

The

# Roaring Muse

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# The Roaring Muse

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# Forward

*The focus of “The Roaring Muse” is to showcase works of artistic merit from the UMD and Twin Ports community that otherwise would not have an accessible platform. We hope to provide a space for emerging young artists to show their work to their peers and begin to understand the editorial process. To create a space where readers are introduced to diverse works of art they otherwise would not have explored. In this edition you will see poetry, visual art, flash fiction, and a one-act play. There are connecting themes of time, nature, and the vastness of the universe.*

*-The Editors*

# Poetry

# Flames and the Hands that Tend Them

By: Sarah McElroy

I am the fire that burns within. The spark of desire and inspiration. When wonder at new ideas and swooping creativity come, when beauty is seen and appreciated. The raging flames of anger and disappointment. The slow burn of rage, the released pent up hatred at wrong doing and injustice. I crackle and spit, though I waver with any passing wind. I struggle to breathe with the pressure and hold of logs that fall onto me. I cling to the weight, hold it close against my heart, and watch my fire start to die. When a piece is lifted off my chest, I suck in air and rejuvenate my flame, gasping, reaching, my tendrils break the surface.

I am a one-sided flame, simultaneously exhausted and burning. I will never fully be free of the weight, for without the wood to keep me aflame, I would burn so bright and die out quickly. My coals shift and the weight changes, always remaining constant. Another gasp, another tendril rises from within.

The world outside my circle of rocks and sand is cold. Unknown to me, I turn my back to its darkness and keep my eyes on inside. The water from outside rushes in beside me, threatening to overtake my boundaries, defeat my flames, and leave me as nothing more than a wisp, a breath of what I once was. Clouds above hold the possibility of rain, of the pain and death that could be. I shrink underneath my captor, my fuel. The cage that holds me captive and keeps me safe.

From outside, my back towards you, I dismiss your presence. For how could I acknowledge that yours are the hands that want to touch me but can't. You are the one who created me, who tended me, gently gave me the breath in your lungs. The one that stokes, that lifts the heavy weight from crushing me. For without you, I am the chance spark from the sky, the hot molten rock in the earth, simply the burning inside. But because of you, I am here.

I breathe from your breath, I grow from your giving, I fade and you feed.

I only am because of you.

# Sleeping Bag

By: Josh Moretter

I'm a bag of meat and I'm upset  
I can't fall asleep, lying in my bed.  
But I won't quit!  
I'll do what a bag does best:  
lie still,  
to myself,  
that I'll get good rest.



# Perfection

By: Jack Hartford

the bright yellow sun  
drowns itself in the choppiness  
of the Pacific

the last rays of light  
burn through the clouds  
and the pleasantly lulling smell  
of salt hangs in the air

the blissful sounds of the calm waves  
lapping against the sea shore  
forever gliding  
back and forth  
along the smooth sands

the washed up seaweed  
dots the glistened shores  
displaying dull colors  
of green and black

the coarse sand  
creeps into every pore  
of my dried out feet

a pair of seagulls  
tear into each other  
attempting to claim

# Perfection

By: Jack Hartford

the last crumb  
in a tattered bag  
of Plain Lays potato chips

a decaying old man  
lies almost naked  
on a tattered red towel  
displaying his wrinkles  
for all to see

a beached whale  
litters the coast  
guts oozing out  
of unnatural places  
the vile smells  
of rot and decay  
invade my nostrils

a gargantuan barge  
passes in front  
of the shrinking sun  
stealing away  
the last glimpse of light

# The Anti-Sonnet

By: Jack Hartford

So many syllables in so many words  
Where, oh, where do all of them fit into place?  
My hubris is focused in different accords  
Oh how I wish to see the look on my editor's face!

Is that ten syllables or eleven to you?  
For I don't find anything wrong with my prose  
Spat from my mouth, onto these pages eschew  
With golden pen and my brain compose

What can I rhyme?  
Do sonnets make my syllabistic and poetic voice sound angelic?  
For this poem takes up so much time.  
And counting syllables makes me sick.

Truly, I am a modern day Shakespeare  
This poem is dedicated to my beloved, who I hold dear.

# A Reprint of The Old Guitarist That Hangs in my Childhood Bedroom

By: Ryan Skarphol

I can't tell  
where you are  
so I suppose  
you're nowhere,  
hung crooked  
at the corner  
of midnight and predawn.

mom thought to  
hang you sideways  
so you could  
rest. if you're  
dead. you're so  
still, I wonder  
if you ever  
lived.

your fingers  
clutch the neck  
without music, only  
desperate to stay  
upright. as if  
letting go would  
change us.  
you sit aged  
forever unbreathing, signs  
of life muted  
under heavy  
canvas. all you  
ever were  
was a picture.

a boy sees his father  
in most things.

# Quiet (Life)

By: Ryan Skarphol

is the best word for it, really. This  
city of parked cars. After midnight  
roads run home  
and tuck themselves into their  
forgotten namesakes. Kitchen windows  
repaint sidewalks the color of  
another life. I see you washing,  
plates clattering in the sink  
as outside I gasp television static and sty-  
rofoam air.

There must have been  
a reason for street lamps. They seem old-  
er than the trees now, unwavering in their  
watch.

Everyone is going home.  
Every body is waiting.

# Love Poem

By: Ryan Skarphol

I'm trying  
to remember  
the last thing you said

shoelace of  
smoke escaped  
your tongue  
curled  
a trigger  
smell  
shotgun shells  
on your breath

bouquets of  
buckshot

muzzle flash  
of stained teeth

# Love Poem Cont.

By: Ryan Skarphol

I'm trying

to remember

the last thing you said —

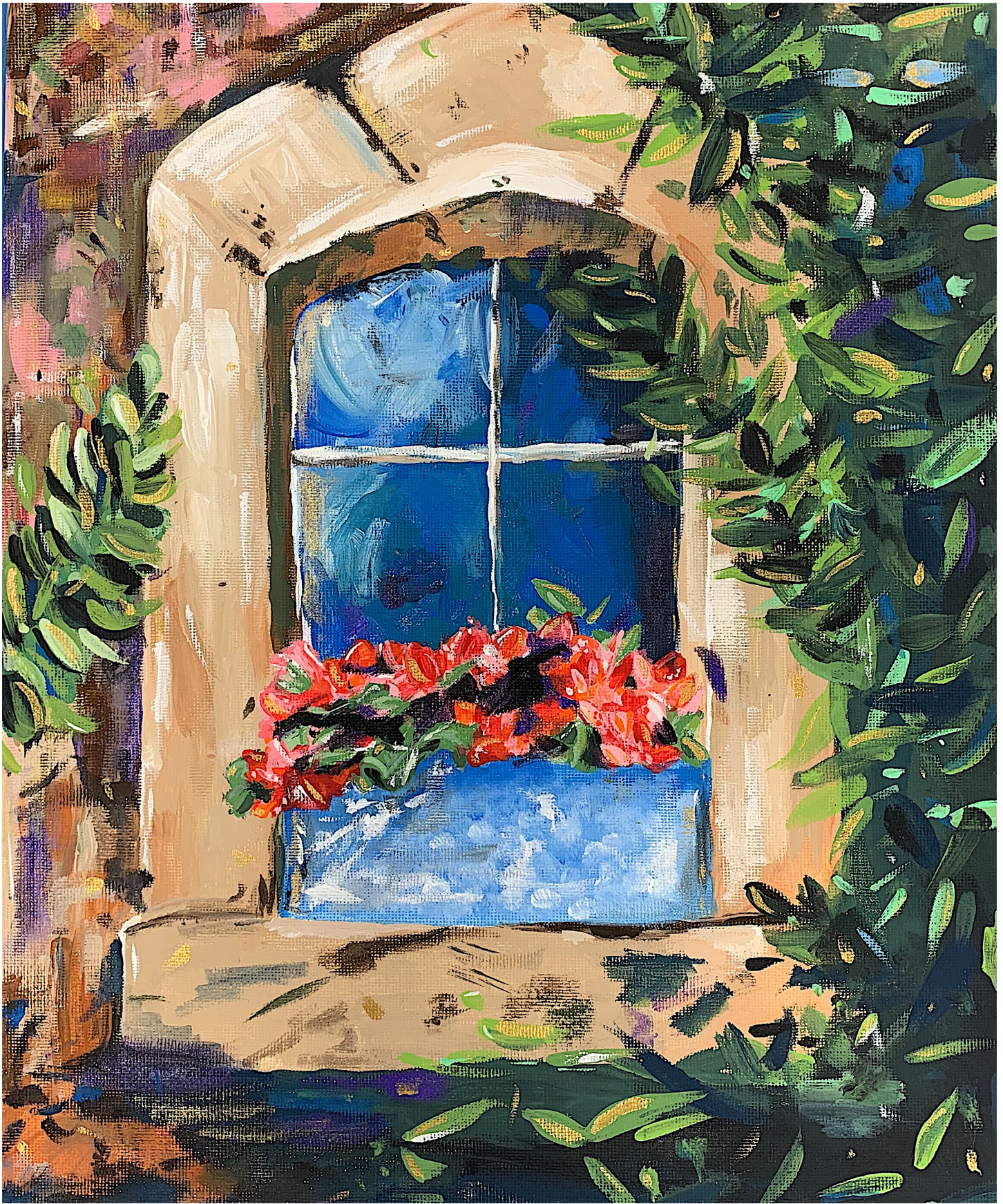
I'm trying

to forget

how it sounds.



# Visual Arts



# Somewhere in Northern Italy

By: Emma Kujawa



**Untitled**  
By: Emma Kujawa



**Untitled 1 - Ink on Paper**  
By: Julia Redner



**Untitled 2 - Ink on Paper**  
By: Julia Redner

# Short Stories

# The Boy and the Star

By: Kelli Carrol

The boy had just turned seven years old when he met a fallen star.

He loves his birthday. He always has; he's only seven, so birthdays haven't quite lost their magic for him yet. And can you blame him? His birthday falls in the warm heart of summer, and he always spends it at his cabin, his favorite place in the entire world. It's a rustic little place, all wood and handmade quilts and a huge, crackling fireplace perfect for curling up in front of, playing card games with a deck so old it's missing two kings and the six of hearts. In short, it's the perfect place for a little boy's birthday, and this specific birthday has been nothing short of wonderful.

The boy had spent the day with his father at the flea market in town, looking at all manner of strange and curious things, like crystals of every color and alligator skulls, homemade pie and baseball cards. His father bought him a Kirby Puckett, and once they returned to the cabin the boy tucked the card carefully in his binder between Joe DiMaggio and his prized shiny Charizard. Then, his dad baked him a red velvet cake, one with cream cheese frosting, and they ate too-big slices while watching Ghostbusters in the living room for what could've been the eightieth time.

Now, full of cake and sugar and warmth, the boy sits on the back porch, his bare feet swinging free. Before him the grass slopes down to meet the lakeshore, where the moonlit water gently laps at wooden dock posts and long stretches of sand. The crickets and their violin-string melodies thrum in the forest beyond the cabin's edge, chorus frogs and spring peepers chiming in from the lake. Only rarely does the boy hear an owl, but to this day he's never found one among the trees despite how hard he tries.

They're sneaky, those owls.

The moon continues to rise, slow and steady; it's almost nine, which is far too late for a six year old but perfectly acceptable for seven, in the boy's mind. Why, he's

practically an adult, and adults can sit on their cabin's back porches for as long as they like. The boy told as much to his dad, who simply smiled, ruffled his hair, and told him to watch for bears.

The boy takes a cautious sip from his too-full mug. It's hot chocolate, of course, despite the fact it's the middle of summer. He holds the mug with both hands to make sure he doesn't spill and stain his pajama bottoms; they're his favorite pair, after all, the one with whales on them. More importantly, he doesn't want to stain the crown jewel of his birthday presents where it rests on his lap: a star chart.

It isn't new. It's far from it; it used to be his dad's, and his dad got it from his dad, and the age shows. It shows in the corners, dog-eared and worn, in the notes scribbled in the margins, in the way the cover's turned soft over time. It's strange, isn't it, the way using something over and over again slowly wears it away, as if your affection towards an item causes it to erode, the same way the waves of a lake gradually wear away the shore.

The boy flips a page, running his finger over a hastily scrawled note about a good time to see Jupiter (late June, hidden in the constellation Cetus) and trying to match the constellations to the sky above. He loves stars with all his heart, the same way he loves blue whales and books and baking cookies and dinosaurs. The stars tonight shine bright and clear, winking at him from their perch in the sky. A few he knows, but most he doesn't, because every time he looks back up it seems another few stars have blinked into existence. He squints at the sky, trying to spot where the dragon Draco's tail slithers between Ursa Major and Minor, and that's when he sees it.

At first he thinks it's a shooting star. He's seen them before in nature documentaries, tracing a path across the night sky with their great glowing tails, and he's so



excited he almost tips his mug right off the porch. He's always wanted to see a shooting star in person, and he almost shouts for his dad before realizing that this star doesn't look quite like the ones in the documentaries.

For starters, this one burns. All stars burn, and the boy knows that, but this one looks as if an immense celestial beast leaned over and struck it with a match. It burns, so, so bright, brighter than any star the boy has ever seen, brighter than the North Star itself. It arcs unsteadily across the sky, jerking back and forth towards the dragon's mouth in sharp, frantic movements. It looks a bit like lightning: writhing, white-hot lightning. If possible, it glows even brighter, a contained wildfire in the sky, and the boy is on his feet, star chart and hot chocolate wholly forgotten as the star begins to fall.

He doesn't realize the star is falling, not at first, but the world around him does. The surrounding wildlife suddenly grows impossibly silent, the way an audience does as the light slowly dim before the curtains open. The crickets hush and the frogs all but vanish, and the sneaky owls and foxes and coyotes and raccoons slip away deeper into the forest, searching for cover. The silence falls thick and heavy over the lake as the erratic star draws closer and closer, hotter and hotter, brighter and brighter and brighter until it's nearly blinding.

It doesn't fall gracefully by any means. It plummets, really, on a direct collision course with Earth and for a moment, the boy wonders if the dinosaurs saw something like this, too. Flames, impossibly hot, impossibly bright, lick across the star's surface, crackling with such ferocity the boy imagines he can feel it from where he stands. It's smaller than he thinks a star should be, hardly larger than himself, though he has no way of knowing what a star should look like; he's only seven.

And then, and then, the star crashes into the lake.

The sound it makes when it hits the water is akin to a massive ocean wave hitting a beach, loud and wet and monumental. The water, cool despite the lazy heat of the summer night, surges up in great waves, violently rocking the lily pads floating on the

surface. Water rushes up the shore, up the grass, soaking roots of trees and uprooting a lawn chair, lodging it firmly in a bush. Steam rolls in billowing clouds like ghosts, and the boy can hear it, so clearly, the sharp hiss of something burning turned wet, like the sound of a still-hot pan run under water from the sink.

The boy runs. His bare feet slip on wet grass, wet wood. He lands on his knees at the edge of the dock, the churning water rocking the posts back and forth, back and forth, and his eyes grow wide as saucers as the star surfaces.

Have you ever seen a star up close?

It looks remarkably like a child.

A starchild, the boy thinks.

The starchild, after surfacing, gasps for air. Steam billows from their skin and they flounder in the water for a brief moment (the boy panics, he's an unsteady swimmer) before they scramble ungracefully to shore. Their eyes, bright and wide and starry, widen as their hands and knees sink into the wet sand, like they weren't expecting it. They lift a hand, seemingly marveling at the way tiny flecks of sand catch in the grooves of their palm and under their fingernails, and the boy sits there and watches with his tongue caught firmly in his throat.

This does not happen in nature documentaries.

The starchild's hair, despite being soaking wet, haloes wildly around their head in tight, bouncing coils. Water traces thin rivulets down the dark skin of their face, their arms, their legs, all smattered with a constellation of freckles. They look like a chunk of the night sky wrenched free, and the boy looks up, half-wondering if he'd see a person-shaped hole among the stars.

The strangeness of the situation, of a child falling from the sky, doesn't really occur to him. He's only seven, and he still has one foot set firmly in whatever wonderful world children live in, a world where someone can fall from the sky and it's seen as something perfectly ordinary.

The boy slides off the dock, and the starchild whips around at the sound of his feet hitting the shallow water. He approaches carefully, holding his hands out like he's cornering some kind of feral creature, though the starchild looks perfectly calm, if a bit bewildered. For a moment, the two children stand there, staring at each other. They look like they might be the same age, the boy thinks, though he knows nothing about how stars age compared to humans.

"Are you okay?" the boy asks, finally. He doesn't know what to expect as a response; do they speak Klingon? Or starspeak? Do they even understand him?

"I'm cold," says the starchild.

"Oh." The boy blinks. "Um, if you come inside, I can get you a towel."

"Okay."

When the boy brings the starchild to the cabin, dripping wet (and extremely naked), he finds his dad sitting at the kitchen table as if nothing had happened at all. He explains the situation, and his dad smiles and says they're welcome to take the extra bed downstairs. The boy and the starchild do not see the crease that forms between his eyebrows, or the downward tug to his mouth the moment they turn away. He'd never been one to quell his son's imagination, and he's certainly glad he made a friend, but he still calls the neighbors as soon as the children vanish downstairs, and finds himself exceptionally concerned when none of them know who this mystery child is.

In the morning, the boy's dad makes his son and the starchild pancakes with fresh strawberry syrup, and the child eats like they've never had pancakes before. Once the children leave, he contacts local police to try and find the child's parents. He is, of course, unsuccessful, but this would be a terribly boring story if we focus on the father. I'll spoil his tale for you: it turns out perfectly alright in the end. For now, let's focus on the children; they're doing much more exciting things. They're exploring.

There's a forest behind the cabin, you see, full of old growth pine. It's the kind of forest where the boy can run through full tilt, the needles catching playfully in his dino-

saur-patterned shirt so he smells of pine all day long. The forest is full of hidden secrets, like raccoon stashes and worms and mushrooms, but the boy knows this area well, and he knows the forest isn't the most exciting thing beyond the cabin's walls.

He dashes through the tree line, squirming his way through bushes that grab and cling stubbornly at his t-shirt and shorts. The starchild follows, picking their way through the brush much more cautiously for fear of ripping their own borrowed clothes, but the boy, feeling impatient, turns back to grab their hand and tug them more forcefully along.

"Where are we going?" the starchild asks, breathlessly.

The boy smiles, ducking under a low-hanging branch. "The field!"

The field in question is really more of a marsh, but the boy doesn't know that. He's only just turned seven, you know.

Soon, the forest breaks, and the boy and the starchild stumble breathless on the brink of what can only be described as a veritable sea of grass, turned green and gold under the summer sun. It extends on and on, a patchwork quilt of tall grass sewn together by calm, winding rivers. The air feels pleasantly warm, a breeze kissing at the boy's cheeks like relatives come to visit, whispering through the billowing plumes of grass, endless grass, creating slow, lazy waves. A red-winged blackbird clinging to a stalk bobs with the wind, a buoy on the open ocean.

The starchild's eyes widen. They take a few, hesitant steps forward, like they're afraid it's a kind of mirage that might break the moment they make contact. They step up to the edge of the great, golden sea, the grasses so tall the feathery plumes are nearly out of reach, but the starchild reaches anyway. They reach, and brush the plumes with their fingertips, the gold stark against their dark skin.

A few loose strands break free of the plume and drift off in the wind, and the starchild giggles in delighted surprise.

The laughter bubbles up like they simply couldn't help it, and they turn to face the

boy with their starry eyes alight in wonder. The boy knows so little about them, but he can't imagine what it would be like to light up in such a way over something as simple and undeniably lovely as grass.

"Come on," the boy says, taking the starchild's hand again. "Wait until you see the river."

"The river?" The starchild repeats, but the boy doesn't reply.

Without another word, he dives into the golden sea, dragging the starchild along. The grass scratches softly at his cheeks, at his shirt, and hidden katydids and grasshoppers leap out of the way as the two children forge their path. The starchild laughs, a bright sound, and the boy laughs too, sun-warm and happy.

The grass parts like a curtain as they tumble out to the river bank. Here, the forest curves to hug the grass, and the water rises up to meet the tree line. Bright flowers and moss nest in the nooks and crannies of the bark and twisting roots, little flecks of color on a canvas of brown and green. Fish dart below the water, chasing tadpoles through the stems of pickerelweed and rushes as dragonflies dance on stained-glass wings along the river's surface.

If the starchild's eyes were wide before, they're astronomically huge now. They gasp, clutching at the boy's arm as a dragonfly whizzes close to their nose. They smile so hard the barely-there crow's feet crinkle at the corners of their eyes, overwhelming delight clear on their freckled face.

"Do you like it?"

"It's wonderful," the starchild breathes. "I've never seen a river before."

"That's a dragonfly," the boy says, giggling. He points at the water. "That's the river."

"Oh. Well, that's wonderful, too."

The starchild slips forward on quiet, gentle feet, crouching carefully on the bank. Upon seeing their reflection, they smile brightly and wave before running their hand

through the still, glassy water, sending a wave of ripples that startles the hiding tadpoles and tiny, quicksilver minnows. They try valiantly to catch one of the minnows, but the little fish slips between their fingers and vanishes into the rushes.

It doesn't take long for the starchild to get distracted with something else. "What's that?" they ask, pointing into the river.

The boy sits down next to them. "What's what?" All he sees is mud and grass and, occasionally, a flash of scales.

"I'll get it." The starchild leans forward a little further, teetering dangerously off-balance on the crumbling bank. They stretch out their hand and deftly pluck something from the soft mud at the river's bottom. They shift, so they're facing the boy head on, and open their hands to reveal a snail shell.

It's not a remarkable shell, by any means. It's brown and rotund, a barely-there swirl at the tip. The boy has found a hundred just like it, and plenty that are far, far prettier, but he chooses not to say anything about it.

Because the starchild is holding the shell gingerly in their hands like it's made of precious gold and diamonds, despite the fact the boy could lean over and pluck another shell from the river without even having to look, despite the fact the shell isn't even pretty.

"Oh!" The starchild gasps as the snail emerges, gray and slimy, to see who might be to blame for such a disturbance. "Hello there."

The snail waves its eye stalks curiously, and the starchild grins.

"That's a snail," the boy explains. "They live in shells." He doesn't know much about snails; he supposes that since there's so many around the lake and the rivers, they aren't worth learning about. The starchild seems to think differently by the way they're focused on the little creature, though, giggling as the snail slowly makes its way across their palm, searching for food in the grooves of their skin.

"Where do the snails find the shells?" The starchild asks, watching the snail trun-

dle along. It's inching towards their fingers.

"They don't find the shells, they grow them."

"They grow their own houses?" The starchild carefully twists their hand so the snail doesn't tumble right off their knuckles. "That's so cool."

The boy considers it. "I guess it's kinda cool." He's never really thought about it before, since he couldn't take three steps in the lake without uncovering a snail, but he supposed there was something a bit wonderful about such a small, nondescript creature growing its own home.

Eventually, the starchild puts the snail back in the river at the boy's warning that it might dry out, but they keep watching the snail as it burrows back into the mud, out of sight.

Somewhere, a woodpecker drills against a tree, momentarily drawing the boy's attention from the starchild and their little snail friend. He scans the forest, trying to spot it. He's seen pileated woodpeckers here before, and he knows, with their crest of fire-red feathers, the starchild would love them. It's then, while he's searching the trees for a spot of red, that the starchild grabs at his arm again and points with wide eyes.

Because across the river near the bank, where a cluster of trees grow so close to the water that their curling, intricate roots are exposed along the earth, stands a bird, so impossibly still that the boy hadn't even noticed it until the starchild pointed it out. It must've arrived while the two were looking at the snail, seemingly unperturbed by their presence here. A plume of black feathers adorn its regal head, its body that same grayish blue of the storms that roll in off the lake. It stands there, frozen in time from the point of its strong yellow beak to the curve of its serpentine neck, watching the water, and waiting.

"What is it?" the starchild whispers.

"A great blue heron," the boy whispers back.

"What's it doing?"

“Hunting, I think.”

The heron cocks its head, eyes trained on the water. It shifts forward on legs so skinny they might've been grass themselves, before lunging forward in the space of a blink, a flash of gray and white. Water surges, loud in the relative quiet, and the heron emerges from the river victorious with a fish writhing frantically in its beak, sunlight glinting off its shiny silver scales. Despite the fish's best efforts, the heron holds on tight, taking long, unhurried strides deeper into the marsh to enjoy its meal in private.

Once it vanishes from sight, the starchild exhales, like they'd been holding their breath the entire time for fear of startling the bird, and immediately demands the boy tell them everything they know about herons. He does his best, and points out more birds as they come and go: a black-capped chickadee, singing in the trees, a goldfinch and a tree sparrow hopping along the ground, the red-winged blackbirds riding the waves of the sea of grass. A hawk, circling high above, too far away for the boy to be able to tell what kind it is. They don't see another heron, to the starchild's disappointment, but the boy promises to show them *Our Planet* when they get back to the cabin. He has a feeling they'll like David Attenborough.

The starchild wonders over the fact that somehow, birds can fly, and that most of them live in trees, tucked away in little nests built of twigs and leaves and feathers.

“I can't imagine what it would be like to live in a tree,” the starchild says, looking around at the forest. “I bet the view is nice.”

“It's cool being up that high,” the boy replies, because he's climbed most of the trees in this forest, and the starchild looks at him with wide eyes.

So he teaches them how to climb a tree.

The boy picks a sturdy one, one that bends and twists with lovely draping branches low enough for the starchild's beginner hands and feet to grasp. The tree looks like a place where fairies would hide away, observing the world through the gaps in the leaves, sleeping in the knots and nooks and of the gnarled branches.



“Test it first, to make sure the branch won’t break so you don’t fall.”

The starchild looks alarmed. “Will it hurt?”

“No. You won’t fall very far,” the boy says, shaking his head. “I mean, you’ll probably land in the river so you’ll get kind of wet, but I don’t think it’ll hurt.”

“I didn’t mean that. Will it hurt the tree?”

“What?”

“If the branch breaks,” the starchild explains. “Will it hurt the tree?”

“Oh.” The boy looks at the tree. He puts a hand to the bark, and it feels rough and bumpy under his fingers. “I don’t know. I guess it might.”

The starchild crosses their arms. They give a tree a resolute, determined look.

“Well. I guess I’ll have to be careful, then.”

And they are. They’re exceedingly, terribly careful, tugging firmly at each branch with their small hands to test it before following with their full weight, and the boy wonders why he isn’t that careful when he climbs. Not careful for himself, but careful for the tree. After a few minutes, the starchild emerges proudly near the top of the tree. The boy watches as they press their ear to the trunk, furrowing their brow in concentration as if listening for the tree’s heart, beating steadily away within layers and layers of bark. He watches as they wonder over something he can’t see trundling across a branch, probably a boxelder or ladybug, or a tiny ant searching for food.

“Be careful not to fall,” the boy calls, anxious over the way they’re kneeling unsteadily on a branch. The starchild does fall, though, not because the branch broke, or because they weren’t being careful. They fell simply because they wanted to. They tumble from the tree into the river like they had the night before into the lake, though the river is much, much shallower. When they sit up, they’re laughing, water soaking through their clothes and mud streaking across their cheek, a leaf caught stubbornly in their dark, curly hair.

Their laughter at such a tiny thing is contagious, and soon the boy is laughing too.

He shifts so he's sitting on the river's bank, and lets his feet dangle in the water. The chill on his bare skin sends shivers up his spine, and all the little minnows and tadpoles scatter from his shadow, trying to outrun the ripples he's created. If he stretches out his leg, his bare foot sinks delightfully into the soft mud at the river's bottom.

The starchild remains sitting in the river; they cross their legs like they intend to stay there for a good, long time. As the water stills, the tadpoles slowly return to their haunt in the pickerelweed stems, apparently fearless of the child sitting barely a foot away. The boy watches as the tadpoles dart to the surface, snagging bits of algae and fallen leaves.

"We should try and catch a frog," he declares.

"A frog?" The starchild repeats. "What's a frog?"

"They're...." The boy frowns. He's never had to explain what a frog is before. Usually everyone he meets already knows what they are. "They're...amphibians. They're about this big," he says, holding up his hands, "and they're kind of slimy. But not in a bad way."

"Amphibians?" The starchild sounds out the word.

"It means that they live in water and on land."

The starchild's eyes widened. "How do they do that?"

"Oh. Um. I don't really know, they just do. We can ask my dad when we get back." The boy shifts forward, pointing to the river, where that group of tadpoles hides in the submerged stems of a pickerelweed plant. "Do you see those?"

The starchild leans in. "The fish?"

"No, those are tadpoles. They're baby frogs, and they live in the water. When they grow up they'll get arms and legs and then they can hop around on land."

"They grow arms and legs?" The starchild asks, their voice edged in wonder. "How?"

The boy shrugs. "I don't know."

“Can we ask your dad about that too?”

“Sure.”

They do, eventually, catch a frog. It takes a while to find one, but the idea of a frog, a creature that begins life as something more or less a fish and grows up to wander about on land, is so unbelievable to the starchild that the boy is determined to show them one. The frog they do find is a leopard frog, though the boy hardly knows the species name; he only sees it by catching a flash of black-spotted green out of the corner of his eye darting through the reeds. He lunges after it, tripping over his own bare feet to fall nearly face-first in the river with a tremendous splash, and the startled frog immediately attempts an escape, but the boy scrambles his way on his hands and knees to catch the squirming thing victoriously in his grasp, water dripping from his hair.

The starchild wonders over the frog for half an hour, cupping the little creature in their hands and marveling over the strange bend of its legs, its slippery skin and its large, round eyes. The frog croaks, once, the pouch at its throat swelling like a balloon and the starchild’s smile is so wide the edges of their mouth nearly touch their ears. The look on their face might lead the boy to believe they were holding a dragon egg or fairy in their hands rather than something as ordinary as a frog.

Eventually, the boy leans in, too, wondering if there’s something secret and special hidden away within a frog, within a minnow, within a snail, something he just hadn’t looked close enough or long enough to discover quite yet.

They spend a long time in the marsh, the boy and the starchild, exploring little things like wildflowers and bees and little hard-shelled beetles that hide away under rocks. Once their hungry stomachs protest loud enough and their wet clothes become bothersome, they’ll leave for the cabin, to watch *Our Planet* in the living room and eat grilled cheese sandwiches and apple slices.

But for now, they live here, in this wild place of grass and sun and water, and if you, a stranger, were to part the grass and stumble upon the sight of them, you might

think the two were forest spirits concocting some sort of plan. They sit with their heads bowed together as if whispering secrets, covered in dirt and grass and sunlight with flushed, excited faces, wild hair and bare feet. The reality, of course, is much more lovely: they are children, just children, and they are discovering the world.

# The Goblin in the Basement

**By: Ben Hanzsek-Brill**

It was a sorry looking house. Gray, though it had started white and the chain link fence was filled with gaps and stabbing bits of metal. The yard was overgrown and the shed in the back was falling in on itself. The house's siding was dented and the roof leaked and there was mold in the bathroom and if you ran the washer and dryer at the same time the lights flickered. The realtor had called the house "a fixer upper," but Will called it a dump. That didn't really bother him, it was better than the motel he had been living in for the past couple of weeks.

On week nights he'd come home and make dinner, usually it came in a cardboard box or a plastic bag. Then he'd sit in front of the TV and drink something cheap until he passed out in his recliner. His bed was too big for him anyways, and the house was too quiet without the TV running.

On weekends he would work on his house. He started in the crawl space that some might graciously call an attic, his considerable frame only just having enough room to turn around. He pulled out the pile of junk which filled it, and set it somewhere to be sorted later. Then he removed the drywall and pulled the insulation out, most of that work had already been done by small rodents looking for somewhere warm to sleep. He put in a whole new layer of cotton candy fiberglass, then put back the old drywall. He was done in a day and a half.

He spent a few weeks working like this, moving his way through the house, fixing the things he could do on his own and writing down a mental list of things he would need help with. He might get some buddies to help him. He was working himself down into the basement, making steady progress.

There were few moments when Will was in the basement, just to use the washing machine really. It was bare and unfinished, one massive concrete pit which sat under Will's house, waiting to collapse. It smelled of mildew and cat piss, one dreary bare bulb and a grimy storm window allowed for light.

One Friday night, Will was following his normal routine, sleep aid brought to you by Wheel of Fortune, a discount pack of Bud Light, and the better part of a bottle of rum. As his neck was fighting a losing battle against his head and gravity, a rending-shattering sound came from the basement, like a tiny car crash happening right be-

low him. Will was ripped from sleep, jumping up and landing on his feet but struggling to remain there. His heart was pounding, and his head was spinning, waves of adrenaline shooting through his blood stream.

Now, to say Will was a large man would be like saying the moon was an above average piece of rock. He looked like he could steal a defensive lineman's lunch money and then go hibernate through winter. This, and the liquid courage sloshing through his blood stream, made him all too willing to see what was making the racket in his basement.

He crept down the stairs, stepping on the edges instead of the center so it would creak less, a trick he learned in high school. He stayed on the balls of his feet, moving as slowly as he could. He didn't hold his breath, instead inhaling and exhaling as slowly and as quietly as he could. He didn't turn on the light, instead letting his eyes adjust to the faint trickle of moonlight coming from the dirt crusted window.

In the corner of the basement, near the washer, a small shadow was hunched. There was gentle muttering coming from the shadow, the odd off-key giggle as well, as it was trying to move the washing machine back against the wall.

Will moved as silently as he could, which was much quieter than could ever be expected of a man who had a BAC higher than most thought possible. He slid, closer and closer to the little shadow, keeping his back against the wall. Then he pounced.

He moved fast, all the oxygen in his lungs bursting out in one powerful exhale. He moved forward and down, letting gravity do as much work as his legs. His arms were flung forward, his legs splaying out behind him as he fell crashing down to the basement floor. Still, he hit his mark, massive hands wrapping around the little shadow's body.

Will sat up, bringing the little creature he had in his grasp into the moonlight. The first things he noticed were the feeling and the smell. Its skin was simultaneously slimy and sticky, like his vinyl letterman's jacket that had started to break down. The smell was the greatest hits of a rotting junkyard. Spoiled milk, wet dog, and stale urine had come together in a horrific team up, being much worse than the sum of its parts.

The thing didn't look much better. Its skin was a muddled green and brown, like a head of lettuce left to rot in the back of a refrigerator for weeks on end. The arms and legs were too long for the stick thin body, the hands and feet were too big. The nails were perfect black points, like guitar picks made of stone.

The face was too big for the thing's head. The eyes were the size of cueballs, and

they seemed to glow with sickly amber light. Its ears stuck out perpendicular to its head, like a goat's but slightly bigger and more rigid. Its nose was squashed and squished and crooked, it dripped with a clear snot onto Will's hands.

The thing's mouth was perhaps the most disturbing of all. There weren't any lips, just a line two thirds the way down its face which stretched too far in either direction. There were jagged points which stuck out at odd angles, but they weren't teeth. One looked like the jagged handle of a coffee mug. Another looked like a broken beer bottle, Will could almost read the label.

"Woof," said the little monster.

"Did yoo juss say woof?" slurred words dripping out of Will's mouth.

"Worth a shot I suppose," It's voice both gruff and high pitched.

"Dum idea ... what arr yoo?"

"A dog."

"No, youre not."

"A cat?"

"Yoo alredy said woof," Will took a moment to work through some muddled thought process. "If yoo don' tell me what yoo are, I'm going to crusch yoo." The thing's eyes grew wide and panicked.

"Fine you drunk idiot. I am a goblin," There was a hint of pride in the little monster's voice.

"Good fur yoo..." a long beat passed, "I din't know goblins 'xisted"

"Oh, God! You're right. You should put me down and back away slowly."

A faint glimmer of memory played behind Will's eyes, "I cot yoo, dozen that means I get something."

"What? No? Why would you get something?"

"Tha's juss what happens. I get a pot ov gold, don' I?"

"You're thinking of leprechauns," said the goblin with a sigh.

"Threee wishes?"

"That's gennies."

"Soop?" Will was grasping at straws.

"That's... are you thinking of catching a cold?"

"Uhhh..."

"Damn you're drunk aren't you"

Will was excited, he had arrived at a significant breakthrough. "Drunk 'nuff to

know I get something fur caching yoo!”

“Sure, fine, you got me. You get a secret.”

“A secret?”

“Yep, hold me close to your ear so I can tell it to you.”

Will slowly pulled the slimy goblin towards his head, leaning in close. The goblin inhaled, and then lunged forward biting Will’s nose. Will brought his hands up to try and stop the bleeding. He did not drop the goblin in the process. It was launched over the back of Will’s shoulder across the room.

It scuttled off using all four of its limbs, muttering a slew of obscenities, some of which would make Will’s foreman blush. Will dived after it, trying to repeat the maneuver he pulled off the first time. But now it was ready, and he was bleeding, and both were in bad moods. The goblin went left, Will tried to go right. It made it behind the washing machine and Will slammed his head into a concrete wall.

Will woke up with dried blood covering his face. Will struggled to rip his eyelids open, only to have judgmental sunlight attack his corneas. Slowly he stood up, using the washing machine for support; there was a large dent in its door.

He managed to half walk, half stumble his way up the stairs. He took a few deep breaths and struggled over to the bathroom, where he nearly managed to get all his vomit into the toilet. He rinsed his mouth out and downed a small handful of Tylenol. He hoped the kidney damage was better than the headache.

Will stripped of his clothes and climbed into the shower, turning the hot water as high as it would go. He let it cut through the lacker of oil and sweat that coated his body, let it comb through the greased tangle of thinning hair. He watched as the dried blood washed away in a soft pink line down the drain. Then he threw up again.

That’s how he knew it wasn’t normal. Will never threw up a second time. The first time was the body cleaning itself, a kind of biological reset, like turning a computer on and off again. But throwing up a second time was unnecessary; it was a sign of weakness.

He clambered out to the shower and tried to towel off. By some strange happenstance of gravity Will ended up lying on the ground, a puddle was slowly growing around him. He reached up to the counter and pulled his jeans onto the floor. Inside the front pocket he found the old flip phone he hadn’t wanted to buy. He called an ambulance.



Will sat on his recliner, not allowed to watch TV, or drink, or do anything “mentally or physically taxing” as per his doctor’s orders. As far as Will could figure this meant sit and do nothing, which was rather mentally taxing.

After a few days simply sitting in his chair and listening to the radio, which was about the only thing Will could do, he was pulled out of the lazy sleep he had drifted into. There were noises coming from the kitchen which played over the radio static: the clicking of a gas stove, the scrape of dishware on countertops, the creaking sound of the fridge door.

Will carefully rose out of his chair. He walked towards the kitchen and picked up a spare rubber mallet he had left near the bathroom while retiling. He peered through the doorway, scanning the well-lit room. It was late at night, exactly when Will wasn’t sure, but the windows held a black landscape.

There on the counter, near the stove top, was the hunched little goblin. He was working over a pan on the stove. It wasn’t obvious what it was working on as Will walked into the kitchen, but it smelled astoundingly good.

“Hey, I know you’re there. You don’t need to sneak around,” said the goblin. It took a plastic bag and shook the last of its contents into the pan.

“I’d like it if you’d turn around and look at me,” said Will, speaking in a low and controlled voice, the kind a mailman would use when cornered by a large dog and running away wasn’t an option.

The goblin took the pan off the burner and slid its contents onto a plate. There sat a perfect omelet with cheese, and onions. It was perhaps the most perfect looking omelet Will had ever seen. The goblin slid a second plate next to it. It was stacked with eggshells, the empty cheese bag, and onion skins.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry,” in an impossible feat of facial contortion the goblin looked sheepish, “You shouldn’t have seen me the other night, and you shouldn’t have gotten hurt and I shouldn’t have bit you. It was all really out of line.”

Will sat down at the table. He reached into a drawer and found a fork and began to eat the omelet. It was the greatest thing he had ever eaten, and that included the food he had eaten while drunk. The goblin began to delicately place bits of the trash heap on its plate into its mouth. There was a certain disgusting fascination to it.

“Apology accepted?”

The two sat in the heavy silence which hangs over almost every kitchen late at

night. Will gave a nod and a "hrgrn" sort of sound to indicate that all was equal between the two.

Will had been to his share of friendly late night poker games, he had even hosted a few. But he had never been to one in his own home that he didn't plan. The goblin had invited Will to the basement to play a few hands with "some guys from around the block".

There in the basement was a folding table and four chairs. Two were occupied; one by a small man with a red hat and a long white beard, who Will assumed to be a gnome. The other was filled with nothing, like somebody had taken the universe and trimmed out the space a person would take up.

"Hey," said Will

"Hello," said the void. The gnome only made a soft grunt in recognition of Will's presence.

"Deal us in boys," said the goblin as it scrambled up into its seat.

The game started as a general state of equilibria, chips would move from one player to the next, in slow and mesmerizing waves. After the first hour a small gravity began to form around the void. More and more of the chips seemed to gradually pile in front of it. Soon, both the goblin and the gnome were out of money. Only Will was left to play, as final desperate bets were placed.

"Well," said Will, "I've got nothing left to bet."

"Wait, for a moment," said the void, "I'm sure there is something you could bet. How about your name?"

"Whoa, hey," said the goblin, "This is supposed to be a friendly game."

"It is," said the void, "all Will has to do is fold and we can move on. I'll win and he'll have his name"

"What happens if I bet my name?" Asked Will.

"Nothing bad," said the void

"Nothing good," said the goblin.

There was a moment of quiet around the card table.

"Yer name," began the gnome, "Is tied ta what makes ya a person, see. Humans give names to things, that's biblical that is. Somebody gave ya a name, even if it was yerself. So if ya don't have a name, yer not really human."

"What...what would I be?"

Another round of silence.

"That's up to you," said the goblin, "who do you think you are outside of being a person?"

"If I'm betting my name, I think there should be something more interesting for me." "Of course," said the void, "How about the secret to eternal life? I've never had much use for it myself, but I think a fellow like you might enjoy it."

"I'm in," said Will.

A final silence, deeper and heavier than the last two. The goblin and the gnome leaned in, holding their breath. Will and the void laid their cards down on the table at the same moment. It felt for a moment as if time stopped. Everybody looked at the cards and blinked. A man was sitting at the table. He was skinny, and his hair was slicked back. He wore an expensive gray suit, and shiny black shoes, and had a smile like a tiger. His name was Will.

"How interesting," said the man called Will, "It seems I have two pair and you have total junk."

He was talking to a small creature. It was the same general form and outline as the goblin. But where the goblin had bald slimy green skin, this creature had skin like well-oiled leather and a shaggy mane of coarse brown hair. Where the goblin looked as if it were built with a wire frame with skin stretched over it, the creature was stout and hearty. Where the goblin's bulging eyes glimmered with a sly intelligence, the creature's eyes shined with an easy honesty.

"Oh, yer a brownie," said the gnome, "I haven't seen one of you fella's in a long time." "Interesting," said the brownie, looking at its tiny hands.

"Why on earth would you bluff something like that?" asked the goblin.

"Well gentleman," started Will, "I think it's time for the game to end. I hope to see you all next week, for a continuation of this wonderful game."

The goblin and the brownie began to climb the stairs out of the basement, the goblin continuing to ask why on earth his friend had just gambled away his name for no good reason. The brownie didn't seem inclined to answer.

"Fine. Don't tell me." The goblin was quiet for almost fifteen seconds, "What are you going to do now?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the brownie, "The wiring in the attic should probably be redone."

# The Incredible Invention of Dr. Mr. Hairdoo

By: Stefan Charon

"Hi there Mr. Hairdoo." Said Daneel walking into the cramped office, nearly tripping over a tortoise.

"That's Dr. Mr. Hairdoo to you, young man!" said the face of mock sternness sitting at the desk. He had a head of wildly disheveled gray hair, enormous bushy muttonchop sideburns, and wide horn rimmed glasses.

His severe expression broke into a genial smile. "Come have a seat Daneel my dear boy!" the doctor exclaimed, "I have something I want to show you."

The office was a rather large one, but there was barely enough room to turn around. Piles of books and papers towered on almost every square foot of the room, leaving only narrow paths of clear floor. One entire wall was occupied by a large chalkboard, covered entirely with scribbled equations and calculations. The writing on the board was in all sizes, and some sections had seemingly been erased to make room for some other equation. In one corner was a rough sketch of a monkey, its eyes replaced by an infinity symbol.

Daneel seated himself at the desk opposite Dr. Mr. Hairdoo. An avalanche of papers had been pushed aside, leaving the center of the desk clear. In the middle sat a strange looking device. A glossy, black, slightly translucent sphere about six inches across sat in the middle of the table. It was mounted on a squat metal pedestal, covered in knobs and switches, all a dull bronze.

"What's that thing?" inquired Daneel, forgetting about the question he had originally come to ask.

"This is my very greatest invention," declared the doctor very solemnly, "Even better than the electric frisbee."

"What's it called?" asked Daneel.

"I don't quite know," said Dr. Mr. Hairdoo, "I haven't actually given it a name. I've never shown it to anyone else, so I haven't had an occasion to refer to it as anything. Until now, it was something of a secret."

"Alright then, what's it do?"

“Why don’t I just show you?” said the professor with a grin. He flipped a switch on the base and the device jumped to life.

The black orb seemed to turn transparent, but instead of the desk behind it, Daneel could see within the sphere a view of a window in a cluttered office. A quick glance up at the wall confirmed that it was indeed the window in this very room; hanging next to both was a calendar written in Klingon. He looked back down at the orb and saw a baseball fly through the window on the device’s display. A moment later a baseball flew through the window in the office, shattering the glass and sending a shower of broken fragments over a tottering stack of amphibians illustrated.

“Oops. Probably should have opened that...” murmured Dr. Mr. Hairdoo under his breath.

“Your device launches baseballs?” asked Daneel, less than impressed and mildly confused.

“Oh no, it’s much better than that!” exclaimed the doctor. “It shows the future!”

There was a sudden increase in the altitude of Daneel’s eyebrows and a sharp drop in the altitude of his jaw.

“What?” Daneel asked dumbly.

“It shows the future.” reiterated the professor patiently.

“Oh, I caught that the first time.” clarified Daneel, “I suppose what I actually meant was... How!?”

“I was hoping you would ask! So few ever do.” said Dr. Mr. Hairdoo gleefully, “Imagine the universe like a rubber duck. Wait no, that’s not right. Imagine it like an ocean and we’re a rad surfer dude. Each spot on the surface of the ocean is some state of the universe. Waves travel through this ocean, and the surfboard is the present, and we are riding the wave. Time is just the movement of these waves, with the present moment riding from one state of the universe to the next. Of course, it’s a bit more complicated than that in reality. It’s not just a two dimensional ocean surface, but more like an infinite-dimensional sea of roiling hyperfluid, and the surfer would be more like a mass of luminous orbs and tendrils with a sick silver key on a chain around his neck. But that’s beside the point. The surfer analogy is good enough.

“What my machine does is make a tiny extra wave that can move ahead in time faster than the main wave of the present. It follows just the same path that the present wave will follow, so whatever state it finds at the peak of this mini-present will be a

future state of our present. My device is linked to this smaller ripple rather than the large wave of the present, so it sees the state of the universe in the future. Quite simple really.”

“Hmm, so you claim... But surely you can't know exactly what someone will do in the future...” said Daneel, deep in thought.

“I assure you that I can. My device works flawlessly.” said the doctor with an air of confident satisfaction.

Daneel looked crestfallen. “So free will is dead?” he glumly asked.

“Not at all!” exclaimed Dr. Mr. Hairdoo, “You can decide to do whatever you want. And whatever it is that you decide to do is exactly what my device will show me.”

“But if I have free will, couldn't I choose to do something different?” argued Daneel, “If I am guaranteed to do what your device shows you, I can't possibly have free will.”

“On the contrary, you would lack free will if you did something other than what my device showed, because that would mean that you did something besides what you would decide to do.” explained the doctor, “Just because it can see what you will do doesn't mean that it controls what you will do; you control what it will see by deciding to do what you want to do.

“I guess that makes sense, but if I see myself fall into a puddle on your device, won't I be able to walk around it in real life? Or am I doomed to know that I am going to choose to fall in?” asked Daneel.

“Ah yes, of course.” conceded the doctor. “I should clarify, you can change the future if you have seen it. By seeing the current future, you may, and almost certainly will, choose to do something different than you would have done otherwise, thus changing the future. If you looked again, you would see the new future that would come about as a result of what you had just learned. ”

Daneel's jaw dropped again. “Are you saying that you can just keep looking at it until you know exactly what to do to bring about whatever future you want!?”

“Well, not quite.” said Dr. Mr. Hairdoo, “If I'm looking at something that I have any influence over, I can never really see the actual future. Whatever future I see will influence, at least subtly, what I actually choose to do, so I can't be sure that the real future will be anything like it was before I looked. It works pretty well with things in the near future, but once it gets more than a few days out, the Hairdoo effect starts to change things up.”

"The Hairdoo effect?"

"Yeah, the Hairdoo effect. I assume you know of the butterfly effect?" asked Dr. Mr. Hairdoo.

"Sure," said Daneel, "It's that thing where even a small disturbance like a butterfly flapping its wings could end up causing a hurricane on the other side of the world. Even small changes to initial conditions can have huge effects later on."

"Well, I cause a lot more disturbance than a butterfly." summarized the professor. "I figured out the math of how much of a divergence from the prediction to expect based on what part of the future you look at, and I call the mathematical model the 'Hairdoo function'."

"Ok, I guess that makes sense," said Daneel after taking a moment to think things over "But there's one more thing I don't understand. Why did the ball come through the window just then? I get that you were able to know it was coming, but why did it happen right when I came in?"

"Ah, well that one's simple." Explained Dr. Mr. Hairdoo, "I knew that you were coming, so I paid a kid to throw a ball through my window at just the right time so I could demonstrate the device to you."

"But why'd you have him break the window?" asked a bewildered Daneel.

"Ah, yes, I did forget to open it, didn't I." said the embarrassed professor. "I was planning to open it, so when I watched our meeting ahead of time, the window was open. But since I saw it open in the future, I subconsciously accepted the idea that the window was already open, and forgot to actually open it. If I had looked ahead a second time, I would have seen the window break, since I would have forgotten it, as you can clearly see that I did." he said as he gestured to the pile of shattered glass. "The event of the shattered glass has entirely changed the course of our conversation. You can see how easily the Hairdoo effect can come into play."

Daneel fell back in his chair and pondered the implications of these revelations for a moment. He leaned forward again and asked, "How did you do it? How did you build this amazing device?"

"Building the actual hardware wasn't too bad. All I had to do was launch several Von-Neumann probes into the asteroid belt and have them construct a series of orbiting superconducting electromagnet stations which worked together to create a particle accelerator the size of the solar system. Beams were collided to create two pairs of parallel streams of neutrinos which were spaced to intersect at their heaviest phase, creating

a pair of orbiting entangled kugelblitz black holes just far enough apart to generate a single point between them where the event horizons intersected tangent to each other, making a point in the spacetime fabric where there was neutral gravitational pull and the roles of time and space were reversed. I used this point as a bridge between the realm of time and of space. Sending a pulse of energy across this point generates the ripple in time of the second present, and the Einstein-Rosen bridge that intersects with the point resonates with the state of the universe that the ripple experiences rather than our own present universe. Detailed measurements of the gravitational waves coming off of the orbiting black holes picks up these vibrations, providing me with all the data I need to work with."

"Oh. I see." said Daneel, who clearly didn't see, or at least was doing a very good job of looking like he didn't.

"The programming is the part that actually posed a bit of a challenge. The Infinite dimensional math took a while to get done. The actual math itself isn't so bad, it's just that you have to do infinitely much of it. At first I thought that I was going to have to invest in infinitely many processing units, but then I remembered that if you gave a group of monkeys with typewriters infinite time, they would eventually write the entire works of Shakespeare. So I simply modeled the monkeys on my Acme brand quantum computer, entered the entire works of Shakespeare myself, and ran the program in reverse. I plugged the resulting infinity into my reverse hologram extrapolation program, and voilà! An accurate framework for the infinite-dimensional structure of all possible universes! Inputting the vibrational data sent from the physical apparatus allows me to see an accurate representation of the future state of the universe."

Daneel, who was clearly a bit skeptical, said, "Most of that doesn't sound strictly possible..."

"True, but I've never been very strict, so it's alright." explained the preposterous professor.

"Huh." said Daneel, and sort of just sat there for a minute, perplexedly staring at a wall.

"Would you like to see how to operate it?" asked Dr. Mr. Hairdoo, interrupting Daneel's silence.

"For sure!" exclaimed Daneel, who seemed to be putting his doubts aside, at least for the moment.

"You ever used an Etch A Sketch?" asked the professor.



"Sure, when I was a kid." replied Daneel.

"Well the controls are sort of like that, but for the dimensions of time and space rather than a four by six inch flat screen. This knob is for up and down, this one left and right, this forward and back, the time coordinate, scale, constant rotational velocity, coordinate of center of rotation, depth in gravitational well, orbital speed, distance from the nearest rooster, relativistic spatial warping correction, a toggle from cartesian to polar coordinates, etc."

"That sounds a bit complicated." confessed Daneel.

"You can just stick to the first few knobs, it's already calibrated for looking about on earth. The other stuff is mostly for looking at the future orbits of stuff in space. I am happy to report that there will almost certainly be no large scale meteor impacts on earth within a reasonable estimate for my lifespan."

"What about after that?" queried Daneel with a note of concern.

"Oh, well I don't know." admitted Dr. Mr. Hairdoo, "I didn't think to check."

Daneel leaned over the desk and took hold of the knobs. He gave them a few twirls to get the feel of it, and then he ventured out of the room and to the road. He navigated into the middle of town and turned the time knob forward. Cars flew by in fast motion, and the shadows cast by the traffic lights grew long in the evening sun. After a second, the cars in the display slowed to realtime. Actually, they slowed to a complete stop. The entire area was clogged by a massive traffic jam.

"I know what street I won't be taking home tonight!" exclaimed Daneel.

"And traffic tips are just one of the perks of being able to see through time." commented the doctor.

Daneel spun the knobs again and the view smoothly glided out of the city and into a wooded meadow. He adjusted the scale knob and twisted time forward again. Wildlife began to flash past at lightning speed. A tortoise flew past and a snail rocketed off into the distance. The sun set, rose, and set again with increasing speed until the strobing of day and night became too fast to perceive. The sun appeared as a brilliant band smeared across the sky, and the lighting settled on something that looked half morning, half evening, half noon, and half midnight. The young saplings grew to towering trees in seconds, and small shrubs and bushes flickered in and out of existence almost too quickly to be seen. Fallen trees rotted away and vanished almost as soon as they appeared. Finally, the frantic pace of time slowed, revealing an ancient forest, with sunbeams only peaking through the breaks in the foliage of the lofty trees.

Daneel wasn't even trying to hide the massive goofy grin on his face. "This thing is awesome!" he exclaimed, "What kind of range limitations does it have?"

"There are none." replied the doctor nonchalantly.

Daneel's eyebrows shot through the roof again. "Are you telling me that this device can show you anywhere at all in the universe?!"

"Certainly!" answered Dr. Mr. Hairdoo, "Anywhere and anytime as well! The difficult part was to keep it from showing all of space and time at the same time, and in just one place. The first time I fired it up, it displayed all of space and time across all of space and time. It was hard to tell that the device was actually on since it just showed things happening where they happened, when they happened."

Daneel looked at him incredulously again. "How could it show you something in a distant part of the universe so quickly? Aren't there speed-of-light limitations or something?"

Dr. Mr. Hairdoo answered his question with another question. "Have you ever asked about a distance, and were answered with a time? Thirty minutes distance to the nearest vegan zoo, for example?"

"Sure, all the time." replied Daneel.

"Well, with my device it's sort of the reverse. Since my device collects data from an event horizon, a place where time and space have swapped roles, if you ask a question about time, you get an answer in distance. It's like if you were to ask me how many years till the next presidential election and I were to answer 'twenty five miles.'"

"Well that seems perfectly meaningless!" said Daneel, once again perplexed.

"And so it is!" excitedly explained the professor, "The length of time it takes my device to receive its data is always a distance. And whether that distance is ten nanometers, or ten lightyears, I can always get my data instantly because all distances exist right at this present moment!"

"Well that's convenient."

"It sure is! I couldn't have thought of a more convenient way for it to work if I were writing this story myself!" exclaimed Dr. Mr. Haridoo, looking at the camera.

Once Daneel had finished taking a picture of the device and its inventor, he said "You know, if you sold these, you could be rich."

"If I sold these, they would be perfectly worthless." Said Dr. Mr. Hairdoo, "If I made even one more of these, it would render both of them almost useless."

"Why's that?" asked Daneel.

"Well, think about it. My device is useful because it lets you inform your actions based on a future that was certain until you saw it. You can use this knowledge to shape the future to some extent, because you are the only variable. Every time someone else viewed the future, they would create a different future from the one you saw. The only way for you to get a good idea of the future is to make yourself the only variable.

"But if they look at the future after I do, wouldn't I see the future they would cause by their foreknowledge?" asked Daneel.

"Well, technically yes, but practically no. You would see the future that they would have caused if you hadn't looked, but the Hairdoo effect will be much more pronounced since the changes you would make would influence the changes they would make.

"If there were two instances of looking at the future, the discrepancies would pile up as a function of Hairdoo squared, and you would have to be a blockhead to trust anything you see after the second future viewing happened. As you can see, if there were lots of people using my device, any prediction would be wildly inaccurate. For every additional device in use, its accuracy is reduced exponentially."

"Wouldn't it still work alright for glances into the near future?"

"Sure, it would be pretty accurate for a good five minutes if no one in your causal vicinity also had one. If it became widespread, checking the future of any interaction would become just as natural as checking the clock. Is that a world that you would want to live in?"

"I'm not sure." admitted Daneel after a moment of thinking about it.

"Me neither." Said Dr. Mr. Hairdoo, "But I'd rather not be the guy known for sacrificing the chance to see the future and do something significant with it in exchange for a few billion dollars."

"Huh. I can see why you kept it a secret." Daneel thought out loud, "So why did you show it to me?"

"I want to give it to you." said Dr. Mr. Hairdoo.

Daneel's jaw dropped for the third time that day. "Why?!"

"Well, it's sort of a long story." said the doctor, "You'd probably get bored."

"I'm sure my curiosity is stronger than any level of boredom you could possibly cause me."

"Alright then..." conceded Dr. Mr. Hairdoo as he launched into his tale, which he obviously did want to tell.

"Whenever I looked more than five years ahead, I was always dead. No matter what I did, no matter what measures I put in place to prevent my death, I always ended up dead. As you might imagine, this was very disturbing to me. I was never able to figure out why it happened. It was never the same thing, sometimes a traffic accident, sometimes a house fire, sometimes a freak lamma incident; there was really no way to predict it. The way my death happened wasn't guaranteed, just the fact that it always happened.

I began to think that maybe knowing the future, however useful, wasn't worth the stress. Finally, I resolved to destroy the Futureinator."

"The what?" interrupted Daneel.

"The Futureinator. That's what I just named it. I got tired of referring to it as 'the device'. Anyways, as I was saying, I had resolved to destroy the Futureinator, but couldn't resist looking ahead one last time. I looked ten years into the future and was surprised to find that I was still alive and kicking. I realized that the Futureinator itself was what led to my demise. Probably some shadowy government organization or another wanted to off me to get at it.

"Once I realized I could do something about my fate, I no longer felt total despair and didn't want to get rid of the Futureinator. Of course, now that I wasn't planning to destroy it, I returned to the timeline where I die in five years, and I had a quite literal deadline to deal with. It occurred to me that I might not need to destroy it, but just not have it myself. And so, I resolved to give it away to one of my students."

"Why a student?" interjected Daneel.

"Well, I most certainly didn't trust the government with it, I didn't trust my colleagues to keep it a secret, and giving it to a close friend or family member was keeping it too close for the comfort of my continued survival. A student, on the other hand, seemed like the perfect candidate. I would have a few years to get to know my students and find which ones I would trust with the Futureinator. Then I could give it to the selected student and they would take it with them when they left, and I wouldn't have to deal with it anymore."

"Did you at least check what the future would have been if you had gone with one of the other options?"

"I didn't actually get the chance to check the future of any of those other options. I had already decided that I intended to give it to a student, and I couldn't convince myself to intend otherwise in order to test it."

"So out of all your students, why'd you choose me?" asked Daneel.

"Well, strictly speaking, I didn't select you. You did."

Daneel raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"There were quite a few students I thought would make good candidates, so I put my most promising student's names into a spreadsheet and had my computer select one at random. I planned to give the Futureinator to whoever the computer selected. I acquired a name, checked the future, and found that I still end up dying in five years, so I told the computer to choose another name. I found that I also ended up dead with the next name. I repeated the process several more times until I got to your name, and found that if I gave it to you, I would still be alive in at least another ten years from now. And so here we are."

"Wow... How do you know someone else wouldn't be a better option?"

"I don't. But I do know that giving it to you will keep me alive, so I couldn't want to give it to anyone else for the purpose of more testing."

"Why do you think it didn't work for any of the other students?"

"Well, I expect that none of them would have wanted to take a device that would have killed its previous owner." said Dr. Mr. Hairdoo.

"What, you suppose I would want such a device?" asked Daneel, who seemed to be rethinking things a bit.

"Well... do you?" asked Dr. Mr. Hairdoo with a concerned expression on his face.

"I mean, yeah..." admitted Daneel after a moment of hesitation.

"Excellent!" cried the professor, "It's settled then. My life will be saved, and you will become the most powerful human in the universe."

He tried to dramatically slide the Futureinator across the desk to Daneel, but the rubber on the bottom made it jitter across the surface, so he just picked it up and handed it to him.

"This is a pretty big thing I'm entrusting you with. As you know, the Futureinator is a thing of great power, and with it comes great responsibility." said Dr. Mr. Hairdoo as he slapped a spider climbing up his sleeve.

"I entrust with you the future of the world!" he said with a theatrical flourish. "I expect that a clever boy like you will manage to use it to bring about a utopia. Or maybe you will just use it to cheat on my tests. I don't really care. Just don't give it back to me."

Daneel stood, lifting the surprisingly heavy Futureinator with him.

"I don't really know what to say," he said.

"Well, maybe you'll know in a minute." said Dr. Mr. Hairdoo, nodding at the Futureinator.

Daneel looked down into the orb, whirled a knob, nearly jumped out of his skin, lost his grip on the Futureinator, and watched helplessly as it shattered into a million pieces on the floor.

"Ahh. I get it now." said Dr. Mr. Hairdoo stroking his facial hair, completely unphased, "That actually makes a lot of sense."

"You're fine with this?!" exclaimed a very distraught Daneel.

"Oh yes, entirely!" responded the professor, "I half expected something like this to happen. This quite neatly explains why it was you I ended up giving the Futureinator to. Perhaps it is just an unavoidable fact that a working Futureinator will lead to my demise. If I am to survive, it must be destroyed."

"You really think so?" asked Daneel, now somewhat less distraught.

"It certainly could be. Or maybe this is unrelated to my continued survival, and you're just a complete klutz." mused Dr. Mr. Hairdoo.

"Oh." said Daneel, back up to a medium level of distraughtness.

"But now I'm curious. What did you see that gave you such a shock?"

"I saw myself walking out of your office, and dropping the Futureinator when I tripped on your tortoise." admitted Daneel.

"Well, there's the Hairdoo effect in action for you. But don't worry about it. What's done is done, and I think it's probably for the best. And don't worry about the mess. I needed to give this place a good cleaning anyways after the window and all."

"You sure?" asked Daneel, "A bit of cleanup is the least I could do after destroying your greatest work. I really am sorry."

"Nonsense, my dear boy! I should be thanking you. You almost certainly just saved my life one way or another. So... from the bottom of my heart, thank you for destroying the greatest thing I ever made, the crown jewel of my life's work." quipped Dr. Mr. Hairdoo with a wink.

"Uh, yeah, no prob." said Daneel as he turned to go, still in something of a daze.

"By the way, 42." called Dr. Mr. Hairdoo as Daneel was walking out the door, carefully avoiding the tortoise.

"What?" asked Daneel, a bit confused.

"42. That's the answer to the question you were going to ask when you came in

here." explained the doctor.

"Huh. Not what I expected, but I guess that makes about as much sense as the rest of my day."







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