

Ombak Volume Three

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That Day With the Elephant

By Brian Low

Dr. Oyugi traipsed among barbed shrubs, sometimes bending to run his fingers through depressions in the dirt, or sniff at clumps of trampled, oil-slicked grass. He paused occasionally to squint through the watery haze hanging over the savanna, then returned to his methodical study of the ground, features alternating between disappointment and elation at every find.

On he went until he arrived at a long-dead tree. Its skeletal branches offered little shade, but he sighed in relief anyway, lifting his glasses to wipe his face with a handkerchief. Patches of sweat had darkened the beige clothing on his lean frame. After unslinging the harpoon gun from his left shoulder, he leaned it against the trunk with care. Linked to the rifle's butt via wires was a rusted metal box resembling a car battery, which he set down. Then he took a water bottle from his waist pouch and sat for a rest.

No sooner had his buttocks touched the ground than he yelped and leaped up again, water slopping all over his hand. He scowled, looking for the offending object. A sharp rock? A pointy root? Excitement seized him when he spotted a gleam, half-buried in the ground. Setting his bottle aside, he got onto his knees and dug with his hands. Within moments, he'd unearthed a

five-pointed, stainless steel disc. Progress, he thought, grinning in triumph.

Gathering his belongings, he set off at a trot. Here and there, he spotted more stained grass, smelling sharply of lubricants. He even found more cogs, tarnished with age, a few bent and twisted inside fresh footprints wider than his face.

As the sun approached its midday zenith, Dr. Oyugi finally spied his quarry in the distance, lumbering close to a half-collapsed signal tower. The clockwork elephant was about fifteen feet tall, made up of tens of thousands of whirring and clicking golden parts. It raised its segmented trunk over its head to sniff the air, almost perfectly imitating its predecessors that had once roamed these plains. There were tufts of grass and twigs sticking out of its legs, and dried mud caking its back. Crouching, Dr. Oyugi checked his rifle, making sure that the wires weren't tangled around the harpoon.

Before he could finish his task, a male voice behind him barked, "Hands up!"

He froze and complied. "Please, don't shoot."

"Quiet! Away from the gun, slowly. No, do not turn around!"

Too late. The other man's face contorted in rage at first, then furrowed in confusion. "Dr. Oyugi?"

"Hello, Elijah," Dr. Oyugi said, trying not to stare at the barrel of the automatic rifle pointed at him. Elijah looked tired, and much older than Dr. Oyugi remembered, though it was to be expected. The savanna was unkind to men like him -- rangers who braved the heat, insects, and dangerous beasts, including the very animals they were protecting, every day to do their jobs. Not to mention facing scrappers and junkers, who almost always had the liberty of taking the first shot. Dr. Oyugi couldn't fault Elijah for his hostility.

Hoping to defuse the tension, he said, “How is Angela?”

The lines around Elijah's eyes tightened. “She is well. Don't use that against me, it's been ten years.”

“Ten years that I gave,” Dr. Oyugi said evenly. It wasn't right to speak like this, but he needed Elijah on his side. “Remember when you came to my house, carrying her in your arms? 'Help me, doctor, my daughter is dying'.”

“That's not-“

“I put her in my own bed. I gave her medicine. I watched over her for days. Aisha welcomed you and your wife like family.” Dr. Oyugi jerked his chin at Elijah's gun. “Are you going to shoot me, Elijah? There are no more hospitals, no more clinics. Do you want to know how many doctors are left in Kenya?”

Elijah's hands were shaking. Beads of sweat dripped from his chin. Dr. Oyugi met his gaze and held it, waiting. At last, the ranger stepped back. He didn't relax, though he did point the muzzle of his rifle skyward. “What you want?” he said.

“Just give me a few minutes to get what I need,” Dr. Oyugi said.

“I cannot guarantee your safety if my team sees you.”

“Are there many?” Dr. Oyugi scanned the horizon, pulse quickening. He couldn't see the rest of the ranger squad, but he knew there were usually three. And if they'd brought their tracker dogs...

“You have ten minutes, doctor. Just this once.” Elijah retrieved a cigarette from a pocket and turned away. “I'm not your accomplice, I got an honest job. You're the one costing the government millions of monies, not me. Give Aisha my regards.”

Dr. Oyugi flinched, though he didn't think Elijah knew, or intended any malice. With nothing left to discuss, he picked up his harpoon gun and the generator, then jogged closer to the elephant. Once he was about twenty feet away from the clockwork beast, he crouched and raised the rifle to his cheek, finger teasing the trigger. It didn't really matter which part of the elephant he hit, but he had only one shot, and that made him hesitate.

Also, Elijah's words still rankled. The astronomical sums of money spent on manufacturing, shipping, deploying, and maintaining these clockwork animals had come from Western and Eastern powers. They'd used their immense wealth and influence to pressure African nations into accepting these creatures. They hadn't come free, however, but saddled his country with crushing debts. *How could anyone call that generosity?* Dr. Oyugi wondered. All that money could have gone into keeping public facilities open instead, like hospitals and even his own clinic.

There were even statistics these days, including the sort that those so-called philanthropists didn't want published. For instance, it'd been estimated that the average clockwork rhino could survive without maintenance for thirty-seven years. Children born and raised in Eastern Africa lived for thirty.

Dr. Oyugi had tried. He really had. He'd slashed his fees. And when that hadn't been enough, he'd cured people for free, until he could no longer do so and still feed himself.

It wasn't fair. But it was what happened when your government had sold your country.

The elephant was looking at him.

Its grey, plastic ears were spread wide on either side of its bulbous, rock-like forehead. Its trunk was swinging like a pendulum, steam rising from its nostrils. Glass tusks scintillated

prism-like with sunlight, tapering into wicked points that could penetrate a car door -- Dr. Oyugi had seen the videos.

He stayed perfectly still, not daring even to lick his dry lips.

The elephant took a step toward him.

His finger squeezed the trigger automatically. With a hiss of pressurized gases being released, the harpoon streaked toward the elephant and punched into its forehead. The elephant shook its head. Its eye-cogs spun, their cavities widening, and transparent sheaths slid over them. Trumpeting loudly enough to rattle Dr. Oyugi's bones, the beast broke into a charge.

Why? Why hadn't it worked? Ashura had put it all together and triple-checked everything. All Dr. Oyugi had to do was point and shoot, after turning the generator on--

The doctor dropped to his knees and fumbled with the switches on his box. The elephant was fifteen feet away, trunk tucked in, tusks fully extended. Which ones again? Blue, then green? Yellow? Ten feet... five feet ...

When he finally got the generator to start, there were no dramatic effects -- no burst of sparks, no mechanical whine, no smell of ozone. The elephant simply froze, one of its forelegs raised slightly off the ground, the tip of its left tusk mere inches from Dr. Oyugi's face, filling him with terror and awe. Silently, he counted to three -- a personal precaution, even though Ashura had assured him that the electrical pulse would have been grounded almost instantaneously after doing its work.

He crawled between the elephant's legs, took the collapsible crowbar that had been hanging from his belt, and began prying a rectangular hatch open.

There was no time for finesse here. He wrenched the plate away, then used the crowbar

to tear through the internal parts. Bolts, cogs, and screws rained down. He merely gritted his teeth and soldiered on, looking for the prize. After parting a number of warm, ropey, liquid-filled tubes, he found it at last -- a semi-opaque sphere slightly larger than his fist, filled with what looked like a million tiny, dimming diamonds.

The beast's heart.

“Something's wrong with the elephant!” a voice called. “Philip, Elijah, check it!”

Affirmative shouts answered the man. Care be damned, Dr Oyugi thought, grasping the heart with both hands and yanking it free with a *pop*. Then he scrambled from beneath the elephant, and this time his presence was not unnoticed. Men started shouting, Elijah among them. Dr Oyugi spied one of the rangers waving at him, while another readied his rifle. Hugging the heart as if it were his child, Dr. Oyugi ducked his head and sprinted into the brush. A gunshot rang out. He nearly leapt out of his skin, but kept going, running faster than he ever had and ignoring the rangers' cries to stop.

Soon after, their shouts faded from his hearing. Miraculously, he'd done it. Stolen the heart of an elephant from under their noses. Thank God he'd been caught by Elijah, not some trigger-happy rookie on his first patrol. He could imagine them fussing over the elephant now, trying to determine how badly it'd been damaged. If he was one of them, he'd be shaking in his boots at the prospect of punishment. Docked pay, maybe, or a rotation into less essential duties at the camp. He hoped that was the worst they would have to endure. Dr. Oyugi didn't want them to suffer for his success, but he believed that he had no other options either.

It was unfair. But it was what happened to the cogs of a broken system.

The taxi dropped Dr. Oyugi off in front of a ramshackle, one-story house, which languished in the shade of crumbling apartments on the western outskirts of Nakuru. In its weed-choked garden, on a hammock strung between two rotted trees, lazed Ashura. His brother-in-law was dressed in a flowery shirt and shorts, smoking a cigarette. A half-empty bottle of Tusker lay on an overturned crate next to him. The black mongrel snoozing beneath the hammock raised his head to regard Dr. Oyugi, and his stubby tail began wagging in earnest.

Upon seeing Dr. Oyugi, Ashura narrowed his eyes and said, “Where's my harpoon?”

Dr. Oyugi groaned. “I had to run almost a mile before I could hail a Gozelle home. You think I'd be able to carry it with me?”

Ashura swung off the hammock and stamped on his cigarette. “Every time I lend you one of my toys, you lose or break it.”

“Oh come on, I barely got away from the rangers. We're lucky I met Elijah.”

“Who?” Ashura looked up sharply.

“I saved his daughter's life a few years ago. Only reason he let me go today.”

“Don't remember any rangers coming to you for help. So, did you get it or not?”

Dr. Oyugi unzipped his waist pouch to show Ashura the heart. “I think he worked for a safari back then.”

“Looks good, minimal damage.” Ashura clapped him on the shoulder and steered him toward the house. “Let's get to work.”

The house's interior was dim, save for sunlight filtering through grime-caked windows. Dust motes drifted lazily in the air, prompting Dr. Oyugi to bury his nose in a sleeve as he followed Ashura. The floor was paved with a thick layer of dirt, and there were even blades of

grass sprouting around the couch's legs. Neither man lived here. They simply needed somewhere private to carry out their project. In the kitchen, they shifted a dining table and the moldy carpet beneath it to reveal a trapdoor. Ashura unlocked it with an old brass key and flung it open. Using his phone to light the way, he descended the wooden stairs leading to the workshop, Dr. Oyugi close behind. When they reached the bottom, Ashura switched on the lights, revealing a spacious, earthen chamber. Roots stretched from the walls like skeletal hands over worktables cluttered with tools and assorted metal parts.

In the very middle of the room, a trio of long and wide benches had been placed together.

Resting upon them was Aisha.

After giving the heart to Ashura, Dr. Oyugi went over to his wife and caressed one of her spindly, golden hands, which were interlocked upon her chest. They, and her arms, had been made using the hind legs of a cheetah. Meanwhile, her torso had been built from the sturdiest parts they could strip off a decommissioned wildebeest. A combination of scrap from vultures, a rhino, and a lioness had been used for her legs. Dr. Oyugi felt a phantom twinge in his thigh, where the clockwork cat had managed to claw him before he could deactivate it. The relatively minor injury had sidelined him for weeks; he'd been lucky it hadn't filleted him.

That was when Aisha had tried to convince him to stop, though he hadn't listened. They'd had their last big fight over that, before she'd died three weeks later.

He touched her cool, inert shoulder, recalling that afternoon he'd spent watching from his wheelchair while Ashura and some friends had lowered her casket into the grave. He didn't cry that day, having exhausted all his tears in the years prior while her ankylosing spondylitis had robbed her of mobility and vitality. A rare disease, it'd caused her vertebrae to fuse together,

destroyed her organs, and filled her with unceasing pain. He'd never felt more helpless as a doctor until a flash of inspiration had struck him during a safari Ashura had organized for the family. When they were home, he'd babbled to his brother-in-law about a plan to build Aisha a new body. Ashura had nodded, then come up with a blueprint after a thirty-hour, alcohol-fueled design sprint.

They'd obtained the head first -- Ashura had some contacts in the black market, though it'd cost Dr. Oyugi his house and car. After removing its synthetic fur, they'd pried it open, giving Dr. Oyugi his first look at a brain-case. A transparent, ovoid container, it'd been filled with fluid and housed a cloned gorilla brain. Very carefully, they had removed the brain without disturbing the liquid, which not only preserved biological material, but also conducted electrical pulses to wires linked to the body's artificial nervous system. When Aisha had died, Dr. Oyugi had immediately removed her brain and transferred it. He'd had to down half a bottle of whiskey just to patch her back together for the funeral. The process had rendered him an insomniac for days. Even now, he couldn't sleep for more than two or three hours a night.

It took them almost nine months of painstaking work and forays into the savanna to put the rest of her together. Even now, he still had reservations about the plan, but they'd come too far to stop. The last puzzle piece was now in her brother's hands. Dr. Oyugi glanced over at the worktable where Ashura was working, feeling a surge of respect and love for the engineer.

"I'm finished," Ashura announced a few minutes later, raising the visor of his welding helmet and turning around.

"Looks a lot smaller," Dr. Oyugi said, nodding at the heart in Ashura's palm, which now resembled a crystalline egg.

“Extra parts, don't need them.” Ashura smiled as he came over. “Don't worry, I know what I'm doing. Helped build those things, remember?”

“Not for a human, though. What if the case doesn't work for her brain? What if I'd damaged it when I was performing the transfer? Even you can't guarantee me that.”

Shrugging, Ashura nudged him to stand aside. “Relax, little brother. It'll be fine. Go get the cables and power up the generator.”

Dr. Oyugi headed to the diesel generator in one corner of the workshop. They'd topped it up yesterday, so he simply retrieved the coil of cables and unspooled them while returning to Ashura, who was fiddling with the inside of Aisha's chest. When he was done, they lifted his wife's body into a sitting position and plugged the cables into her back. That done, they exchanged a look.

“It'll work,” Ashura muttered as he left for the generator, though Dr. Oyugi felt the words were not meant for him.

Kneeling beside his wife, Dr. Oyugi wrapped his fingers around her left hand and brought it up to his lips. A lump formed in his throat as he regarded her new form. He longed for her eyes to open again, longed to see the spark in them that he'd loved and lost.

Ashura was banging his palm on the generator; it awoke with an irritated whine. “I'm switching it on now,” he said.

“Her',” Dr. Oyugi replied, grinning when Ashura rolled his eyes. “It's safe to hold her, right?”

Ashura shrugged. “Should be. It's wired to go straight to her heart. There shouldn't be any accidental discharge. Here we go.”

Closing his eyes, Dr. Oyugi bowed and rested his forehead on her knuckles. He heard the click of a switch being flipped and the barely discernible hum of energy coursing from the generator. Seconds passed. Nothing seemed to have changed in the now-silent workshop. For the first time in over a year, Dr. Oyugi murmured a prayer, squeezing her hand like he had during her final hours.

He heard Ashura suck in a breath as steel fingers tightened on his flesh.

Two months later, Dr. Oyugi was back in the park where he had his first and only encounter with a wild clockwork elephant, except he wasn't skulking in the wilderness this time. Rather, he paced on the porch of a blue-walled, single-story ranger station, fanning himself with a hat, a cardboard box tucked under his left armpit. Every time a ranger passed by, he would glance at them and hurriedly avert his gaze, though none hailed or accosted him. He smiled ruefully to himself; guilt was evidently harder to shake off than dust from his soles.

After waiting for about twenty minutes, the man he had been hoping to see finally appeared, riding into the compound on a beat-up motorcycle. Dr. Oyugi waited until Elijah had taken off his helmet and straightened his uniform before approaching him.

As expected, the ranger's face darkened right away. "What're you doing here?" he hissed.

"Since nobody has arrested me yet, I take it you didn't tell them about me," Dr. Oyugi said.

"You've got some nerve. You know what they did to my team?"

"I'm sorry for the trouble I caused you, sincerely. That's why I'm here today. I want to offer reparations," Dr. Oyugi replied.

“How?” Elijah's gaze fell upon the box. His lips tightened. “What's in there?”

“Come with me.” Dr. Oyugi led Elijah to a corner of the parking lot, behind the rangers' fleet of trucks. When he was certain that nobody was around to overhear them, he opened the box and showed Elijah the spherical device inside.

The ranger's eyes bulged. “Is that--?”

“A very clever engineer helped create this replacement,” Dr. Oyugi explained in the most apologetic tone he could manage. “I'm sorry it isn't the original, which doesn't work anymore, but this will be just as good, I promise.”

Elijah shook his head. “You think I can just take this and give it to them? They'll be wanting to know where I got it! What will I be telling them?”

“Anonymous sender, sorry for the harm he caused.” Dr. Oyugi shifted the elephant heart to show Elijah an envelope at the bottom of the box. “That will explain it all. Here, please.”

He pushed the box into Elijah's arms while the latter was still staring, dumbfounded, at it. Dr. Oyugi straightened and sighed deeply, somehow feeling as if a burden had been lifted off his shoulders.

“Why did you steal the heart?” Elijah said.

Dr. Oyugi's tone was light when he said, “I can't say.”

Elijah snorted. “Okay, keep your secret. What have we come to, doctor? Stealing and then returning the hearts of animals to bring them back to life?”

Unsure of the response he ought to give, Dr. Oyugi opted to stay silent.

Elijah's expression turned wistful as he looked away, at the vast savanna stretching all around them. Softly, he said, “I saw a leopard the other day. Old and scrawny with patches of fur

missing from its face, but a live one nonetheless. It was sitting on a rock. When it saw me, it leapt away and disappeared into the grassland. I cried for a whole minute after.”

Dr. Oyugi patted Elijah's shoulder solemnly. “I'm happy for you.”

The ranger met his gaze. “I wasn't happy. I just felt strange. I've worked with metal animals for so long, I think of them as the real, living ones. Is it weird to think that they are alive and natural? Seeing a flesh-and-blood one, it was like seeing a ghost.”

“Believe me, I understand. For a long time, I thought the same way too. 'How can metal be alive? How can we replace what we've lost with these things?' But that day, with the elephant... my perception was changed.” Dr. Oyugi smiled faintly and looked at his watch. “I have to go, Elijah. It was good seeing you today.”

“And you, doctor.” Elijah offered his hand. “I hope Aisha is well. Give her my regards.”

Dr. Oyugi clasped Elijah's hand. “I will.”

1945

By Kim-Dan Doan

Genji slid the bamboo door open and stepped out onto the porch. He scanned the garden. It was simple, elegant, and self-sustaining - aside from the regular watering from Genji's mother. She had a good eye for simple, elegant, and self-sustaining things. Tomatoes grew on the right, onions on the left, and mint in the center. The three sides formed a parabola, encasing the field of grass. In the middle, one large sakura tree was blossoming full bloom in its spring.

Genji walked out towards the tree, clutching a paperback in his hand, with a word in its cover rubbed out, merely titled "The ----- Science". A light breeze brushed across his neck and as he sat down in the shade, he flicked through the sun-stained pages. The world held its breath while Genji read the words of a philosopher long past. He remembered the content of the book more than the book itself. It was about time, death, and enjoying life for what it was -- all very grim topics for a child of thirteen. But Genji had always been drawn to the beauty masked within pain.

A few pages in, Genji looked up from his book. There was no one there, and yet, he felt like he was being watched. He folded a little triangle to mark his place.

"Who's there?" he called.

No one answered. He turned his head, double-checking just to be safe. But he was alone. There were no movements save for the soft wind that caused the garden to sway. So Genji went back to reading. He turned the page. A fly landed on the type. He shooed it away with the back of his hand. He turned once more and the same sensation returned. He grimaced. He hated when his reading was interrupted.

This time, he pushed himself up, using the trunk of the tree for balance.

“Who's there?” he asked again, his arms crossed, resolved not to go back to his book until the eyes showed themselves. Something shimmered in the wind. He blinked and squinted, unsure of what he was seeing, eyes focused on a translucent figure seemingly made of mist. Genji took a cautious step closer, his foot inching forward before he could think.

He cleared his throat and asked one last time, “Who--who's there?” His voice shook despite himself.

“Airi will tell you more, but we are the kami of those who died. The spirits of those who died.”

Genji bowed his head. He was humbled that a spirit -- any spirit -- might choose to visit him, of all people.

“Why did you come to me?” In haste, he added, “O Great One.”

“Your country will need you one day,” the spirit replied.

Genji lifted his gaze.

“Time happens all at once, and you must be there to restart the clock. You must be there to restart time. But first, you must make the clock that will shatter.”

Genji's mind tried to process what the kami was telling him. There was a strange

repetition in their voices, as if part of them didn't agree on what to say, even though only a single figure appeared before him, Genji was sure he was not speaking to just one kami, but simply a lag of ability to process such information on Genji's part as he spewed words at a question too slow each. "Who's Airi? What clock? What will happen? Why me?"

"Why you?" A dry chuckle came from the kami. Genji's face flushed. "We needed someone. Make the clock, Genji Anami. Make the clock that will shatter and then fix it."

He nodded, though he did not understand what he was agreeing to. In fact, he could not even comprehend whether he had a choice in the matter. It seemed foolish to say no; that much he understood. The kami nodded back. Genji assumed it was a nod. It was hard to discern much expression of any kind from them.

"I'm home!" shouted his mother, sooner than expected. He spun to face her standing on the porch, her hands on her hips. He looked back at the kami, but they were gone as if they were never there. Genji's mother ushered him inside and the eternal hourglass of existence was whirled upside down.

She came into the store with her head held high. Genji noticed her cheekbones first, and then her crescent moon eyes. Her dark hair was perfectly combed and parted to the left, the edges dyed a light yellow. Genji was hunched over the counter, tinkering with a new clock. He looked up at her and then back down at his project. With a practiced hand, he placed a gear into the slot using a pair of tweezers. He referred to the diagram beside him, just to be safe, then gave a satisfied smile. *This pocketwatch, he thought, is my finest yet.*

The woman approached the counter and Genji pretended to be absorbed in his work.

When she got close enough, he stretched his back and made eye contact with her. Airi smiled at him. He grinned back.

“Hard at work, I see,” she said, examining his project.

He spun the watch towards her, so she could better see all the beautiful gears. Though they were still in his imagination, he pictured them all ticking in unison, each cog working together for one empirical truth--time. He didn't remember what had first fascinated him about clocks, but his passion soon became an obsession. The tiny object on the table had a simple silver case. There was not a scratch on its surface nor a dent in its metal. In this state, the pocket watch was as beautiful to him as the woman before him.

He realized that Airi had come to visit *him* and not the clocks. He stumbled for words and managed, “How was your day?”

She laughed. “Not as productive as yours. Some of my students weren't paying attention during our shrine visit.”

“Oh, that's too bad. I bet you give great tours.”

She brushed one long strand of hair over her ear. “I could give you one, if you want.”

Genji's heart fluttered. *Did she just ask me out?* He swallowed hard. “That would be amazing.” Airi blushed. And the eternal hourglass of existence was spun right-side up.

The two linked hands and sauntered into the Shinto shrine. Red archways lined their path up the steps. Each platform had its own pattern. Some were concentric spirals, others were triangles layered over other triangles to create bigger triangles, and a few were squares within squares. Genji couldn't tell where any of the designs began and ended. Two stone dogs guarded

the front, each one facing the other. There was a strange symmetry about the place that gave off a spiritual atmosphere, it heightened the feng shui.

In the main courtyard, great big trees shaded everything. They were evenly spread around the perimeter, like a mirror of his mother's garden. There was even a tree in the center, except this was a willow and not a sakura. A tiny plaque was in front of the tree with an inscription from Michizane. He read:

In roadside field stands
A lone leafless willow tree-
Spring will come, and then
The wonders of long ago
Will all return from then on.

Genji let the words sink in. He could feel the weight of them on his chest. He looked to Airi for an explanation who took the role of a tour guide.

“Ume trees were something that Michizane, a famous poet, loved. He was also a high government official and therefore had political enemies. After he was wrongfully exiled, he died and the capital was struck by lightning and it even flooded. During the disasters, many of the people who plotted to get rid of Michizane perished. In the aftermath, the emperor decided it must be the spirit of Michizane exacting revenge and ordered people to erect temples to the poet and worship Michizane as Tenjin: kami of natural disasters. Now, however, he's regarded as the kami of scholarship and poetry. I thought you'd like this particular Shinto temple, since you like reading so much.”

Genji nodded and she let go of his hand. Airi fished from her purse something wrapped

in a forest green paper. “Happy birthday.” She handed it to him. He accepted it gratefully, peeling away the thin paper to reveal a book he used to love as a child -- a book he'd long since lost. *The Gay Science* by Frederic Nietzsche. Genji stared at the cover, not sure what to say.

“What is it?” she asked in a concerned voice.

“I already have this,” He said. “Hotaru--“ Genji trailed off, realizing he had made a terrible mistake.

“Who's Hotaru?”

“Um...”

Genji bounced off the walls of his mind, scrambling for an answer. “She's an old friend of mine. Yeah, in middle school.”

“So in middle school she gave you a book written by a German philosopher? Seems like pretty heavy material for a thirteen-year-old.”

He gulped and placed a hand on Airi's arm. He calmed himself, trying to be as serious as possible. “She's no one,” he said, staring into her eyes, “Just someone from the past.”

Airi didn't break eye contact. He could tell she was considering pressing the issue, but he prayed that she was a trusting person. He wouldn't love someone who wasn't.

“Okay, if you say so,” she said eventually.

“Thank you for today,” he said, changing the subject, “I did learn a lot.”

The eternal hourglass of existence was turned upside down once more.

Below them was a large cave. The ground opened up to reveal hidden depths. Genji and Hotaru crouched near the edge. On Genji's back was a heavy hiker's pack, full of rope, food,

flares, and other assorted equipment. He flicked on the little light on his helmet and the rays pierced into the blackness. He examined where to place their anchors. Beside him, his daughter shifted her weight from foot to foot.

“Don't worry, honey, you'll enjoy this once we get down there.”

“Mmm,” grumbled Hotaru. It didn't sound like she believed him but Genji continued.

He found a spot by the precipice where the ground was perfect. His hand brushed over the soil. It was firm, but just soft enough that he could plant the spikes. Genji retrieved them from his backpack. With a thunk, he dropped it onto the soil. Around them, the forest brimmed with life. It was a beautiful summer day. Ironically, they wouldn't be able to enjoy it. It was a small price to pay for what waited within the cave, Genji was sure of it. Hotaru came over to him as he hammered in the anchors.

She gave a nervous tug on his arm.

“I want to go back home.”

Genji stopped what he was doing and looked up at her. Everyone always said she was a splitting image of Airi, but he never considered them to be right until then. Her black hair cascaded straight down to her waist. Her thin, bony figure worried many people, but that was simply her body type. And her eyes had an alluring quality about them.

“Are you scared?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“Don't be, you're a firefly. You're supposed to flash in the dark.”

Hotaru's face turned red, and Genji laughed at her.

“There! See! Now let's go, we're burning daylight.”

They descended together with Hotaru following his lead. Their spikes held without budging an inch and the walls of the cave provided enough footholds. Hand over hand, foot below foot, they sunk deeper into the shadows. Her breathing became more frantic the further they got from the surface. He tried to comfort her, but she didn't respond well to his words. Only when they reached the bottom, and he handed her a flare, did she seem to recover. She held it an arm's length away from her face and uncapped it. Hotaru, like the fireflies he named her after, illuminated the enveloping pit.

He didn't know how long they walked but the faint echoes of water dripping through the cracks in the rock accompanied the silence between father and daughter. She concentrated on keeping calm while he guided her to their destination. The tunnels twisted and merged with each other, creating elaborate pathways that one could get lost in, if not for the map that Genji referred to. Hotaru hovered the firebrand over his shoulder for him as he retraced their steps. More than once they got lost in the winding corridors.

The deeper they went, the less oxygen there was. There was still enough to breathe but they had to slow their pace. At one point, Hotaru slid her back against the wall and rested for a moment. He, on the other hand, was excited to keep going. The clearing would once again have fresh oxygen flow, but they'd have to make it there first. Genji pulled Hotaru up onto her feet, and they continued their journey.

Through raspy breath, he asked Hotaru, "Do you know why people thought dragons breathed fire?" She gave a slight shake of her head. "Because when they explored caves, they'd go in with torches and the fire would ignite the methane that leaked through all the nooks and crannies."

Hotaru's eyes widened. "Is that supposed to make me feel *more* comfortable?"

"Well... there's no methane in here, so we don't have to worry."

"And there's no such thing as dragons."

She gripped his hand. Their whispers reverberated off the rocks as their voices travelled ahead. Towards the end, even Genji's breathing was ragged, but like he promised, the tunnels gave way to a vast clearing naturally formed from centuries of coercion. Little pockets of air poked through the rocks, making it once again easy to breathe -- to talk. Hotaru inhaled audibly. She let go of his hand and walked to the azure pool in the center. She seemed mesmerized by the lake.

In the rippling water, he noticed something strange. A white skeleton - flayed by a heat unfathomable - stared up at Hotaru. Genji glanced at Hotaru's face though she appeared not to have noticed. When he looked again, the skeleton was gone. Hotaru snapped her fingers.

"I almost forgot," she announced. "I got you a birthday present."

Genji tilted his head.

"I know it's a few days late, but it took a while to find."

She produced a rectangular object wrapped in forest green paper. *Is it a book?* He hoped it was a book. Beaming, his daughter handed him his birthday present triumphantly.

"Thank you," he said, unwrapping it.

In the rays of fire, he read: *The Gay Science* by Frederic Nietzsche. Genji suddenly got the feeling of déjà vu, however, the eternal hourglass of existence was rotated right side up and the sand that trickled to the bottom, began to drip, drip, drip, to the base of the glass.

Genji was shrouded in desolation. He stumbled out of his house, if the rubble could still be called a house. The time was 8:15. The date was August 6th, 1945. He coughed, clearing the dust from his lungs. He turned around, saw the shattered remains of his home, and wailed. He screamed for Airi and Hotaru, then spun in a circle. His entire street was the same. An empty echo coursed through the broken semblance of civilization.

He tried to approach his home but waves of heat pushed him back. His skin blistered and bled before his eyes. His hands and arms shook from the pain. *Oh God*, he thought. *Airi and Hotaru are still in there!* He tried three more times to enter the ruins until he was forced to stop by a larger gash on his leg. He limped away from the radiation. Genji used his shirt to dry the blood despite not wanting to see the other charred parts of his body. There was not enough time otherwise anyway. A voice ushered him forward in a dry, urgent tone. *Make the clock that will shatter and then fix it. Fix it. Fix it. Fix it. Fix it!*

The kami's voice propelled him toward his shop. Genji blinked away crimson tears from his eyes. He remembered them now. How could he have forgotten? *They've been there the whole time, haven't they?* He asked no one in particular. His neighbors' homes were just as wrecked as his was, some worse. While his home had the frame still standing, others had completely collapsed in on themselves. A few of his friends were distraught in the street. Not many had emerged from the disaster.

Genji passed a red bike that had fallen over. Beside it lay a corpse of Akira, a young boy who used to have playdates with Hotaru. He had a contagious laugh. Genji ground his teeth together. The only distinguishable feature left on his person were the fake dog tags around his neck. He always used to pretend he was a soldier, and now the war had caught him.

The shop wasn't much further but the limp slowed him. The kami pressed him until he arrived at the front entrance. He hesitated outside, scared of the radiation emanating from the premises. The building stood intact as if all the damage bounced off the store and rained onto the others nearby. In the unsettled dust, a figure beckoned him inside. Genji shuffled forward and surprisingly, the pain ceased in his body as if everything was fine, aside from the physical evidence of the atomic bomb of course.

The kami pointed at the display counter where that silver pocket watch glimmered. Genji heaved a chair at the glass, bursting the case. He shook off the loose shards and wound the watch, his fingers trembling against his will. As the second hand moved forward, through the windows, the world around Genji moved back, buildings rearranged themselves, corpses came back to life, trees sprouted up into the sky. He twisted the nub on the watch as far as it would go. Then he waited until 8:15 again.

As he did, he thought of a poem learned long ago to impress a woman on a date. He never got the chance to recite it, but he was compelled to then.

*No one escapes from,
the heavens' falling rain so,
I wear my wet clothes
blameless, with no way to dry*

“But they will escape,” said the kami. “They will live on, paralyzed in this singular moment before the end. The eternal hourglass will never stop whirling.”

“So the watch--“

“Is a physical manifestation.”

“And the war? How will it end?”

“Always one question too slow. Always too slow.” The kami laughed, at Genji, he was sure, while the spirit disappeared into nothingness.

Baby Blue

By Joseph Anthony Montecillo

It came on the first day of summer as the season turned, March sunshine burning away the cool breezes of February. Raf Galban was getting ready to go down to the barangay hall where fire trucks dealt out water rations for the residents. A week had passed since the water company began cutting off the supply for upwards of ten hours a day.

His phone rang. Jenny. He considered not picking up. His sister always called to pester him about one thing or another. Checking where he was, if he'd paid his bills, or if his health was holding up. It had been this way even before their parents died. Jenny always thought she had to clean up his mess. It pained him to know that she was usually right.

He picked up. "Hello?"

"Raf, are you at home?"

He heard the lump in Jenny's throat. "Yeah, of course."

"Good. Listen. Something happened."

Raf knew then that it would be Pam. Things didn't happen to him much anymore. Good or bad, it was always Pam. Mundane always seemed to miss her. He listened as Jenny explained. The doctors at the mental hospital found Pam dead in her room that morning.

“Was it?” asked Raf.

“Yeah.”

He didn't remember what he said before putting the phone down. He stood still, waiting for a reason to move. The empty water drums he'd set out stared back at him from where they stood.

The morning passed. The firetrucks left the barangay hall.

He found himself in Andy's room, not quite sure how he got there. He always came to Andy's room when he thought about Pam. Not much remained in the room. Jenny made sure that whatever could be taken away was gone, leaving only the feeling of bare dryness despite the pastel blue paint on the walls. Only the crib remained in the center. Raf had begged Jenny not to take it away.

An image of Pam dead in the hospital flashed across his mind. He pictured her splayed on the bed, eyes agape. In his mind, there was no blood. Shock lay etched on her face instead of any kind of peace. He wondered if she thought about him at all before the end.

Maybe she thought of Andy.

Soft thumps sounded on the hardwood floor behind Raf. They sounded like the footsteps of a heavy dog but uneven and crooked. He gripped the side of the crib, unable to turn his head to look. His skin grew hot and the fabric of his shirt clung to his sweaty back.

The footsteps drew closer.

“Dada.”

The first time Raf brought up having children with Pam, they were still three years away from getting married. They sat in his Toyota Innova a block away from her house, trying to

sneak in a few more moments together before he had to drop her off. It was a good day. They always had more good than bad but when the bad ones hit, they hit hard. It was always worth savoring when things were going well.

In the darkness of the dimly lit subdivision street, he kissed her. She told him that she loved him.

“I love you too,” he said, smiling. “We're going to be all right.”

“Hearing wedding bells?” Beneath her sarcasm, he knew she heard it too.

“It makes sense,” he said. “I think you'd make a good mother.”

She paused.

“I hadn't thought about it,” she said. The shadows on that street corner made it easy to pretend that he missed her lie. He filed it away in his mind behind his dreams of a family--two children, three if they could afford it. The only person he could imagine sharing that with was Pam.

He dropped the subject anyway. Better to preserve her smile from a few moments ago than tip the scale the other way.

Seven months after they got married, Raf came home to find her curled up in bed weeping. A plastic stick lay on the ground beside her. Two lines. Two other pregnancy tests sat at the bottom of the bathroom trash bin. They all came back positive.

“I don't understand,” she said.

Pam took the pill every day. She kept them in her marked pillboxes for the week along with her antidepressants. She checked every night to make sure she hadn't missed anything.

He crawled into bed with her, holding her hands in his as he kissed her shoulders. That

helped when she went into a depression. “This is a good thing,” he said. “You'll see.”

Pam didn't speak. He didn't pressure her to. She would get better now that he was with her. He didn't know how long they stayed in bed like that--her in house clothes, him still dressed from work. He held her until her body stopped shaking from the sobbing. He thought she had cried herself to sleep when she went still in his arms.

“It didn't work,” she said.

“What didn't?”

“I knew it when it happened,” said Pam. “I felt it inside me. When I woke up, I downed as many birth control pills as I could stand. I heard that could kill it but it didn't.”

Raf let her hands go.

Pressed up against her beneath the blankets, the room felt suffocating. He got up without a word and walked out.

He only threw up once he got out the front door.

They buried Pam on the hottest day of the year.

Even with the air conditioner on, the heat swelled through the walls and pressed down on Raf's temples like fists. He wanted to take a shower but the water didn't come back until midnight. His most recent ration from the fire trucks ran out the night before.

He could only imagine how much worse it was at the cemetery. Whatever cheap tarpaulin tent shaded the grievers wouldn't do much against the sun. They'd be sweating through their long-sleeved shirts and black dresses as soon as they stepped out of their cars. Jenny would be texting him to complain about it all afternoon.

In the next room, the child started crying. The afternoon always unsettled it. Raf suspected the hot air didn't bother it so much as it awakened it. It got hungriest a couple of hours past noon. The sobs devolved into screaming. Echoes of it filled the master bedroom, ebbing with the heat.

The energy he needed to get up drained with his sweat. Goosepimples broke out over his arms as another shriek rang through the wall. It stung as if the child had screeched right into his ear. For just a moment, his skin went cold.

He got up, changed into a fresh shirt, and headed to the next room. When he turned the doorknob, the screaming stopped.

Raf left the air conditioning in the child's room off. The windows remained shut even as the sunlight poured in. Stepping in always made Raf feel like an ant beneath a cruel child's magnifying glass. The child hated the cold and the room seethed with heat like a car left out in the sun.

The child sat up in its crib, eyes fixed on Raf. It looked too skinny. Instead of soft baby fat it bore lean limbs and a pinched face. It didn't look malnourished so much as it looked animalistic. It moved like a cat at times, its muscles far too developed.

Raf picked it up into his arms, grunting with the effort. It felt heavier than yesterday, dense like a block of cement. He rocked the child in silence as it hated singing. It never smiled, only ever gazing at him with a blank stare if it wasn't weeping to call his attention.

This close, Raf could see the resemblance. It had his sharp cheekbones and stern eyes. That much was obvious. He always tried to find a piece of Pam in the child. None of her softness came through no matter how hard Raf looked.

It opened its mouth to reveal a fully developed set of teeth--full white against soft gray gums. Raf placed his arm against its mouth. The sharp teeth broke through the scar tissue with ease. There was no pain, only the soothing warmth of his blood flowing out as the child began to drink.

Andy gave Pam a hard time during labor. She always talked about it like a battle--a long bloody scrap that left both sides wounded. No winners, only survivors.

Raf watched the nurses put Andy into Pam's arms for the first time. Andy's gasping sobs from escaping the womb hushed down as Pam held him. Neither of them made a sound. Pam's face remained still. Raf chalked it all up to exhaustion. Thinking on it now, it looked like she was deciding something. Like her brain clicked into place, figuring out how the baby fit into her life.

Raf kissed Pam on the cheek. "Everything's going to be all right," he said. "We're a family now."

Raf wondered if she was going to cry. After Andy, he never really saw Pam cry again.

Pam kept quiet most days after getting back from the hospital. Raf rarely got to speak to her even when they were alone together. Even when she tended to Andy, Pam didn't hum or sing. She never spoke to Andy at all. She just came in, took him into her arms when he cried, and he'd quiet down. The two of them shared a connection that Raf didn't understand. At times, he couldn't help but be jealous of it. Andy never quieted so easily when Raf held the boy.

Raf saw her setting Andy down in the crib one night, both of them deathly quiet. He waited as Pam tucked the boy in. As she turned to walk out the door, Raf took her hand and

pulled her into a hug.

“I don't know how you do it,” he told Pam. “You sure have a way with the kid.”

“He's not my son,” she said, with the clarity of pure certainty.

Raf chuckled, shutting the door to Andy's room behind them.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“He's not my son,” she said. “It's not natural.”

“Babe, you're not making any sense. What are you trying to say?”

“I killed it. It should be dead.”

“Don't say that.”

“I did,” she said, clutching his arms. “It's not right that it's alive. Something's wrong, Andy. I don't feel right.”

He shook his head, heat rising in his face. “What are you even talking about?”

“I--“

“You can't keep doing this, Pam. I don't understand why you have to say horrible things like that, okay? Who's it helping? Why do you always have to do that when we're trying to raise a family now? This is what's happening. We have a son.”

She sucked in a breath, her eyes suddenly wrapped in tears. “I just feel wrong.”

“I don't understand.”

She looked into his eyes for a long while, not saying anything.

“No,” she said finally. “No, you wouldn't.” She pulled away and went back to bed. She never talked about that night again. He never brought it up either. Better to not send her mind back down that path.

“It's just the baby blues,” Jenny told him.

“You think so?”

“Sure, all my friends got it when they had kids,” she said. “She'll get over it, just give her time.”

Raf gave her time. Pam's mood brightened when the summer came. She got back to talking to friends. She went back to work. She still didn't sing to Andy, but she seemed excited to see him some days. Their family started coming together.

“Hey, I'm heading out to buy some things from the store,” she said one Saturday afternoon. “Let me bring Andy, I'll get him a treat.”

“That sounds great. Get me something too?”

“Of course,” she said and kissed him on the cheek.

After an hour, Raf began to worry. A trip to the store never took them much longer than half an hour. He called Pam but she didn't pick up. She shot him back a quick text, “Just looking around, getting some extra stuff for the house.”

When the second hour passed, he called again. She didn't respond at all. He called her ten more times without luck. He called Jenny to ask if she'd seen her that afternoon. No. When he had no other choice, he called her parents too. Same answer.

Raf called the police.

They eventually found her parked in an empty lot about an hour away from the house. Pam had hidden behind a concrete wall that blocked the view of the lot from the main road. It was likely that none had seen her pull in and no one was going to bother to check either.

She had locked the doors of the car, held Andy close, and turned off the engine.

The windows stayed rolled up.

She had not moved from her seat even when her bladder emptied or the sweat began to run dry on her skin. The police figured that at the height of the afternoon, the temperature in the car climbed up to a hundred and eighty degrees Fahrenheit. The leather got so hot that it left burns on her back. Somehow, Pam found the resolve not to pull herself away.

They brought Pam straight to the hospital to deal with the severe dehydration.

Andy died before the police found the car.

The sun set and the child slept.

Raf stood over the crib watching it sleep. It had no sheets or mattress to rest on, just the wooden frame. At times, he tried to convince himself that it looked like Andy. They both shared a stony quiet that felt wrong in children. But those thoughts faded quickly. Too many hard lines where Andy had softness. The moonlight shifted, casting a shadow on its face.

It would be easy, he thought. Easy to just cover the thing's mouth with his hand until it stopped moving. But even then, he wasn't quite sure it could actually breathe. Maybe tomorrow, he would bundle it up in his arms and drive out somewhere to let the summer take them both. Killing something so small would be easy. As easy as swapping out an active birth control pill with a placebo. So easy, no one would notice.

The blood continued to trickle down his arm as the thought faded.

He always bled a little too long after the child fed. Sometimes he'd wake up the next morning and the wound still wept.

The sound of his cellphone ringing drew him back to his own bedroom. Jenny was

calling for the fifteenth time today. He picked up.

“Hey,” he said.

“Where've you been? I've been calling all day.”

“Just at home, sorry. I left my phone in the room. Sorry.”

“Why didn't you come to the burial?”

He sighed, sitting down on the bed. “I just couldn't.”

“Look, Raf. It's not your fault, okay? These things happen and it sucks but it's not really anybody's fault. Especially not you.”

You're wrong, he almost said.

“I just couldn't,” he said again instead.

Jenny sighed on the other end of the line. “I don't understand.”

He caught a glimpse of himself in the bedroom mirror. The redness of the blood on his arm stood out even in the darkness. His cheeks were sunken in, sharper than usual. His skin looked pale and clammy despite the heat. He almost looked like the child in the next room.

“No,” he said. “No, you wouldn't.”

That Where I Am You May Be Also

By Brie Atienza

Rapture was a good book. You liked the chapters describing humanity's Most Golden Age. You enjoyed the premonitions: it was clever how humanity's latent psychic power made them unconsciously sense the Supervisors' arrival; how we learned to dread them through creating horned mythological figures and tropes about alien invasions. You weirdly sympathised with the Supervisors' plight: biologically incompatible with Rapture, resigned to being caretakers for ascension-attuned species.

But you could do without the Christian imagery to characterise a freaky metaphysical hive mind.

Your group members groan.

Hey, you aren't heartless. You like any furry animal that could fit into a breadbox. And not because you want to put them *in* the breadbox. That's just how you measure cuteness. You love your mother. You haven't considered putting her in a breadbox! You've even sniffled at the saddest story ever told in six words: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

Contrary to popular belief, it's not a Hemingway quote. Nor is it automatically sad, if you think harder. Maybe the shoes didn't fit. Maybe they were unforgivably ugly. *Maybe there*

was never any baby in the first place. No, stop that.

Your opponent raises an eyebrow and raises you one better: “Baby aborted.”

You argue that that's not a story; that's a statement. A hilarious statement. In what context is that a full sentence on its own? Like, a doctor walks into a waiting room, pulls down his surgical mask to reveal a solemn expression, and declares in a monotone, “Baby aborted”. Mission accomplished. High-five. You're wheezing with laughter, harder at how your opponent's face flushes.

“Why does the Devil toss sinners into the pit of fire?” you wonder, once you've finished laughing. “Shouldn't they be his friends? Enemy of my enemy?”

“The Devil isn't the one who puts them in the pit of fire.”

“Who does?”

“Themselves.”

“I mean, literally.”

A pause. “God.”

“But what about love?”

Your opponent fidgets. “That's why He does it.”

The table rattles from the force of your gleeful slap. “Well, paint me pink and flip me off during the Rapture!”

“I shudder to think of what you'll be by then.”

“A ruthless parent. And doting politician.” You revel in the predictions that you'll burn Singapore to the ground. “*Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven'*, bitch.” Though you don't believe in either. You barely believe in Earth.

Much of mankind fabricates an all-powerful figure to compensate for its lack of power. It's reasonable for you to envision future children as a coping mechanism throughout the void where a childhood should be. Names and gender configurations change. Determination doesn't. You roll your eyes at friends' talk of cuddles and cuteness. If that's what you're after, get a pet.

The goal persists through the years as a default daydream. But even when you fantasize, it has to smack of the truth. It's not pure escapism -- not expansions of the lies that comprise and compromise reality.

(One morning, you wake with your phone on your face and a note open on the screen: *“god mad us why? why maek kIDS 2 judge n punnish them for exsistence? y not magic absolution u idit.”*)

So it's settled. Instead of what you can give, you reflect on what to withhold. No Heavenly Fathers and virgin mothers. No excessive makeup, or embarrassing current trends, like ombre hair the colour of sunspots, or lipstick glittering as idealised constellations. No gadgets at the dinner table. And you'll exile every folkloric figure hijacked by marketing. If money must be worshipped, resist dressing it up as elderly home invaders and tiny winged women. If lies must be told, let them serve a purpose. All children play pretend, but yours will do so with a knowing wink, mastering the ability to instantly put psychological toys in the box. What's real is your love.

(You close your eyes and pretend to pray. All you feel is the blank blackness behind your eyelids.)

You're fifteen when silver ships descend over every major city in the world.

Once the shock has ebbed, people practically line up to pester you, the go-to skeptic with a mind wide-open only as a snare. What do you have to say about *this*?

“I, for one, welcome our alien supervisors.” You pause. “No, really, that's what they're called.”

“Some of you know us,” their leader announces to the world, calm and authoritative. “You will call us 'the Alien Supervisors.’”

It's a correct prediction, not a command. Sci-fi authors first saw the ships' inhabitants around 1950. In particular, *Rapture*'s author saw the explanation for why he saw them: every culture's stories reflect premonitions freed from the constraints of time.

Riots break out globally, in the name of art, of religion, of individuality, cornerstones of humanity suddenly terminally ill, slated to be shed with its earthly limitations. Even the Speakers' Corner is packed with a days-long vigil. Protests are held in every language. But to what end?

“We're impressed with the strength of your potential,” the Head Supervisor says, on the accuracy of your fiction, “And utterly exasperated.”

The Supervisors maintain an amiable but cautious distance from current world leaders. They will only seriously deal with the youth: those slated to be the final torchbearers, who are unlikely to lose their children, but will lose their children's *future*.

You're twenty-one when you become the first Singaporean to meet a Supervisor face-to-face. His wings are leathery. For 'hands', he has two cloven appendages. His body is red from the base of his curved horns to the diamond-shaped tip of his tail. In your mind flash early

memories of brimstone and hellfire, bile, the fevered fear of Revelation.

You ask his opinion on the chewing gum ban.

“[...] Unlike in Rapture, the world is too broken for the Supervisors to fix. But Singaporean society has never viewed brokenness as a dead end. Our nation was built from a splinter. And this is another forking path.

“[...] Now I find myself in the unexpected position of leading the final charge. Yes, I'm young, but so is our country. So is humanity, evidently. I'm looking forward to serving you.”

- Statement by -----, Minister of Culture, Community and Youth

Rapture details a city on the Supervisors' homeworld, dedicated to ascended species' cultures. Tiraak has hinted about his previous work there. Today he elaborates. For the first time, he mentions the ascended species by name. He lists spectrums of colours that humans can't see and notes beyond comprehension.

He sounds disturbed as he explains, “If *we* disappear, so does every trace of the species who've ascended.”

You understand. Nevertheless: “What's it to me?”

“I had thought,” he says drily, “That you were the minister overseeing historical preservation.”

“That's me!” You boop your Merlion figurine on the muzzle -- half-fish, half-lion, full-Tourist Board fabrication. “I'm an archaeologist in a playground sandbox.”

“I know exactly how wrong you are.”

“We're talking *national* history. Do we even have a spot in your museum?”

“Every nation will be featured.”

“So... one stamp.”

You gained this position by reading repression like a sacred code while everyone else treated it as a textbook. You sense that Tiraak simply seeks reassurance from an outsider.

“For trillions of years, we've endeavoured for 'maturity', believing that it's the highest state of being. And yet...” He sighs -- a habit adopted for the sake of familiarity. “If you could prolong your childhood, wouldn't you?”

You don't know. You didn't have one.

Without the prospect of legacy, art has lost allure. Creation has been stripped to its fundamentals: reproduction. If the nation was meant for anything, it's this. *You* were made for this.

“You look happy,” Tiraak notes.

“I'm having a baby.”

He stretches his mouth in an attempt at a smile, to match your beaming.

Since finding out, you've been energized in a way which your own youth hadn't brought. What did the Supervisor say, about why space exploration had to stop -- “the stars don't belong to you”? The world is enough.

While you talk, Tiraak helps you paint paper balls as planets. His 'hands' can't grasp a paintbrush well, but he can comment on accuracy. Within three sessions you've constructed a

mobile to hang above the crib.

Occasionally, there are reports of floating objects or primary school-aged children with uncanny foresight. Isolated incidents. You're mildly jealous that they have yet to happen locally.

Then, in one day, within ten seconds, #Rapture begins trending on all social media. There are -- outbreaks? -- of advanced telekinesis from infants; toddlers who suddenly keep falling asleep but are otherwise healthy; feats of levitation, telepathy, and other psychic phenomenon.

It stops as abruptly as it started. And no children over three are affected...until two months later, when children of multiple births close their eyes and speak in unison for a full minute.

“It seems that your latent powers strengthened due to society's *perception* of childhood,” Tiraak explains. The Supervisors are even more shocked than humans are. Their homeworld has sent ships of additional scientists and intergalactic historians, frantically working to learn more about the recent phenomenon. “As a result, some children are prematurely ascending.”

“So when will Rapture happen?” you ask. “How long do we have until all children change?”

“Fifteen to twenty years is our current estimate.”

Fifteen. Isn't that a quaint bookend?

A month later, the Supervisors finish examining their new data.

On the day of that harrowing PSA, you buy a baby monitor. You switch it on to test it,

then forget to turn it off. Your son kicks like he's demanding to be let out.

“Soon,” you tell him. Your body is foreign and unwieldy, a mere vessel for doubt. For the first time in years, riots run rampant. Globally. Even near your office. Threatened by the prospect of further unrest, the Supervisors offer their current estimate: thirteen years.

“Do not take these estimates for granted,” the Head Supervisor warns. “We've made that mistake several times before.”

Abortion rates skyrocket. So do 'emergency' births and fertility consultations.

More items move into your nursery. Socks. A baby doll. You never had one of those, yourself.

Little happens to separate the racing days: night terrors and morning sickness. Ask yourself, are you ready? Are you capable of loving someone so selflessly that you avoid worshipping them?

Thousands of children are evacuated. They aren't dangerous, but the manifestation of their powers endangers *them* from fanatics, from lunatics, from actions fuelled by grief.

You haven't prayed in decades and you don't resume now. You don't say something dramatic, like, *I shall will God into existence to fight Him*. You barely even think it. The mobile swings above the crib.

You can't drink. The only therapy you haven't built unhelpful tolerance towards is the retail sort: tiny socks which won't even be visible in tiny shoes; tiny hats for seasons you don't have; and a rattle, which you shake absent-mindedly until your spouse yells at you to put it down.

Twelve years, they say.

The anxiety of the day that will change your life has been overshadowed by growing dread of what will change humanity. Strange, to be sidelined in what should be your joyous beginning. Inside the hospital, you keep glancing at the clock.

A high, wordless cry pierces the room. For a blissful, wretched moment, every modicum of fear dissipates.

His eyes -- thank God, his eyes are open, and they're yours. He is so small, and he is everything.

It's miraculous to hold something new and hungry for life, someone that you willed into being not out of duty or desperation, but because you wanted them. You love fiercely, with all that you have. You believe. If not in a higher power, then in an inherent rightness, somewhere, for the briefest of moments; if not in yourself, then in a purpose. You had so many questions. Here is the answer. For once the *how's* and *why's* are periphery. It's real. It's real. You refuse to let go; you have always known him; you were meant for this.

So the TV is silent. So the computer has ingloriously drowned. So since your walls aren't soundproof, you pretend they're steel, and since your windows lack shades to draw, you pretend they're tinted. Instead of the broken world, you face only yourself.

And the mirror only reminds you. So you finally head out.

The Singaporean fixation on buildings seems even sillier now, seeing as the

accompanying social plans are in shambles. Surviving friends are perplexed by how you can stand to visit hospitals. Well, there's nothing left inside you. Is it so dangerous to fall apart when there's nothing left inside?

Babies are born with blank expressions. They don't make a sound, nor open their eyes. And when they're held, their absence is most acutely felt. They don't crave touch; they don't acknowledge it. They need you far less than you need them.

“I would offer my sincere condolences,” Tiraak says. “But they would ring hollow, considering the cruelty of my envy.”

You glare at the Merlion figurine. “You envy my son.”

“I envy you.”

Your head throbs.

Tiraak plants his hands on the desk and continues, “I envy that you are the master of your fate, even in such little, painful ways. I envy that your species no longer struggles to become something greater because you know that you cannot be. I envy that you envy us -- that you would switch places in a heartbeat if it meant you could keep your plans and world and children. We don't relish being ourselves.”

“Rapture is our fate,” you remind him, bitterly.

“No. It's an inevitability, as is sunset or mortal death. But you decide how to react.”

Your head's pounding almost serves as a welcome distraction from the tight, ever-present ache in your heart. Almost. Nevertheless, Tiraak's voice oils wheels in your mind which, for months, haven't been turned by anything but routine grief.

“Since we know more about Rapture than the book's characters did, I wonder if we could alter it somehow.”

“Perhaps you could've chosen a different path, earlier in your history,” says Tiraak. “But when we arrived, humanity had progressed too much to reject it.”

“I know. Yet lately I wonder -- if all adults made a concentrated effort to link our consciousnesses, and we discovered a way to delay it, maybe for another generation -- “

Something shifts in the air. Infinitesimal, yet undeniable. Tiraak leans forward as if he's seriously considering climbing the desk. Dimly, you identify a swelling sense of urgency.

“Would you?” he presses.

Your own fingertips feel foreign on your scalp, on your temples, against each other..

“What's happening?”

“The latent powers you have -- they appear to be surging. Reach out. Do you feel linked to something larger?”

“I am.” It's like being sealed into the heart of the Internet circa 2009, though whatever terror you feel at the fringes of your consciousness is for the impending disconnection, not the content. You realise with anguished clarity, “But it's temporary.”

The world moulds to your grip, heavy and ripe and malleable. Tiraak doesn't need to tell you to *push*.

“We can delay it,” you say. “We can watch our children grow. We -- “ *can watch their expressions when we tell them we pulled them from Rapture don't even know what will happen if we do will we risk the entire human race for the slightest chance to be happy but after wanting after deception after disappointment after abandonment we deserve to be selfish we deserve to*

be loved we DESERVE TO LOVE

“Would you?” Tiraak repeats.

“No.” No? You blink back tears. “No, I wouldn't want to put my children through this.”

With that declaration come revelations which had been unable to penetrate comprehension fogged by loss. The stars are for *your son*. He will never know insecurity or loneliness, or fear, or the despair which had impaired his ancestors and impairs those left behind. The splendour of the universe will be before him and never again interrupted by an image of human brutality, by the symbol of guilt, of obligation. How could you begrudge him that? How could you force him into your shoes, at the edge of an abyss?

Reports pour in. Around the world, surviving parents had a similar thought, at the same time. Most came to the same conclusion.

Humanity is near-sterile. The few babies born are already attuned to Rapture. The young... people who narrowly avoided ascension are horrified. Few remain resolved to have children of their own. And with their heightened psychic senses, there's little to recommend sticking around.

The planet destabilizes faster than its inhabitants can. Suicide -- assisted and otherwise -- wipes out around half of the population in one surge, then in a continuous trickle. It was once illegal here. Remember that? The Supervisors offer to take remaining humans with them, but watching your species die out one by one is too depressing for most.

The Supervisors receive an avalanche of donations for the museum on their homeworld. There are hundreds of different editions of *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost*, all with Satan on the

cover. Plastic red pitchforks. Devil bobbleheads. You place one bobblehead on Tiraak's shoulder.

Tiraak smiles. He's better at it than you are. On his other shoulder, you place a Merlion figurine. He sets both figurines down, then wraps his fingers around the Merlion.

“This was one of the first things you showed me,” he recalls.

“I was so young.”

“To me, you still are.”

You shake your head. So much has transpired since then. Your soul buckles beneath the weight of millennia.

Tiraak touches your shoulder.

“I won't forget you,” he promises.

His frightening, beloved face blurs through your tears. For all your vivid imagination, for all your religious indignation, not once did you predict that the devils would have sympathy for you.

“Christ said that unless we become like little children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Factually, this was disproved. But here we are, locked out of the gates of eternity, made no stronger nor wiser by age.

“The childhood that ended wasn't our children's. It was ours. They wouldn't have belonged to us, even if things had gone according to plan. They were never ours. Responsibility is not ownership. We, as a society, had spent decades treating children as the toys we had rejected or lost or lacked. We believed that letting go would entail sending them to the end of human existence before we died, with no reunion in an afterlife. We didn't anticipate waking to a

tomorrow without them.

“I once told myself to never show weakness, not even to myself -- to hide fear, to hide grief. With my last words, I say that saving face is pointless. Let us face the end unmasked.

- Statement by -----, Minister of Culture and Community

One baby monitor blinks rhythmically. You set yours beside it and look around.

It's midnight. The nursery is as you left it months ago. The rocking chair creaks as you sit. The whole room overflows with toys for varying ages and of varying quality, all physically untouched. On the floor, there's the rattle your son had levitated and shaken for a day, and only dropped when he was taken away. Above the crib sways the mobile of the solar system. Looks like Pluto gets the last laugh.

(“It will be sudden and painless,” the Head Supervisor had said, “heralded by no massive earthquake or growing rumble, or most other cliches found in apocalyptic fiction. Perhaps there will be light. You are unlikely to notice it.”)

Is the air thinning, or is it your imagination, exaggerated in this final hour? You stand and approach the crib. Its emptiness still stings. The mobile swings with a squeak. The baby monitors watch, a pair of glowing blue eyes trained upon your vigil.

Anytime now. You wrench Earth off the mobile and weigh it in your palm. An ancient impulse tugs at the back of your mind, a chain, like words in a remembered phrase, flashing backdropped by the sun. You close your eyes and let stillness surround you. You close your eyes and your son is the last thing you see.

The rattle shakes. Then there is light.

Author Profiles

Born and bred in Malaysia, **Brian Low** enjoys speculative fiction and may or may not have used spreadsheets for designing magic systems. When he's not lost in a fictional world, he's out exploring the real one.

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Brie Atienza is a Filipino-Indonesian writer, or possibly an alien. She lives in Singapore, where she studies English and theology through the University of London. Her poetry has appeared in *Teen Ink* and the second edition of *Wingless Dreamer's Passionate Penholders*. This is her first fiction publication. Find her on Twitter as [@thesharkwrites](https://twitter.com/thesharkwrites).