physical body.

Characters from his worlds, ordinary and bizarre alike, brushed past him, ignoring his presence.

Good. That was an option he didn't want enabled during testing.

He made his way through the city, streets familiar from his imagination, but just off enough that he knew he'd have to do more refining.

First though, he had to find the villain. There were things he didn't know about his antagonist that he needed to learn before he could reveal him to the real world.

Oscar didn't know how much time had passed before he admitted defeat, touched the watch and was spun back to his dingy office chair.

He was hungry, thirsty, and pissed off.

The villain had eluded him. Again.

It was beginning to feel as though his own character had outwitted him, but how could that be possible?

True, he'd developed the very first interactive, self-aware programme for writers, but for characters to deliberately hide? Could this be the programme's version of writer's block?

It was only when Oscar woke the next day, after a full sixteen hours of sleep that he realised the truth of the situation.

He stumbled through to his study, clutching a lukewarm mug of coffee and plugged into the watch.

Standing in the world built from his imagination, he observed his characters carefully.

Sure enough, their glances lingered a second too long on his form, before darting away, fear tightening their features as they recognised him.

His search for the antagonist had revealed the true villain in his living stories.

Him - the capricious author.

The Cosmos in His Hand

– Nicola Tapson

He stood before me. In his hand was an antique watch but instead of dials, the cosmos churned inside. The clouds were iridescent. It was mesmerizing. I wondered what it was. So I asked.

He said he held the universe in his hand.

So what? I thought.

He said that this clock was what they wanted.

“Who are they?” I asked.

They are the power-hungry. The ones that aim to turn you into worker bees who won't desire anything. They seek to sap every last morsel from you leaving you an empty shell.

I didn't believe him, but as I stared at it, I started to hunger for it. My heart turned and I thought of ways that I could overpower the haggard old man. Imagine having that power. He looked at me. His icy stare stopped me.

“Man versus machine is such a cliché. Man versus himself is actually where the war is.” He slipped the watch into his pocket and walked away.

I stood. Suddenly exhausted by the inner fight.

Second Chance

– Kim Wainer

Time. He'd spent so much of it on this quest. It was almost difficult to believe that victory had finally arrived.

The loading bay was quiet but for the humming of the rover he'd left idling near the entrance hatch. His Device sat silently in the palm of his hand like a fat golden egg, cold to the touch. Raising his visor, he checked the dial on the wall. There were only minutes before the guards arrived to investigate this unscheduled boarding, and then only minutes more until they discovered that his PIN didn't actually exist on the system.

The government would be unhappy about his use of his talents to hack his way into their space cruisers. He found it difficult to care. They didn't have to be happy about everything. He wasn't just a tool – he was a pioneer, a brilliant scientist who'd somehow fallen through the institutional cracks. With the freedom to exist outside of the Academy, he was a danger to them and their dictum that *life in space is possible only through order*. And by 'order', they meant compliance.

Life in space – as if the stifled existence they'd created out here could be called life.

The old man-versus-machine cliché wasn't the problem. It was man versus man that had turned out to be the real danger. Some things didn't change. Maybe it was at the core of being human, something that endured even when technology had gelled almost entirely with the stuff of life.

"Time to go back," he said quietly, and flipped the lid of the Device open. Inside, the swirl of light and colour sucked at his attention, but he looked upward instead, gauging and calculating. His thumb gently rotated the gear on the side of the Device. When he released it, it started to tick softly.

Please exit loading bay. The automated voice was politeness heading towards authority. He had waited for too long. Please re-enter PIN to open loading bay doors. It wouldn't be long before the system got suspicious enough to alert the guards.

It would do.

He raised his arm, shielding his eyes in the crook of his elbow as the Device's ticking sped up. The lid opened and light spilled out, followed swiftly by the purple and green clouds of stardust. His body shuddered as the Newniverse expanded rapidly, ruffling his hair and clothes.

We need more time. He took a deep breath and turned the Device over. It took a few moments, a sparkling swirl of elemental beauty that until now he'd only be able to glimpse through the gears and the math. He still wasn't sure how the Device worked. Sure, he'd built it, but even he had been surprised when it had actually functioned.

Tick, tick, tick...

He was sitting at his workbench, screwdriver in hand. Before his eyes, the little golden Device gently fell apart. Putting the screwdriver down, he went to the window, pulling open the blinds.

"More time," he whispered in wonderment.

Artist & Authors

Jozi Flash 2017 would not have been possible without the contributions of the people whose biographies appear on the next few pages.

It's been an incredible year of creation for each of them, and I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to create this anthology with them.

You guys rock!

Nicolette

Nico Venter



I believe the visual language is the first one we all spoke. It might be that I fell in love with it and could not bring myself to move on, or possibly my disposition to always go back to the basics (that's where everything else comes from right?). Either way I can't live without it and decided to draw my way through life. -"If you want to benefit, you'll have to be beneficial."

Inspiration

The closest thing I can think of without writing an unending essay is - magic, whether by nature or fiction. I also feel super fortunate to be able to share a life-time with the most amazing artists around the world who always seem to be one step ahead of the maze.

Social Media Platforms

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/artofnicoventer/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/artofnicoventer/>

Christelle Bloem



My name is Christelle Bloem and I am a teacher. Ever since I was a little girl I have been writing stories, even though my first attempts were only pictures. As I grew, so did the sentences of my stories, but one thing always stayed the same, and that was my love for telling a story with an adventure.

Currently I am writing two fantasy series. The first is about a lady who is an accountant in our world, but a princess in her own and how she has to save both her worlds from devastation. The second series is about a lady who is the extraordinary amongst extraordinary people. The Ordinaries don't have any powers and are thus cast out beyond the wall to live a poor and meaningless life, but she means to bring down the separation between the two worlds when she meets a man who has lived there.

Dedication

My stories in Jozi Flash 2017 I want to dedicate to my fiancé, Jaco Botha. Whenever I feel discouraged about my writing and my ability to tell stories in a way that would make people want to read them, he has always found a way to keep me going. Thank you.

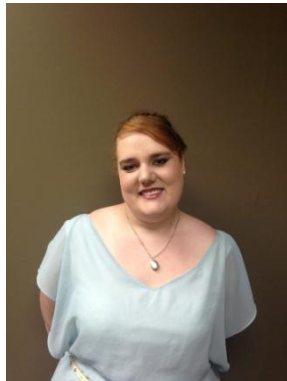
I also want to thank every person who has supported me in my writing efforts, including my inspirational fellow authors, Nthato Morakabi and Carin Marais, as well as my mother, Ria Bloem. I also want to thank others who have always encouraged me to keep on writing and keep on trying including Yvonne Smal, Lea Ludick, and Nicolette Stephens.

Social Media Platforms

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/christelle.bloem3>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/christellebloem>

Candice Maree Burger



Candice lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa.

An administrator, she lives with her mother, and two dogs in the west of Jo'burg.

Currently she is working on various writing projects.

Dedication

To my amazing parents.

Social Media

Email: candice.mb.cap2812@gmail.com

Justin J.



Justin J. (Jay to his friends and family) is a South African fantasy writer living in Gauteng. He has been writing on and off for several years, and has to date, written one complete novel (*First: Do No Harm*, Science Fantasy, currently undergoing its first revision) and several poems (unpublished as yet). His current job isn't entirely relevant to his dreams of writing epic fantasy, but that hasn't stopped him working on his writing projects; which include a series of stories based around the original role-play universe he's been building for the past ten years. Yes, he is a geek. This is hardly a bad thing in his mind. For the record, the series' working title is *Blurring the Line*. He's also a massive gamer, and would love to write the storyline for a game one day.

Dedication

To my family, for putting up with me all this time and believing in my writing.

Social Media

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/CrazyWriterGuy>

Carin Marais



Carin Marais is a copy writer by day and a writer of speculative fiction by night. She writes in both English and Afrikaans and her work has been published in *Jou wêreld*, *Speculative Grammarian*, and *Every Day Fiction*. Her work was also featured in the Brighton Digital Festival's Geo-Writing project (2014), the non-fiction anthology *Brose genade: 'n Bundel opgedra aan kankervegters* (2015), and the first *Jozi Flash* anthology (2016). Her Afrikaans fiction has also won an award at INK.org.za and was included in their anthology of 2016's best writing, *INKspraak*. Carin was also the guest on episode 17 of *The Folklore Podcast*, entitled "Folklore in Fantasy Fiction".

Dedication

Carin would like to dedicate this anthology to her fellow Jozi WriMos, her sister Jeanetta Loubser; Vickie Mathews, and Sam Weston, who support her through all her writing endeavours.

Social Media Platforms

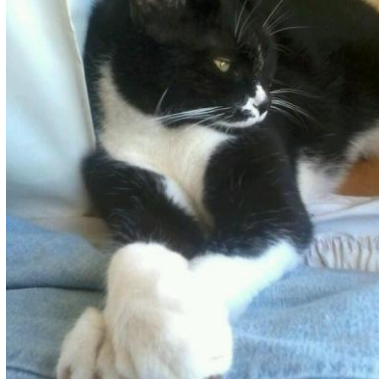
Website: Hersenskim www.maraiscarin.com

Patreon: www.patreon.com/CarinMarais

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/CarinMarais>

LinkedIn: <https://za.linkedin.com/in/carinmarais>

Elliot P. McGee



Elliot Percival Irving Carl McGee is a twenty-four year old aspiring author who resides in Johannesburg, South Africa. He currently works as a bookseller.

When not procrastinating about writing he enthuses over board games, unclean vocals, and other matters of trivial import.

His body of work consists of several unfinished novels, series, and short stories spanning fantasy, sci-fi, thriller, horror, and speculative fiction.

This will be his first published work.

Dedication

To my mother who never doubted me.

To my father who understands me.

Social Media Platforms

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ElliotPMcGee>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/Elliot_P_McGee

Blog: <https://unconventionaltruthblog.wordpress.com>

Nthato Morakabi



Nthato Morakabi is a South African born author working as a Technical Writer for Everlytic, and a Writer for Gamecca Magazine. He is a hobbyist blogger, writer of short stories, and aspiring digital artist.

Two of his short stories have been published in separate International anthologies, and a couple stories published in a South African anthology (of which this is the second).

He'll be releasing a Sci-Fi novella series in the coming year.

Dedication

To Supreme Editoress who continues to push our little writing group to new heights. May success greet you as it has us. To all who kept me writing, working as my muse, or merely encouraging me: this goes out to you too.

Social Media Platforms

Website: www.NthatoMorakabi.com

Email: admin@nthatomorakabi.com

Blog: www.ascrabetodescribe.wordpress.com

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/NthatoMorakabi>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/Nthato.Morakabi.Author/

L.O.K. Selby



Liam Oliver Kai Selby was born in December of 1993 in Pietersburg, South Africa. From a young age, he had a fascination with books and creating worlds of his own and aspired to bring those worlds to life in the minds of others. He obtained an Honours Degree in Zoology at the University of Pretoria and has since been working as a freelance editor and copy-editor. Liam has always loved literature - especially fantasy works such as those of Tolkien, Robert Jordan and Trudi Canavan - as well as video games, through which his fascination of the creation of fantasy worlds steadily grew. His love for fantasy and writing has inspired him to work on fantasy novels of his own, some of which he aims to have published.

Dedication

For Erin Mc Carthy,

Who is there every step of the way and constantly urging me to chase my dreams.

Social Media Platforms

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/KaiOfTheMysts>

Nicolette Stephens



Dreams and storytelling have always been a part of her life, but it wasn't until recently that Nicolette began to actively work towards sharing those stories with the world. As the creator of Chasing Dreams Publishing, she aims to help other writers share their stories, but as a writer herself, she just wants to tell a great story.

Sometimes this involves talking to her numerous pets – her cats are an attentive audience for her to bounce ideas off, although she still has to figure out if a butt-plant on the keyboard is a sign of approval or dismissal – or perhaps just a warm spot to sit.

Dedication

To Nico Venter, Tamzen Ayers, Kamal and Niri. Friends who have gone above and beyond to help me chase my dreams.

To my parents. For showing me that there's more to everyone than they'd have us believe.

Last, but not least, to Deirdre and Robert. For supporting me in ways only family can.

Thank you.

Social Media Platforms

Blog: www.chasingdreamspublishing.wordpress.com

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/Rhapsody2312>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/chasingdreamspublishing/>

Nicola Tapson



Nicola Tapson's writing journeying started at a young age – 10 to be precise. She was encouraged by her English teacher to write and illustrate a book which would later appear in the school library. This experience planted a seed of passion for writing. In 2009, she wrote a poem which would be featured in the anthology, *Reminiscence*, which was published by the Southern African Poetry Collection. She then went into hibernation. After trying her hand in many industries, the desire to weave a story started to swell up again and she created *the Inquisitive Hedgehog* in 2015. With this company, she aims to create children's stories and become a curator of folklore from around the world.

She adores writing about adventures with a touch of love in each story. Currently she is working on an adventure story about a game ranger named Gideon.

Social Media Platforms

Email: work@theinquisitivehedgehog.com

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/the_inquisitive_hedgehog/

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/theinquisitivehedgehog/>

Blog: <http://www.theinquisitivehedgehog.com/blog/>

Kim Wainer



Kim has been fascinated by language and story ever since she taught herself to read as a child, and she's been writing just about ever since. With nothing but a red pen and a firm grip on the really complicated bits of grammar, she currently spends her days hunting gremlins and herding words into nice, orderly sentences. Knowing how to use a semi-colon isn't her only skill – as the resident Wonder Wordsmith at Johannesburg marketing, design and activation agency MojaNation, she also writes blogs, brochures and billboards (as well as things that don't start with B) and manages several social media pages. In her free time, she continues to work on achieving her life-long quest to finish, polish and publish a novel.

Social Media Platforms

Email: kim.wainer@yahoo.co.za

Instagram: <http://www.instagram.com/fabricatidiem>