



Khimairal Ink



Volume 3, Number 1

May 2007



Stories by

Bernadette Quaily Q. Kelly
Tyree Campbell Kirsten Elliott Sias Bryant



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In This Issue



It's spring in Northern California and it's raining. As I write, I watch the somber grey clouds, the pelting rain and patches of blue skies as the front moves through. But despite the gloomy weather, I welcome the rain since it brings promises of greener hills and abundant wildflowers. It occurs to me that this ephemeral storm reflects the theme of the May issue, "This too shall pass." This month's issue addresses some sad and bittersweet life situations yet also give us the hope and promise of better things to come.

Smiling faces don't always take the place of a thousand words. Bernadette Quailey's "The Photos" shows the reader a poignant look at treasured pictures of a loved one.

Living through tumultuous teenage years can seem to last forever and sometimes hastily shouted words do make a difference. Q. Kelly gives us a glimpse of a silver-lining with her quirky tale, "The Lesbian Curse."

Tyree Campbell once again draws you into a captivating tale about an archeologist finding arguably her greatest discovery and its repercussions with his tender story, "Sentimental."

Kirsten Elliott's "The Prayer" gives us the hope of those spring flowers. No matter who you ask,

you never know what will happen until you try it.

As we look at the submissions to *Khimairal Ink*, we've notice the dearth of upbeat, entertaining and stories that make you smile. I asked Carrie about that and she said writing those kinds of short stories is actually harder than the soul wrenching, angsty ones. We all know how to empathize with a couple breaking up, someone close to you dying or living in an unhappy situation. It takes a bit more crafting and skill to tap into a writer's "fun" side.

With this in mind, along with trying to develop good writers, Carrie put together a free, online writer's class. We were pleasantly surprised to see over 80 people sign up and decided that we would leave the lessons up so other folks could benefit. You can access the class at <http://bedazzledink.wordpress.com/fiction-writing-basics/>. In addition, she also has updated and enhanced her blog with information about successfully published works of our contributors. The blog is at <http://khimairalink.wordpress.com/>.

See you next issue!

Claudia

Join us for the September 2007 issue featuring . . .
Spring and Fall by Val Gryphin

Spring Fever



This issue is volume 3, number 1 of *Khimairal Ink*. Two years ago when we dreamed up the idea for this zine, we could only hope that it not only took off but remained true to our original vision with each passing issue. We prayed that it wasn't just the optimistic dream of a couple of women suffering from spring fever.

Two years later we've published 27 stories by 18 authors. Six authors have had more than one story in our pages. Our mother company Bedazzled Ink has signed books by four of these authors. These statistics go way beyond what we had imagined for *Khimairal Ink*. We thank both our authors and our readers for helping *Khimairal Ink* make it to volume 3, number 1. It's spring again, and we continue this optimistic dream. *Khimairal Ink* is going to grow and thrive for a long time.

We have three authors returning to this issue. Tyree Campbell gives us "Sentimental." The depth and beauty of the writing is something to be sipped and savored like a fine wine. Q. Kelly's "The Lesbian Curse" is at the opposite end of the spectrum and gives us the kind of laugh we'd like to see more of in these pages.

These stories are bookended by two smaller snapshots from life. "The Photos" by Bernadette Quailey takes a poignant look at how a mother deals with the loss of a daughter. "Prayer" continues Kirsten Elliott's amusing look at how young lesbians get through those tough rights of passage.

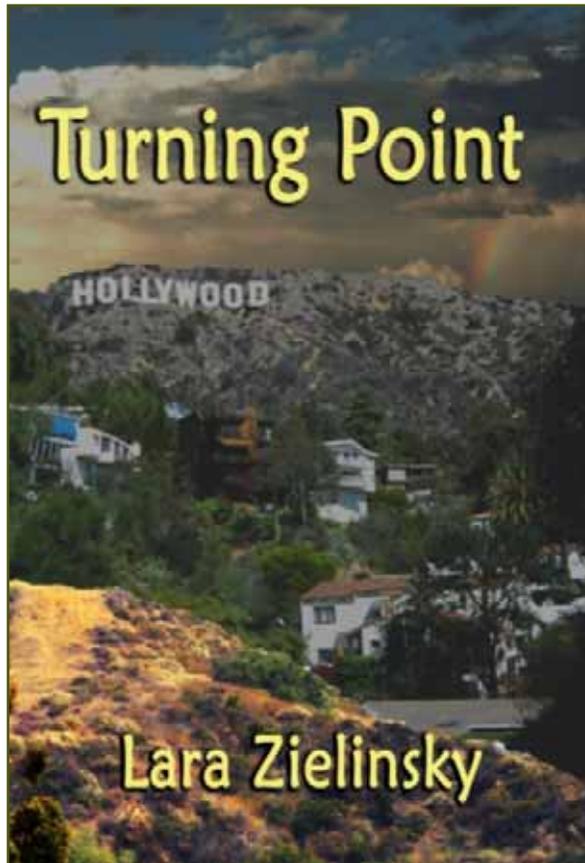
Sias Bryant is no stranger to these pages and Bedazzled Ink is pleased to be putting out a volume of her short fiction this summer. We've included an excerpt from her tale "The Fisher" as a teaser. You have to wait for the book *Remnants of Shadow and Light* to see how the story ends. I know, we're being cruel.

Don't forget to visit my blog every once in a while to see what we're up to. We love to get comments on it. They let us know you're out there and I love to discuss the things I blog about.

Hope you enjoy this issue!

Carrie
<http://khimairalink.wordpress.com>





Brenna Lanigan and Cassidy Hyland

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Touch.

Turning Point



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Caidy's lifelong dream is to become a warrior protector of the city of Andagor. All she has to do is solve a strange riddle and figure out how to light the wishing tower with dragon drool.

+++

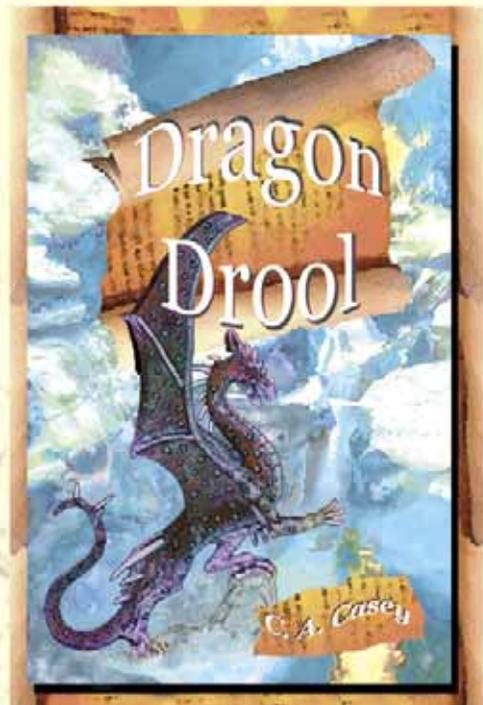
Dragon Drool

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The Photos

by Bernadette Quailey



In this one you are at your first ballet recital.

In this one you're wearing a cap and gown.

Here's you traipsing around in Mummy's heels.

Here's you in your own. Remarkably similar, the shoes. Perhaps I bought yours for you, I certainly borrowed them.

In this one you're about to squirt the photographer with the garden hose.

This is one of your kitchen after that deep-fryer caught fire. There are black marks all up the wall—we took a picture for posterity, but you had a better idea and just never cleaned it up.

In this one you're tiny in the hospital bed, bewildered with tubes going in and out of you.

This is one of you in a nurse's outfit, ready for a fancy dress party.

Here's one of your toy-box, and later there's one of your book shelf and there's one of your garden shed, with stuff all strewn on the bench. Anyone else would have cleaned that up for the photo, but you would have wanted it "naturalistic." "Keep it real" you would have said.

This is of some sunset, somewhere, or perhaps it's a sunrise. It's an unremarkable photo so it must have had some emotional significance, now we'll never know what it was.

I rip it (surprising even myself) in two. This photo means nothing (literally) now you're gone. I get up and walk to the rubbish bin, place the two halves on top of each other and rip them again for good measure before opening the bin with the foot pedal, dropping them in and letting

the lid clang back into place. I want to dust my hands dramatically against each other "that was that" and dispose of the rest of these feelings. At least for now.

It doesn't work.

I go back to the table. There are now photos everywhere, not in the neat piles I'd planned: some to give to your brother, some for me and your father to keep, some to post to Jenny for when she gets back from that therapeutic trip your girlfriends have taken her on.

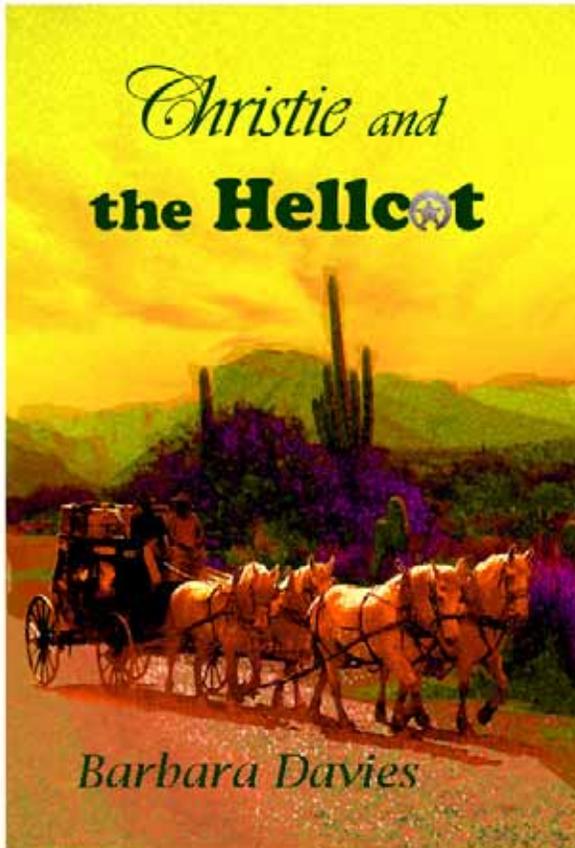
She'd want this one, although it's from before she knew you. It's of you in your school dress, standing straight and tall and beaming, uncharacteristically pleased to be off to school for some reason. Let's look at the back. No clues. Not even a date. Well, she'd like the mischief in your eyes. "What's she up to?" It makes you wonder, "What's she planning?" "Will I ever know her deeply enough that if she's gone I'll remember her well enough . . . ?" The answer's "no," and now it's too late. But we did our best, or most of the time we did, when we weren't too tired, or too broken, or too worried about you and your friends and what was going on when we couldn't be there to protect you.

OK, where was I? The table looks like I'd given *you* the job of sorting these out: there's a mess everywhere. How you ever got anything done I'll never know . . . I honestly will never know. I don't want to do this now, or ever. But I can't even bring myself to swipe them all back into the big box. I'll just leave them here for a bit, until you're father comes home and wants his dinner, I guess. And then we'll have to clear

them up. I'll keep myself busy in the kitchen, and ask him to do it.

And I'll come out, a saucepan of steaming vegetables in my oven-mitted hands, and he'll

be bent over them with moist eyes, and perhaps then we'll be able to cry together. And then pack them away. For another time.



Christie and the Hellcat
Barbara Davies

March, 2006

from

Nuance

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Into the Yellow
and Other
Stories

by Barbara Davies



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The Lesbian Curse

by
Q.
Kelly



I was thirteen years old and in eighth grade. I'd just snagged the most-drooled-after boy in middle school, so I got overly cocky. I forgot how dangerous my rival was.

Her name was Becky. We'd been enemies ever since we were in diapers. We both had perfect families, perfect blonde hair, perfect blue eyes, perfect everything.

But Becky had always won—until Brandon.

He was *mine*—he saw what an airhead Becky was.

I enjoyed my prize for six wonderful hours, strutting around with him, lingering with him at my locker, fingering his polo shirt. Kissing him on the cheek.

Showing my boy off.

Becky pretended not to care, but after school that day, she corralled me in the girls' bathroom. She was furious—her right eyebrow twitched, and her shirt was just the teeniest bit untucked.

"You won't get away with it," she informed me.

"Brandon doesn't like you. Accept it."

She shoved me, so I shoved her back.

"I curse you!" she exclaimed. "You're gonna become a lesbian!"

"Lesbian? What's that?"

Becky snorted. "You don't know? That's when women like each other. They kiss each other."

I was stupefied. "That doesn't happen."

Becky nodded knowingly. "It does too. And lesbians are *ugly*. They have short hair and buck teeth. They don't wear dresses. They look like men. No one likes lesbians. Now you're gonna be one, unless you let me have Brandon!"

I looked into Becky's blue eyes and shivered.

She was dead serious. Still, I refused to let on that I was scared. "You can't curse me."

"My aunt's teaching me voodoo."

"Whatever."

Becky crossed her arms. "It'll start tomorrow morning. With your hair. You'll brush it, but it won't shine as much. And you'll change little by little every day."

"Whatever." I stomped out of the bathroom.

Stupid, worthless Becky.

Still, that gleam in her eyes . . .

Brandon and I talked on the phone for three hours that night. We chatted about the latest movie stars, who was mean at school, who was cool and so on.

I did not tell him about the "lesbian curse," but it worried me to no end.

I was glued to the mirror. Brushed my hair every five minutes. It shone brilliantly.

After Brandon and I hung up, I found the word "lesbian" in the dictionary.

A homosexual woman.

So I looked up "homosexual."

Homosexuals desired people of their own sex.

Ew.

I really had never heard of such a thing. Like I mentioned earlier, I had a perfect family. Perfect friends, too. It was a very sheltered life. No homosexuality allowed, thank you very much.

At 10 p.m., I went to say good night to my parents. I hugged them extra tight and wondered if they would still love me if I became lesbian.

I tossed and turned all that night.

Buck teeth.

Short hair.

Ugly.

No more dresses.

I loved dresses! And boys.

When I woke up, I dashed to the bathroom and locked the door behind me.

Dark, purple circles resided under my eyes. *Great.* They almost made me forget about what Becky said would happen first—the dulling hair.

But I did remember, eventually.

I brushed and brushed my hair.

Finished.

Practically dropped the brush. My hands trembled.

My hair was not its usual brilliant self. Sure, it still shone, but it was missing the key element that made it stand out.

The heterosexual element.

I wanted to die.

I crawled back into bed and played sick.

The next morning, a Saturday, my hair was even duller, and my front teeth suspiciously resembled a rabbit's.

I ran the three blocks to Becky's house and pounded on her front door.

She answered a few moments later, smirking hugely.

"Take it back!" I begged her. "Please. I don't want to be a lesbian. I want my good hair and nice teeth back. You can have Brandon."

Becky shrugged, flipped back her perfect blonde hair. "This is more fun."

She slammed the door in my face.

I furiously blinked back tears. *Don't cry. Don't cry.*

"Fine!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, not caring who else might hear. "I curse you! You'll be a lesbian, too!"

The door opened again.

Becky, still smirking. "You can't curse me. You don't know voodoo."

"Do too," I lied, already plotting to sign up for the best voodoo classes ever. "I double-curse you, Rebecca Elizabeth English. You'll be the ugliest lesbian ever."

I meant what I said. My words had the force of indescribable anger and confusion behind them.

"Tomorrow," I continued, "you'll gain two

pounds. You'll get so fat."

Becky snickered, but my heart leaped—I saw fear in her eyes.

On my walk home, I passed a group of high school boys. They were all tall, muscular, tanned. More drool-worthy than Brandon.

I paid them scant attention, because of the young woman with them. She had long black hair and wore a tight red T-shirt. She was beautiful. I could not take my eyes off her.

She smiled.

I turned into a clueless, gibbering fool.

"Hello," she said—to me! "Are you okay?"

I squeaked.

She laughed. Winked.

Her group went off.

Only when I got home did I realize just what had happened.

Desire for my own sex.

How I hated Becky then.

Brandon broke up with me the next week. I couldn't blame him. The circles under my eyes had intensified and my hair was practically falling out.

Not to mention what was happening with my teeth.

The dentist said they were fine. He saw no difference.

My parents did not notice any differences, either. They said my teeth were wonderful and straight. My hair was great. Same as ever. I just needed to get a good night's sleep.

I checked out a book on voodoo from the school library. Found nothing on lesbian curses, but there were plenty of general spells that would do.

So every night for close to a month, I cursed Becky.

Becky, who was now with Brandon. Ugh.

I also tried to uncurse myself. Nothing worked. Becky became more beautiful than ever. Taller. Slimmer. Longer-limbed. Smarter.

I became shorter and wider.

Blushed more and more whenever a pretty girl talked to me.

Right when school got out for the summer, I broke down. I blubbered everything to my mother, through hot thick tears:

How I had been cursed, how I didn't like boys anymore. How dresses felt alien now.

Mother rubbed my back and whispered soothingly, "You gullible girl. It's all in your head. There's no curse. It's impossible."

Mother bought me new dresses, which I pretended to love.

In July, I went to Becky's house again. Got on my knees and pleaded with her to please, please, please undo the curse.

She said no, even after I threatened to quadruple-curse her.

So I became uglier and uglier. A pariah.

The logical part of me lectured that Mother was right—such a curse was impossible. How to explain what had happened with me, though? Overnight!

But then something even more improbable happened.

I entered ninth grade and despite my best, most strenuous efforts, fell head over heels in love with Becky.

It was impossible not to. She was so lovely and smart. Her laugh . . .

Sometimes she touched me. Oh, not like *that*. But she'd brush past me, to shove me out of the way.

Those moments were heaven.

She and Brandon were long over, but she had a new boyfriend every week. All of them had close-cropped brown hair.

So I cut my hair and dyed it, much to Mother's horror. Her perfect family was falling apart.

"You really are a lesbian," she muttered one day.

She bought me more dresses.

Okay, maybe I wasn't in love with Becky. But I certainly had a crush, and it grew and grew. By senior year of high school, it was unbearable. I would do anything for the girl. Carry her books. Do her homework. Help her cheat on tests.

Becky started to like boys with nose rings and tattoos, so I followed suit.

Still, she barely paid attention to me. Never said "thank you" for my help.

Mother bought me more and more dresses.

One evening in May, about a month before graduation, Becky summoned me to her house. To her bedroom.

I went obediently.

"I'll undo the curse," she told me.

My mind went blank. My tongue became thick and clumsy. Finally, I sputtered, "Why?"

"I'm tired of you fawning all over me."

Tears sprang to my eyes, but I blinked them back furiously. "Oh."

Becky said nothing, but her right eyebrow twitched ever so slightly.

"Why didn't you just ask me to leave you alone? I would have."

"You would've stalked me."

I laughed—not sure why. But laugh I did. "No."

Becky's lips parted, as if they were not sure what to do. Scowl or grin.

She giggled. Covered her mouth with her hand. Giggled some more. "You might have, though."

"No, Becky. I promise. I would not have stalked you."

She flipped her long blonde hair back and did *that* thing with her hands on her neck. "Are you saying I'm not stalk-worthy?"

I replied, very seriously, "You are. Definitely. You're stalk-worthy."

"Good."

"Please don't undo the curse. I'll leave you alone."

"You like being a lesbian?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

It was a good question, especially since I had spent the past few years hating being a lesbian. "Why? Well . . . I don't know. I just don't want to like boys. Girls are . . . they're . . ." I struggled to find the right word but could not.

"Hmm," Becky said.

More eyebrow twitching.

On her nightstand was a picture of Richard, her current boyfriend.

Becky caught me looking at him. She said

nothing, though. Until . . . “I never cursed you,” she whispered. “It was just something I made up. I’m sorry.”

“Okay.”

She sighed. Went over to Richard’s picture and snapped it down. “Did *you* curse me?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “Every night for about a month. I used to really hate you.”

“Hmm.” She crossed her arms. Uncrossed them. Did the thing again—fingering the nape of her neck.

More shifting and fidgeting on her part.

Then: “I’m gay too.”

I could not believe my ears. “What?”

“Your curses worked.”

I stared at Becky for the longest time. She was clearly miserable to her very core. Ready to cry.

I wanted to hug her, but I stayed away.

She dabbed at her eyes. “I liked you even then,” she whispered. “Back in eighth grade. And I wish you wouldn’t change yourself to look like my boyfriends. You don’t need to be my lap dog. Just be yourself.”

My knees went wobbly. I could no longer breathe.

Four years.

Four years of hoping that one day, against all odds, she would like me back. Somehow.

“You . . . you liked me? You *like* me?”

“Yes. I’m sorry I’ve been so mean. You have no idea. I . . . I . . .” She swallowed. “It’s been hard for me. But I’m so sorry.”

She covered her face with her hands. Now she was really going to cry, unless I did something.

So I did.

Fast.

I said, “Don’t cry. It’s okay. I understand. Do . . . do you want to be gay together?”

Becky uncovered her face. She stared at me, startled. Her eyes were red-rimmed. And blue, wonderfully blue.

“You don’t hate me?” she asked. “After all I’ve . . . and now I’m . . . I’m just a hypocrite.”

“Look. Being a lesbian is not bad. It’s a wonderful curse. It’s the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Becky laughed. Nodded, just a little. “Okay,” she whispered. “Let’s be gay together.”

Her right eyebrow never twitched again.



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Sentimental

by
Tyree Campbell



[On 13 August 1997, in the cemetery adjacent to the Cathedral de Saint-Remy in Troyes, France, the casket containing the body of a woman was exhumed pursuant to an estate request to determine whether certain items missing from the estate inventory had in fact been erroneously interred with her . . .]

une

In Troyes she splurged, purchasing one of those colored party bulbs that flicker all night like a string of fireflies in the wind, an *ampoule de fete*, as it read on the box, this one a deep ruby color. On certain Troyenne streets the color might have had additional significance, but not in the stone-and-thatch cottage near the east bank of the Othe south of Aix-en-Othe, where she lived. No one would see it there. She could turn it on with social impunity, reveling in her solitude.

From Troyes she took the route that connected the city to Sens in the west, though she puttered but half that distance in the ancient green Renault before turning south to cross the Vanne and acquire the semi-paved roadpath that took her past the vineyards and small estates, through sleepy Aix with its morning aroma of freshly baked *baguettes* and spicy *saucisses* still lingering in the afternoon sun and, after a brief stop at the *poste* for any letters for Pierrette Gossard, finally along the tranquil Othe to the cottage on the small holding bequeathed to her by her parents some years back, a squarish plot a hundred meters on a side, with the

corners aligned to the points of the compass. The days of this late summer stretched more than usual. She had received no invitations to assist in museum displays or restorations or to revisit the Lescaux cave paintings, and to occupy her professionally she had only her writing, the brief, illustrated topical booklets for children that, she rather imagined on spring days, when hope was immanent in all things, might nurture the next generation of archeologists and physical anthropologists. There was some small demand for her work—readily available in the glittery tourist alcoves that litter the arid, sterile museums of France and western Switzerland—and Pierrette was approaching deadlines on half a dozen more, among them a primer on the ancient uses of amphorae and directions for children on how to throw their own in clay, and a coloring book of antiquities. But this *interminable* Friday in August had wearied her, and so she trudged through the kitchen into the sunlit front room, slowing step by step as she tossed the survey from the *Societe Planetaire* and the subscription renewal for *L'Astronomie* onto the floral stuffed chair left to her by a namesake aunt, and stopping when she reached the brass pole lamp by her desk in the southeast corner of the room, placed there that she might write with the sun warming her back through the small bay windows in the late afternoon.

The *ampoule de fete* would not fit in the socket with the lampshade on, so she removed the shade and the old bulb, screwed in the new, and turned the knob. Ruby light lent a strawberry tint to the summer tan of her face and arms and altered the pale blue of her chemise

to lavender, but before the filament reached a festive flickering temperature it popped, faded, and died.

Pierrette muttered several of those words she had heard on archeological digs.

The bulb had cost almost eighty francs. She retrieved the container and checked for warranties. A soft strawberry glow in the room made her look up.

She said, "*Merde!*" She hissed a few other archeological words and held the box as if prepared to hurl it.

The woman with the strawberry aura neither flinched nor spoke.

"*Quelle apparition—? Qui etes-vous . . . who-what are you?*"

Not an aura. Her skin glowed like June strawberries in the patch behind the cottage, evenly, as if she tanned, naked as she was now, under Arcturus. Ruby-red hair shimmered like decanting claret over her shoulders, framing an oval face dominated by eyes that were rubies, multifaceted drops of fire fit for a maharajah. The rich color matched the nails on her fingers and toes, her eyebrows, and her pubic thatch.

"*Ou suis-je?*" asked the woman, in Berlitz French.

"You don't know where you are?" Pierrette lowered the container. It fell from her hand onto the old brown rug, tumbling like a die into the trapezoid faded by sunlight. "*Etes . . . etes-vous anglaise?* English? You are lost?"

"No, not . . . English—"

"*Americaine*, then, *hm?*"

"No. Please be not afraid. I mean you no harm."

Pierrette collapsed onto the stuffed chair, crumpling her mail. Where had the woman come from? How had she entered the cottage so soundlessly?

Intuition came a flash of pain, a berzerk spark dancing behind her eyes, rekindling beliefs long abandoned, and she slipped from the chair to her knees on the rug, head lowered in reverence, ochre hair casting her cheeks in pious shadow. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners—"

"No."

The negation startled Pierrette. She raised her eyes a little, enough to see the woman's knees.

"*Lourdes,*" she whispered. "*Fatima.*"

"Aye, such explanations have proved satisfactory in the past." The woman spoke English with a curious inflection, a lilt Pierrette thought familiar but was unable to identify. Not American . . . "But no, 'twas another, then, and not meself. I am new here, just."

"Who are you?"

"This is me here, observing you. D'you wish me to leave, then?"

Delicately Pierrette uncoiled, arms pushing her up into the chair, weak. Sunlight washed over her left side, overpowering the woman's spectral glow there, returning the blue of her denims, the robin's-egg of her chemise, the old gold of her hair. The rest of her remained tinged, affected. She felt as if her right side should feel even warmer. Strange that it did not.

Pierrette's own English came clumsily, a scarcely used tool from a dusty shelf in her mind, with an accent that would have buckled the knees of an ardent American suitor.

"Who are you? What is your name?"

The woman drifted a turn around the front room, pausing here and there, rubies intent. At a taboret of varnished maple, to caress the chunky clay statuette of a primitive Venus in the Mesopotamian style, although this was a replica from Pisa, so stamped on the bottom of the base, with a little yellow sticker that read L23.000. By a wrought-iron *etagere*, to examine the contents of each of the three tiers. Archeological bric-a-brac, innocuous fragments pilfered from digs—a potsherd, a bronze spearhead, a fragment of something woven, now hermetically laminated, a handful of marbles of fired clay in an ashtray of polished green alabaster. Before a black-and-white photograph in an inexpensive charcoal frame, hanging on the wall opposite the window, of Pierrette standing beside an older man with a professorial salt-and-pepper beard, garbed in khaki, and two others, local diggers, with broken nails and half-healed scratches on their forearms, the Pyramid of Qufu in the background, the past haunting their present. Beside an heirloom chifoniere, its lustreless wood shelves stocked with souvenirs and mementoes of her life and work in no particular chronology or arrangement, as if the owner clearly never intended to display

them for anyone else.

The woman has no shame, thought Pierrette, *snooping in my closet to see what I wear.*

A pink index finger stroked a pewter she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus. “Aye, a penchant for identification you have. Very well, then. I shall submit. Name me.”

She was, thought Pierrette, the color of a *sucette*, the sweet spicy taste at once remote and familiar.

“Canelle, *hm?*”

The woman laughed. “Cinnamon, is it? And not Celeste, if you believe me a miracle descended from the sky? I remind you of pastry, then?”

“I was thinking of a child’s lollipop . . . from my father’s hand, long ago. Please, be very careful with that.”

“It is important?”

It was a bisque drinking cup, a face carved into it, thick lips and Sumerian ringlets, passed down to her from her grandfather, who had accompanied Kurtwood into Nineveh during the interlude between wars. Something had happened between the first and second firings of the clay—an invasion, a plague, a tax collector, the birth of the firstborn—and somehow the unfinished artifact had survived four millennia of nomadic hordes, invasions, religious uprisings, looters, and the odd archeologist. She kept it on a corner shelf, alone, in a space no one else was meant to see, protected under a crystal bell jar whose curved surface now cast warped cerise reflections.

“I do not know. From a universal perspective I suppose not, *hm?* But to me . . .”

Delicately Canelle replaced the cup and turned around. “To you, then. But why?”

Pierrette’s hands fluttered. “*Sais pas . . .* it is difficult to explain.”

“But it is this which I wish to know.” Her lilt was fading, her speech seeking its own level of competence—now she might have been educated in western New York.

“To observe me, you said.” Pierrette got up to reposition the Mesopotamian Venus so that the bulbous breasts faced the window once more. Although this brought her within arm’s reach of Canelle, she felt no warmth radiating from her. The strawberry woman might have been a holographic projection . . . but she seemed palpable,

substantial. A dead body, arisen? Perhaps from the family plot in the cemetery at Saint-Remy? If she were possible, anything was.

“*Pourquoi?*”

Am I so interesting?

Canelle withdrew in the direction of the door. “To study you studying yourself.”

“You are an anthropologist?”

“If you wish.”

“I think you may observe me without my permission. Without my awareness of you, *ne c’est pas?*” Clarity set in. Pierrette had spent the sixteen years of her adult life in an attempt to decipher the inexplicable, the past in terms that the present might comprehend. In the wake of Canelle’s declaration of harmlessness her self-assurance began to re-emerge, and with it her capacity for analysis. But she was at home, and she had a guest—the first in years, and she was showing herself a poor host. “Would you care for something to drink, *hm?* Water, perhaps, from the well, or Evian?”

“What is the difference?”

Pierrette went into the kitchen, Canelle following. “Water here tastes slightly of sulfur.”

“Taste?”

“You cannot taste, or smell? I cannot explain.”

“Sensory perceptions filtered through your tongue, your nose. Yes, I understand your physiology. That is not why I am here.”

Pierrette filled a glass and handed it to Canelle. In passing, their fingertips touched. Anticipating a static spark, Pierrette steeled herself, but there was only the feel of something alien, like a finger with the circulation temporarily cut off. Canelle lifted the glass to her mouth, drained half of it, and returned it to Pierrette.

“*Merci . . .* thank you.”

“I do not think you were thirsty, *hm?*”

“You wish to be a proper host, even to an intruder. If I may presume upon your hospitality, I wish to be a proper guest.”

“Why did you choose me?”

“This door leads to your carport, *ne c’est pas?*” Canelle pulled it open. Her speech had altered once more, to include tags in adequate French, as if she were seeking to reassure through communication. “And to your yard.”

“You wish to go outside? Perhaps, wait until it is dark. A car may pass, *hm?*”

“Ah, clothing.” In a starwink garb similar to Pierrette’s appeared on Canelle, including a ratty pair of blue Adidas with white piping for her unsocked feet and a black skunji to bind back her hair. Her reds remained unaltered. “*Je m’excuse*. I have embarrassed you.”

“No . . .”

“Perhaps you would feel more comfortable if I translated as a man.”

The offer took Pierrette unawares. To ask an acquaintance to change genders after the initial encounter seemed . . . *gauche*. To say nothing of unprecedented. “Ah . . . no. That is . . . no, you are . . . I am comfortable with you as a woman.”

Canelle stepped out into the carport, Pierrette following. “And now I have disconcerted you. This is one reason why we observe. I have no wish whatsoever to offend you in any way. To do so could skew the observations.”

“You can . . . translate, you said? . . . as a man?”

“I presumed you would feel less threatened, were I a woman. But I may translate as anything you wish, anything . . . a tyrannosaur, although I suspect you might find it difficult to present me to your friends.”

“ . . . I have no . . .”

Canelle rounded the corner of the cottage and toed a raised bed. “These are flowers.”

Pierrette’s mind scrambled for the English word. “Marigolds. Yes . . . I love flowers.”

“And do they love you?” She dropped a knee to the brick border and ran a fingertip over the stiff orange petals.

“I-I do not know. No, I suppose not. Or perhaps . . . I give them a place to stay, and water them, and they bloom for me.”

Canelle rose, eyes toward the road and the river beyond. A surrounding low hedgerow, broken only by the driveway entrance, afforded the cottage a measure of privacy. Five trees shaded the unkempt clumps of old field grass in the yard. A triad of birch in the western corner, white javelins in the bull’s-eye of a tulip bed. A medieval oak in the southern, and a cluster of three cherry trees between the carport and the birch, their fruit already gathered for the year, limbs now occupied by small birds of incessant twittering. Between the field grass grew clover

and bronze groundcover and wild plants that produced creamy white blossoms. A yard of burgeoning independence, thought Pierrette, who cared for it when she had the time . . . but she’d had more time of late, and had not increased her attention. Canelle’s sweeping gaze measured her regret, her shame.

“I did not choose you,” said Canelle. “Had you selected another color, you would now be alone.”

“*Solitaire, oui . . . mais je ne savais pas qu’il-y-avait quelqu’une dans l’ampoule . . .* I did not know.”

“I think perhaps I am most fortunate.” Canelle made for the oak, rubies intent on something affixed to the massive trunk. “Another might have chosen that bulb.”

“*C’est incroyable.*”

“And yet you are not afraid of me.”

“Closer to the spirits of the land, we are more accustomed to miracles here, *hm?*”

“There are spirits in the land?”

“Oh, yes! Spirits . . . memories.”

The sun had sunk to just above the treeline on the other side of the Othe, the gnomons of their bodies projecting shadows back toward the cottage to announce the late hour. Pierrette expected Canelle’s to be pink, but it was charcoal, like her own. Even the penumbra was gray, neutral.

What are you?

“Memories?”

They reached the oak. The object that had drawn Canelle was a weathered board that had been set into a knee-high niche in the trunk and nailed in place. Other keloid scars in the bark suggested there had once been a ladder of such boards, leading up into the tree.

“*C’est la chaumiere ou j’ai grandi,*” said Pierrette. “I grew up here . . . in the summers, and several springs. Many memories.” Securing a handhold on a keloid of bark, she put her right foot on the remaining rung and tried to pull herself up. The board snapped, and she spilled onto the groundcover, the impact jarring breath from her. Baleful green eyes transfixed Canelle. “You might have caught me!” She extended a hand. “Help me up.”

“It is prohibited.”

After an exasperated pause Pierrette rolled

over and pushed herself to her feet. "I did not see the '*defense d'aider*' sign. How could you not . . . ? I would have tried to catch you."

"Events under observation must proceed as they will. I may not interfere, without skewing the observation. And you would have fallen, had I not been here."

Pierrette was still aggrieved. "I would not have tested the wood, had you not been here, *hm?* Why should courtesy fall victim to causality, *hm?*"

A car horn stuttered a greeting. Above the top of the hedgerow passed the cab of a blue Citroen, an arm extended, waving. Then the vehicle slowed . . . and sped up again, bearing south. Belatedly Pierrette returned the gesture as the growl of the engine dopplered out.

"Who was that?" inquired Canelle.

"Michel is . . . an old acquaintance."

"You are distressed."

". . . It is of no importance." She rubbed the back of her left thigh, where the soreness would metamorphose into a morning bruise, then picked up and decapitated an acorn, tossing the fragments aside. Finally she *tchahed*. "Let him think what he thinks. *J'ai faim. Et vous?*"

"I do not require food."

"Or drink." Pierrette headed back to the cottage. "Yet you can perform the . . . go through the motions."

"I do not wish to attract undue attention."

Pierrette barked a laugh. "*Vous etes une dame rouge.*"

"The color is . . . inherent. I do not yet know how to alter it. I am . . . young."

A throaty chuckle issued from Pierrette as she opened the front door and turned to the kitchen, switching on lights here and there. "A scarlet tyrannosaur. Please, sit there, and you may observe me eating . . . bread, and . . . let me see." She rummaged through the shelves of the small cooler. "Some cheese, the remains of yesterday's salad, a glass of wine." She served herself and sat down, the table a barricade of wood between her and Canelle, and spoke between bites. "*Alors . . . you are from outer space, ne c'est pas? Not from nearby, hm?*"

"The neighboring spiral arm."

"Ah. I think you have nothing to fear from us for several more months, *hm?*"

"The day will come—"

"How real are you, Canelle?"

Rubies glowed at her.

Pierrette swallowed a lump of dry crust. "You are both a person . . . and a spark of light. A charm quark, *ne c'est pas?*"

"I am . . . energy, translated into matter." Pierrette grunted surprise, and she went on, with a desultory wave of her hand at the plate, "You convert matter to energy. Why should the reverse process be so improbable? You are a substantial. You are matter, and you shape matter. We shape energy . . . as you see me."

"You are . . . *biophotique?* And you were inside the light."

"A whim, no more. I might have translated here—or anywhere—directly. I thought to leave the matter to chance."

Pierrette washed down the last of the cheese with a final dollop of wine. Her eyes drifted, until, without warning or intent, they locked with Canelle's and held for several seconds. She reached a hand halfway across the table. "Forgive me. My name is Pierrette. Please call me Peri."

The charm quark accepted the offer. Again Pierrette stiffened in anticipation of a *frisson*, and was disappointed.

"Canelle, you call me."

"*Oui.*"

"From another memory. A sweet, you said." Pierrette nodded. "And you love this memory?"

"I had not thought of it in that way. It is a . . . fond memory, pleasant." She raised a pale eyebrow. "It is important to you, to know about the love of things? Of people?"

"You act with an affinity for other substantials. I accept this and I would not change it even were I able to, but I would understand it."

The light in the kitchen ceiling flickered.

"Is that you?" asked Pierrette. Canelle shook her head. "Then perhaps it warns of another outage. We may be dark for a time."

"I can give you light."

"I would not ask you to violate your prohibitions."

"You are angry with me."

"Oh, no. No, no."

The lights in the cottage died. In the dark,

Canelle's rubies glowed, rich coals in the depths of a tunnel.

"Come outside with me," said Pierrette, and gathered up Canelle's hand in hers.

Behind the cottage, next to the strawberry patch, stood a wicker lounge of the type often encountered on the Cote d'Azur. From the carport Pierrette brought a second, and unfolded it, inviting Canelle to relax herself.

"Will you sleep out here?" asked the charm quark, accepting.

"The night is very warm, *hm?* And I have done this on many nights before. This is where I watch the stars. The stars that are now watching me, *hm?*"

"You are also an astronomer."

Pierrette stretched out on the lounge to confront the Universe. "Not the technology and telescopes, the eye to the eyepiece, *non*. To see anything clearly, you must use both eyes. Look, and tell me what you see."

Above them a great gout of fresh cream spilled prismatic droplets across the black-lacquered dome of a vast stadium before dribbling off into the surrounding trees. On either side of the spill glittered tiny crystals. It was impossible to say, in late summer, whether the vaulted surface sparkled with this residue, or constituted in fact an opaque barrier, blocking an infinity of raw light beyond . . . whether humanity, observing and pointing, now and then, had pierced the barrier with its fingers, uncorking the light—of Regulus, and Antares, and of Vega, Sulaphat, and Sheliak, of Altair and Tarazed, names far more ancient than the light which now caught the eye and kindled the curiosity of Earth.

"Which," asked Pierrette, "is yours?"

"All of them."

The response left Pierrette breathless. She fell silent, eyes renewing acquaintances above her, connecting the dots, sketching fantastic shapes. In the intense rural darkness the stars shone a thousand times brighter than when viewed from Lyons or Nancy. They seemed alive . . . and perhaps they were. A streak briefly lit the sky—a stray Perseid? Or was this the manner in which Canelle had arrived?

To observe me? Me?

How *small* I must appear to her! *Quelle insignifiance!*

Pierrette did not look at her. "Canelle?"

"Yes, Peri."

"Canelle . . . I am thirty seven years old. I have passed perhaps half of the time I will be allotted. I grew up here, in this cottage, and in Troyes, where I purchased you. My family has a plot in the church cemetery there, where I will be buried one day with a few possessions that have some special significance to my life. Until then, I live. I studied at Grenoble and at Marseilles. I have arranged displays for artifacts from five continents, and dug for them on three. I write books for children. I drive a car that should be put to sleep. I do not cook well. I was married, once, briefly, but we had no children and we . . . drifted apart, because my work compelled me to travel. I have had lovers . . . but I prefer to live alone, and to visit when I feel . . . alone. I raise strawberries, and grow vegetables, and tend flowers. I do not dust as often as I should. I think I appreciate the stars more because much of my work is interior, at desks and displays, and underground. Once I thought to go up there, to see what is to be seen, but that is not for me to do. It is enough that the stars have come to me. I think it perhaps my destiny to be a connector. I take the past and, in some small way that is my own, make it palatable to the future. I have things I remember well, and things I wish to forget. You may find me anywhere. I am pleased that you found *me*. But you will leave, and you will not remember me."

"Peri?"

"What is it, Canelle?"

"Sleep."

And she did.

deux

Fists on the counter top, Pierrette glared darts at the *M'sieur le Cafe* in an attempt to accelerate the brewing process by the power of her irritation, mentally assaulting the struggling appliance because the proper target of her sullen mood, a red charm quark, had abandoned her to a temperature fallen fifteen degrees from the evening and without a blanket. Power had

returned to the cottage at some point, confusing the coffeemaker, whose crimson digits had commenced flashing 12:00 with the confidence of a metronome while the timer waited patiently—forever, if need be—for hours to coincide. A morning without coffee could be corrected by the flick of a thumb. But another morning alone . . .

She thumped the counter top. “*Ou êtes-vous? Where did you go, Canelle?*”

Dark steaming liquid continued to dribble, tantalizing her with its aroma. The intoxication of the evening’s company had yielded a morning hangover of loneliness. What, she wondered, were we drinking? There had been some talk of stars, and her life, and more stars, and . . . she rubbed her arms, still chilled.

You might have covered me, Canelle.

Or awakened me, and put me to bed . . . and let Michel think what he thinks.

Five reedy beeps invited Pierrette to pour. From the cupboard above the counter she selected a clean mug with the Coliseum enameled on one side and Roma in black letters on the other, and filled it, plopping in a cube of sugar and a dollop of cream to soften the bitterness. She wondered how Canelle took hers. Tasteless, perhaps the charm quark adopted a pattern espied in restaurants, the better to blend in despite her impossible epidermal tint. After a tentative sip, Pierrette worried at a blemish in the glazing with a nail, bleak black cumulous thoughts roiling her mind. The darkest hour did not occur just before dawn. It came when you awoke, shivering, expecting to find someone beside you, finding yourself alone.

Her eyes went to the mug. The Coliseum had endured two millennia of abuse, but already chips marred the enamel after only half a decade. Colin had bought it for her, from a kiosk near the *Fontana di Trevi*. She had promised to speak his name whenever she drank from it. Three weeks on a dig in arid Tunisia. Four days sharing the tent. She doubted he remembered her, or whether the enamel would outlast her own memory of him.

A ray of sunlight forced its way through the surrounding trees, through the back window, illuminating the calendar on the wall above the cooler, purchased in a market in Nancy. The

month read *juillet*. She had neglected to change it. She grasped the bottom edge, and hesitated, letting the page fall back. Every morning of that month had met her expectations. Already *août*, only half over, had failed her, beguiled her with its strawberry promises.

She trudged through the front room, pausing before the fireplace, debating whether to kindle a log. The flue had been swept in *avril* in preparation for the autumn, and two cords of wood had been stacked at the southeast end of the cottage, creating a disjointed labyrinth through which mice and snakes scurried and slithered in search of safety or a meal. She was still cold . . . but already the sun had begun to warm the cottage. The tacky lining of her mouth suggested that hygiene ought to be her first priority.

The bed remained unmade from the previous morning, the quilt bunched in the shallow depression along the left side where she slept, one pillow on the floor, silent witness to a restless slumber. Absently she straightened the bedding, a twinge of guilt prodding her into action, then went into the *bain* to draw the bath. Waiting, she peered through the steam at the reflection in the mirror. No new wrinkles to admonish her that the leaves were beginning to turn in her year. It should have been a glorious time, a prolonged flurry of orange and cerise and yellow before the brittle browns finally took up residence, but strawberry was the color of her mind now. She prodded a cheek. No sagging yet, not even an incipient jowliness. The sun had treated her well, all those years, and the work had kept her fit. She drew the chemise over her head and searched for other gravitational effects. Her reflection fogged over while she conducted the daily check for lumps, as routine now as brushing her teeth—

She barked a laugh. *Perhaps morning breath drove Canelle away.*

The film stripped from her teeth—she retained all but the four wisdom and a small fragment of a lower incisor (now capped), the latter a loss to a happenstance encounter with a mallet—Pierrette wriggled out of her denims, and stepped to the tub just as the *bain* was redecorated in strawberry.

After exhausting her repertoire of hyphenated archeological words, Pierrette tried the direct

approach. "Get out of my bath! *Vite, vite!* You will not observe me bathing."

Canelle was kneeling at the head of the claw bathtub, naked again, the water lapping at her thighs, dark green washcloth in one hand, bar of soap in the other.

"Please, Canelle . . ."

"I thought you would like me to wash you. This is what women do, *ne c'est pas?* Was the movie in error?"

Pierrette had not supposed the Playboy Channel a proper cultural briefing forum for extraterrestrial visitors. "Probably that was not exactly a movie, Canelle."

"It was intended to stimulate the reproductive process in men, yes, I understand that. But . . . how do you wash your back?"

Pierrette pointed to a long-handled brush hanging on a hook. "Please, Canelle. You have already left me in the cold once this morning, *hm?*"

Canelle rose. Water ran from her legs without beading. "You slept outside, as you chose—"

"Are you telling me that your rules forbid you to cover me with a blanket, but permit you to wash my back?"

About to step out of the tub, Canelle hesitated. "You would have been cold in any case, had you slept outside. Your back will be washed, regardless of what I do, *non?* But I thought to confirm my observation in that movie that the contact of bathing also stimulates you."

"*Out!*"

"If you are sure—"

"Canelle, women don't . . . don't . . ."

But they do. Remember those weeks with Eugenie?

Pierrette withdrew a pace. Her epithet, directed at herself, came whispered. "*Zut!*"

"Is that yes, or no?"

Pierrette took a shuddering breath. "*Eh bien.* You may wash my back. But no stimulation, *hm?*"

"*D'accord.*"

"It is done," said Canelle. "Now the other side?"

"No!"

"But that is what I saw."

Pierrette almost turned around, eye contact requisite in a debate . . . or an argument. But to do so risked increasing her vulnerability.

"Canelle . . . no. Just go, and let me finish."

"But they seemed to enjoy it."

"*Precisement.* They 'seemed' to. They were pretending, Canelle."

"They did not have an affinity for one another?"

"Please. Go into the front room, and wait for me there, *hm?*"

"Affinity and stimulation are not the same. How are they different?"

"*Zut!*" Water splashed as Pierrette whirled around, almost losing her footing. The charm quark made no effort to support her. "Could you love me, Canelle? Could you have an affinity for me?"

"Affinity for a substantial? No, that is impossible for us."

"But you could wash my . . . wash me, now that I am turned around." At this the charm quark lifted a soapy washcloth in preparation. Heart astutter, Pierrette firmly pushed her hands away. "What you saw as stimulation would have no meaning for me, Canelle. You would be pretending to care that I feel . . . pleasure. And I could not feel pleasure from pretense. For me, this 'affinity' must be reciprocal."

Canelle lifted a crimson eyebrow, an acquired expression. "So you could have an affinity for me?"

"Yes, I . . . no! Not for someone who left me outside to freeze! Not for someone who lets me fall, *hm?* Not for someone who treats me as an object, a substantial, to be stimulated, no!" She snatched the washcloth from Canelle. "Please, go to the front room."

"You are angry with me."

Pierrette softened. "No, Canelle, I am not angry with you, but with myself."

"I do not understand."

"The water is growing cold. I am starting to feel a chill."

Canelle stepped from the tub, dry. Her feet left no puddle-prints on the speckled linoleum. At the doorway she paused, with a glance over her shoulder. "I mean you no harm, Peri."

Pierrette scarcely heard her. On the verge of arousal, she began washing herself very gingerly.

The charm quark had opened the front door and was gazing toward the hedgerow with the concentration of a seamster trying to thread a needle. Pierrette drew up beside her, maintaining a discreet distance between them. In the light breeze, rose stems climbing the trellis at the southeast corner of the cottage tickled the windowpanes like a stuttering clock. The scent of open blooms wafted past them, and for a brief moment Pierrette felt a twinge of pity for Canelle, who did not possess the faculty for appreciating it. How did one go about describing aromas to an anosmic? Or taste, an associated sensory perception. Odd that the charm quark could see, and hear, and . . . touch.

Pierrette shivered, rubbing her arms.

"The blue car," said Canelle. "It drove by. I think it was . . . Michel."

"I wish you would put some clothes on, *hm?*"

Immediately the charm quark garbed herself in a blue terrycloth robe, imitating Pierrette. "I did not mean to offend you."

"*Nue*, you do not offend me, *hm?* But Michel . . ."

"I do not understand."

Pierrette grimaced. Having already said too much, she found herself obliged to say more. "After yesterday, and this morning, he probably thinks we are . . . lovers."

"Like the shower in the movie."

"No! Not like . . . Canelle, that is not being lovers. That is a . . . a . . . *c'est une parodie, hm?*"

"And what is that?"

"It is . . . playing at love."

Canelle stepped through the doorway and around to the raised bed of marigolds. She tried to pluck a blossom, and instead uprooted the entire plant. Pierrette cried out in dismay. "*Que fais-tu?* Canelle, what are you doing?" She snared the marigold and crammed it back into the hole, packing soil around the stem.

"If you want a flower, let me cut one for you," Pierrette grumbled, wiping her hands on the robe as she stood up.

"You love the flowers. Even though they do not love you in return."

Pierrette snorted, and scuffed at a clump of grass. "We had this discussion in the bath."

"But does it not alter your feelings for the object of your affection, if it is not returned?"

"Unrequited love, *hm?*"

She led Canelle to a wooden bench bought at a park sale years before, and they sat down. The climbing roses filtered the sunlight, dappling them, while Pierrette struggled with her thoughts. The charm quark was beginning to intrude into a solitude she had long taken for granted. Worse, though uncomfortable with the tack Canelle's seemingly ingenuous queries had taken, she had confined herself to the bench, an easy target for more discomfort. She covered her face with her hands, concealing dry tears of frustrated ambivalence.

Am I so desperate for a companion?

Are we talking about us, or about the marigolds?

"If I felt love," she said slowly, gathering momentum to break through a wall she had inadvertently erected, "it might grow stronger, were it not returned. In time, it might become an obsession . . . *dangereux*. In that direction, for us, lies a madness . . ." Within her billowed an urge to treat Canelle as a companion, a confidante . . . to touch her in punctuation as she spoke, to meet her eyes, jade upon ruby . . .

Pierrette shook herself, a dog out of the bath, to regain control.

"Canelle, you said 'object of your affection.' That has two meanings, *hm?* It is a reference to the one you love . . . *un synonyme, hm?* But in another sense, it implies that the one you love is an object, a thing, a . . . substantial, as you say. I love the flowers, the marigolds, the artifacts in my cottage. No, they do not love me in return. But if I loved you, Canelle . . . it would be wrong to regard you as an artifact. To do so would demean both of us."

"I cannot love you."

"Even so." Pierrette reached up and plucked an older rose bloom. A thorn from the stem remnant pierced her finger. Briefly she sniffed the dying fragrance, then offered the flower to Canelle while she sucked at the droplets of blood that formed. The charm quark seemed oblivious to the barbed stem. She thrust her nose into the bloom as Pierrette had done.

You cannot taste, or smell. You cannot love.

Suddenly she grabbed Canelle's hand and

opened it. Scarlet beads ribboned the strawberry fingers and palm as the rose, freed, tumbled to the ground. "Canelle . . . how can you bleed?"

"It is a cosmetic injury." Instantly the blood vanished, the hand regaining its normal appearance. "I thought the vulnerability might reassure you . . ."

"Instead you disconcert me." Pierrette gave her a sidelong look. "So you can act with respect to my own feelings, *hm?* But it is acting, *ne c'est pas?* Like those women you saw. It is not real."

"If you close your eyes, I promise you, you will not know the difference."

A chill fluttered up along Pierrette's spine, and she trembled, annoyed with herself for the momentary surrender.

"You will leave," she said, in a hollow, haunted tone, "and you will not even remember me." Abruptly she got to her feet and swept inside, the charm quark following attentively. "None of what we might share would mean anything to you, except as an observation, an experience for you to analyze as you will, *hm?*"

"But how can you love an object?"

"A substantial?" Pierrette raised the lip of the bell jar and withdrew the bisque drinking cup. "Perhaps 'love' is too general. It is what we say, Canelle. It is the word we use. We love this movie or that book or such a car. Perhaps 'cherish' is more accurate . . . but less romantic, less emotional, *hm?* And we are a romantic species, above all. We live and we die for our loves. I love this cup. I have never drunk from it, nor have I done anything but display it, and yet I love it. Of all the members of my family, my grandfather encouraged me the most in my studies and in my work. He was my guide, my mentor, my . . . my shoulder to cry on. When I received my diploma, he gave me this. When I die, it will be buried with me, to comfort my spirit. It has little intrinsic value, *hm?* Yet, whenever I see it, I think of him, of all that he meant to me. When I say I love this cup, I am saying I love him. Perhaps we love our objects for their emotional content . . . for their 'insubstantial' content. For the pleasure or the pain or the memory they represent."

"But what would I represent to you, if you loved me?"

Pierrette replaced the cup on the shelf and

sealed it under the bell jar. "That is far more complex. This cup is incapable of returning love. The love that exists between it and myself travels in one direction only. I can control it, direct it, determine its boundaries, *hm?* But when it travels in both directions . . . perhaps it sets its own boundaries."

"I told you: I cannot love you. I can only act love."

Pierrette's eyes dropped to the floor between them. "Perhaps, as you say, I will not know the difference."

A shadow fell upon her. Just inside the doorway a pale, gaunt middle-aged man had come to a halt. He was dressed in the manner of a villager. His face utterly lacked expression. The shotgun in his hands swept the room and came to rest on Canelle, its lifeless black caves staring at her.

Pierrette inserted herself between them. "*Mon Dieu! Michel . . . que fais-tu?*"

Michel blinked, his dull gray eyes refocusing on the nearer object.

"Who is he?" asked Canelle.

"From my past, long ago. Michel, please. Leave us. We'll forget this, *hm?*"

The shotgun steadied. "When you moved back here, I thought . . . I hoped . . ."

"We were *children*, Michel. We did what children do, *hm?* I loved you then. I do not love you now. Please, go."

"But now you love this . . . woman?"

"No. Yes!" She took a step forward, arms outstretched, half-defensive, half-pleading. "What if I do, Michel?"

The explosion shook the cottage. The compact burst of pellets drove Pierrette into Canelle, and they tumbled backwards, caroming off the desk and knocking over the brass pole lamp. It fell against the wall, the *ampoule de fete* shattering with an audible pop. Blood surged from the gaping hole in Pierrette's chest as Canelle lowered her to the floor.

Michel reversed the shotgun, placing the barrel under his chin, and thumbed the other trigger. A red geyser splattered the ceiling and front windows. His decapitated torso blocked the doorway.

Canelle slipped to her knees, inspecting the wound with a surgeon's detachment. Blood

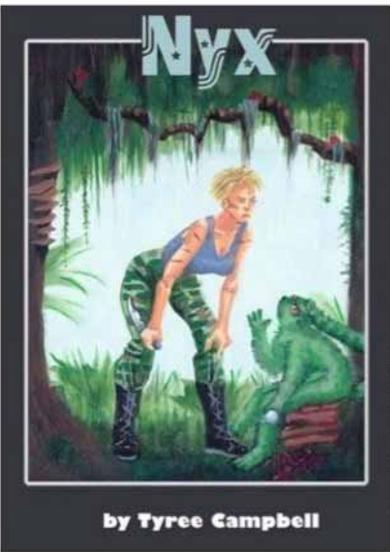
dripped from her hands without staining them.
 “Yes, Peri, I will leave, as I must. But you are wrong: I *cannot* forget you.”

“Nor I you,” whispered Pierrette, and died.
 The room faded from strawberry to daylight.

[. . . missing from the estate inventory had in fact been erroneously interred with her. Civil and

legal representatives found only three items—a piece of bisque pottery, a bronze spearhead, and an intaglio onyx brooch—family heirlooms listed on the casket inventory. Beneath the hands clasped over the breast in repose authorities also discovered a small pile of thin flakes of ruby glass. Their presence remains unexplained.]
 [Translation mine. TC]





by Tyree Campbell

Meet Nyx. She's an assassin on assignment on a world where both sides want her dead. Her old nemesis wants her dead. And her only allies are the lemuroid, sexually-tilted Malasy. To win this one, Nyx has to recover her lost femininity, and make the coldest sacrifice of all.

Nyx is a trade paperback sf novel published by Sam's Dot Publishing. To order your copy from The Genre Mall, click on this cover icon and scroll to this cover.

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Prayer
by
Kirsten
Elliott



Dear God,
Please let her be queer. This may be a slightly unusual prayer for you to hear, God. I'm aware that you have issues with the alternative sexualities. But you must understand, it's just this once, this one girl. One lamb from your flock of millions. And she may not even be a Christian. She might be sleeping around with lots and lots of teenage boys. And if she is, striking her with lesbianism would not only be a just punishment—it would be saving her from sin. You'd be doing a good deed.

And if she is chaste and pure and faithful, could you not test her, as you tested Eve and various other Biblical people? I'll happily serve as an apple. Or a snake. She might resist, and prove herself worthy. Or she could fall and come to Hell with me. In which case I'm sure the devil would be happy to have a pretty girl like her. She is very pretty, isn't she? You have to admit it.

Good God (sorry) she's stripping. Well, removing one layer to reveal soft shoulders and perfect collarbones. Why is it that my idea of beauty is the way bone moves beneath flesh? Knees and collar bones, they get me every time. But, no, sorry God, I'm sure you don't want to hear the erotic peculiarities of an undersexed teenage lesbian. I'll pray properly.

But I'm not praying for very much. I could be asking for her to land half naked in my lap. Or completely naked in my bed. I just need her to be queer. I just need a shot at this one. I'm sick of falling for straight girls, longing for straight girls, tearing myself apart over straight girls. Let her be lesbian and not interested in me, or bi

and happily attached to a guy and I'll walk away content that at least I had a chance.

It's so bloody difficult to read whether she is or not. She's not short-haired, but if life fitted that stereotype I'd be straight. And I've just spent the last thirty minutes trying not to stare at her breasts. No rainbows, no pink triangles, but then wearing symbols of gay culture kind of blows the closet door right open. And the closethood is rather useful, particularly for the prevention of social exclusion and mindless violence. However, it does have the downside of making it significantly harder to get laid.

Hmmm. Just had a thought. I've been praying to a Christian-type God. With Biblical references and everything. When you might not actually be the right God (god?). I could go down the Muslim or Hindu route. But that would feel false. Although I'm not a Christian, Christianity is definitely the religion I've opted out of. You are the god I swear at, so you should probably be the god I pray to as well. Even if I would be slightly more likely to get your help if I hadn't sworn at you.

Although even if I hadn't I'm not sure you'd agree to grant my request. The kinds of prayers you answer seem to involve solving the moral dilemmas of people who really should know better and healing sick people. But I'm buggered if I know how you pick which ones to save. Surely the ones with no one to pray for them are the ones that most need your help? And you can't save everyone. Because, well, you designed the world in a way that meant you couldn't. (Do let me know if I've got the wrong end of the stick about that, because I'm not a

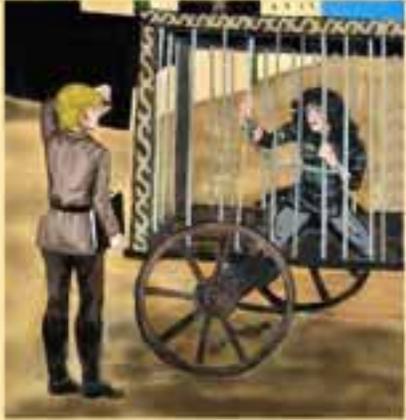
theologist, and you probably have a decent come-back to that one.)

Anyway I shouldn't be finding fault with you. I'm trying to get you on my side. And I do understand you're doing a very difficult job. And I appreciate many of the things you've created. Like chocolate. And vodka. And cats. Gotta admit, you kind of fucked up with us humans, but that can be overlooked if you consider all the other species you've created that don't torture each other, destroy the planet or wear really stupid hats. And stars. Good call on the stars. Very innovative exterior decoration. I like the idea of the pretty little twinkly things being huge great balls of fire. And the moon is a very nice touch.

But back to what's important. That girl, over there, with the long dark hair and the soft pink mouth and dove-like eyes. Well, what ever the guy who wrote the song of Solomon meant by dove-like because he seems to use it as a compliment a lot. That girl, who will appear in my day dreams forever. That girl, who could be the love of my life. That girl, who could be queer if you let her be queer.

Please. I need this. I need a chance to flirt and laugh and know it's not a performance for the guys, a performance to prove I'm straight. I need a fantasy that might come real. I need a shot at love. Or at least sex.

But I suppose it's already determined. It won't change in a split second while I'm staring at her. Either she is or she isn't. And rambling at you won't do anything to change that. So I'm going to go and talk to her.

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*Excerpt From
Remnants of
Shadow
and Light*

*by
Sias
Bryant*



The Fisher

“**T**ide goes out and that dingy there will look like it was set in a pile of muck waist deep. Few hours later, she’ll be buoying up and over like a raft in a squall.”

The sturdy fisher spit the fact through his clenched teeth that held a pipe securely toward the right side of his mouth. He finger-laced a hole in a large net that had recently ripped while hauling crab. He used a fine rope of what looked like shoestring and skillfully weaved the strands of netting until they formed a solid bond across the eighteen-inch hole. The precision of his stitch was impressive and I was mesmerized by his voice. It was a deep and soothing sound that split the eerie morning silence and caused me to hear the salt water bubbling at the back of his throat.

He had worked the boats all his life he said, and his presence proved it to me. His enormous hands were calloused and scarred from years of scraping fish fins. I assumed that the bright orange hat and tan waders held up by suspenders were his daily attire. I thought that the turtle-neck shirt underneath looked as though it was only changed when absolutely necessary. The multitude of lines on his face was rugged, much like I assumed the life of a fisher to be. He was such an interesting sight that I forgot for a moment the questions to ask. I had taken leave of my mission and concentrated on his busy-work instead.

A silence fell between us and he looked at me with a short smile.

“What are you doin’ down here at six bells, Miss?”

The idea that anyone would call me “Miss” was absurd and made me smile inwardly. He was just as comfortable with company as he was with the net. I wanted to pack up his easiness with me somehow so I could remember it after I’d gone.

“I’m visiting here and had not yet seen the bay side. Thought I’d come and take a look before another tourist came around and spoiled my view.”

We both then turned from each other and stared collectively at the sea. The bay was sized well enough to bring in several large fishing boats and, in its day, had probably done just that. The long boardwalk from the center of town now mostly housed whale watching tour boats on its right. The few remaining fishing boats on the left were well-worn and snug in their watery spaces. They lulled me with a creaking sound in their bellies that was a haunting consolation. The view from the end of the pier was an exercise in opposites. To the left, beyond the boats, was the sleepy town that stretched along the waterline and formed the arc of the bay. Straight ahead was the rock wall breaker, distant and vigilant in protecting the bay’s inner cargo against the elements of the sea. And directly to the right was the reason I had come to the dock that morning.

There were four salt-stained pictures displayed side by side that ran the height of the oversized boathouse. The individual photo-like images made a quartet of grandmotherly women staring beyond the bay, keeping watch over the tiny town. I remembered why I had set

the alarm and walked the pier that morning. I turned toward the side of the boathouse and spoke to my companion.

“Can you tell me about those pictures?”

He dropped his head toward his shoes as if he’d lost something. Then, moving his gaze up to my face, he caught my glance and held it. Honestly, I couldn’t see a difference between his eyes and the color of the sea behind him.

“I can.”

He still fixed his stare into me and I breathed a steady rhythm while waiting for his next words.

“What’s your name, Miss?”

“Diane.”

He smiled at the sound of my name and softly spoke a word that I couldn’t hear.

“I’m sorry, sir, didn’t hear you.”

He turned his gaze toward the women and said, “Tokias. Long ‘i’. Tok-eye-us.” Then he turned toward me and continued, “That’s my name.”

Pause.

“What interests you about ‘em, Miss?”

“Diane, please, Sir.”

“Tokias, please, Miss.”

We both grinned at one another and let the moment of familiarity sit between us until I finally spoke.

“I guess I am intrigued by their presence. Who are they? And who decided they should be up on the boathouse for fishers and travelers coming in by ferry to see?”

“Those women were the beacon of hope for the men who fished. They stood and kept the town safe until their men came home from sea. At least three of them did.”

“Why only three?”

Tokias gazed again toward the sea and then

back to me. “Would you like ta’ come aboard? Coffee?”

“That’d be great. It’s freezing out here.”

The fisher reached out to take my arm as I steadied myself on one of the dock’s massive timber pylon supports. His watery fingers and firm grip dwarfed my hands as he guided me neatly onto the boat. The vessel had to be known around the tiny town as a rust bucket. Worn and faded paint on the stern looked like the boat must’ve been named after its present owner. The T O K, and I were barely visible and the A and S were only partially remaining. Its masts, paintless and weathered, were streaked with a color like red autumn leaves and her ropes were charcoal gray and frayed. The black shoulder of the starboard bow had a six foot crease running parallel to the water that had been patched recently. There were three hatches that tanked the fish and a small cabin was just above the one closest to the rear. Tokias stepped into the cabin and returned with two cups and an ancient percolator pot.

“Anything in it?”

“No, black’s good, thanks. How old is this boat?”

“Old enough, I reckon. You married?”

I smiled and wondered how the old guy would take the news. “No. I’ve had a woman in my life for the last twenty years, though.”

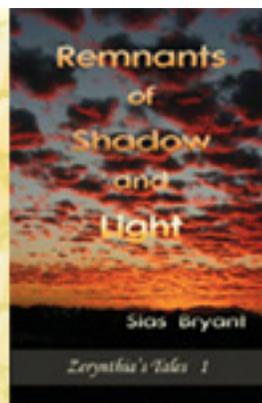
He didn’t flinch or move a muscle. That was either a really good or really bad sign.

“Then you’ve got more in common with Elizabeth than I thought,” he said. Tokias gestured toward the women on the boathouse.

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Contributors



Bernadette Quailey

Bernadette Quailey was born in Australia, and grew up in the cities and the outback of Australia. She majored in English and Psychology at university. After graduating she began working in psychological research, first in Australia and later in the Netherlands. Since moving to the Netherlands she has lived in a number of otherwise empty buildings --a defunct seminary, a luxury three storey villa and a church – to prevent them from being squatted (and to save on rent!) She currently lives just outside of Amsterdam.

Q. Kelly

Q. Kelly is an editor living in Froot Loop Land, Virginia. She has won numerous short-story and journalism competitions. She's also authored several novels and is in the process of finding roosting places for them. She loves flirting, mocha Frappuccinos and royal families. You can e-mail her at yllek_q@yahoo.com.

Tyree Campbell

Tyree Campbell is a retired U.S. Army translator [Russian, Spanish, Thai] with some 80 stories and two dozen poems [including a 2003 Rhysling finalist] published to date. His first novel, *Nyx*, about an assassin who rediscovers her emotions while on assignment on a strange world, is currently available from Project Pulp at <http://www.projectpulp.com>. Just do a simple search, you'll find it. His second novel is currently under a second reading with a publisher. He is also the Managing Editor of Sam's Dot Publishing, and invites you to <http://www.samsdotpublishing.com>.

Kirsten Elliott

I'm a Londoner. I adore my city, but I'm to leave to spend 5 or 6 months travelling around Europe and then go to university to study History and Politics outside of London. I'm currently working as a charity fundraiser. I enjoy writing short stories, and also the lyrics for a gothic jazz band called Weeping Fig. I hope to one day finish a novel, but I'm not sure I'll ever be able to do it.

Sias Bryant

Sias Bryant is quite possibly the busiest writer in her own head that you would ever want to meet. In her writing, she is wild about quirky romantics, odd women of questionable repute, and otherwise industrious, wise o' dames. Look closely and you will see her just about everywhere you go. Sias is the one in comfortable shoes who most likely gave your lesbian aunt her first real kiss.