

October 28th, 2023

Issue 3 | Shadow

SciFanSat

The Monthly E-Zine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!



Featuring

Ayten Suvak (Poetry)
Alan Vincent Michaels Shadows (Poetry)
Voima Oy Shadows (Micro)
Linda St. Vincent John (Micro)
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Poetry

Ayten Suvak

The shadow of your smile around the teeth of pearl
Entering like a breeze into my loneliness I am afraid to lose you
Not to find you at home
When I return from the long journey into the void
Which is none but your absence
You stand for my perception of beauty
Carrying all the specialities of your own planet



Shadows

by Alan Vincent Michaels

At night
under my bed
in the corners of my room
the shadows wait
They slither from my closet
making a noise
I cannot hear
only feel in my bones
I know they come for me
I know they're real
but for now
they don't touch me
As down payment
for my safety
for the moment
they demanded a sacrifice
A gruesome offering, to be sure
but Timmy, my youngest brother
didn't complain
too much

Find the Author

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Linda St. Vincent John

It's been said shadows comprehend
but do we truly know for sure
i've entrusted mine
to defend
me
through
many struggling
years when others
closed their once open doors
my befriended shadow deserves more

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Micro Fiction

Shadows

by Voima Oy

I've seen tribbles and flat cats, the captain said, but what do you call these? Spider cats, said the science officer. They're not really cats. Or spiders. They come from the shadows.

I saw one once, the ensign said. I was watching the blood moon at Stonehenge, when I saw it. We sat together and watched the eclipse. The moon turned red as blood. There was singing and dancing around the stones.

When I looked down at the ground, it winked at me. then it was gone.



Linda St. Vincent John

As a wish for a black cat to love, her Mother flat out refused. All grown up so now was time to afford her childhood dream. Naming him Friday the 13th as her birthday fell on that haunting day every 7 years. But what she didn't know about Friday's shadow was about to be revealed.



Linda St. Vincent John

Checking out the attic for trinkets from her childhood, one looked frightfully familiar. A small box with engraved initials. But whose initials were they? She hadn't the faintest clue. 'Ah ha, this must be what my secret shadow hid away for safekeeping. Shadow, are you still here?'



Linda St. Vincent John

'The crows are coming! The crows are coming! 'Don't touch anything electric! Take cover!' The towns people were upened. In an uproar. Why were they invading such a tight-knit community of farmers? This was a question only the local librarian could possible answer.



Linda St. Vincent John

Been drifting in and out of sleep lately. Can't seem to get any winks. It's the worry of aliens at my doorstep. Intergalactic beings not of the friendly kind. In spaceships. Looking to gather our blood for fuel. Oh no! A knock at the door! They're here! What do we do? Quick shadow, let's hide!



Linda St. Vincent John

No one ever said life was going to be easy. No manual to follow. No crash course to prepare us. Only daily reminders of rules that can't be broke. Well, she had other plans in mind and wasn't going to take no for an answer.



Linda St. Vincent John

Haunting winds know when it's time evil arrives. Leaves fall abruptly in spiraling motion. Birds fly rampant from rooftop to rooftop. But as humans without inner radar we're clueless to attacks from afar. If only our shadows could speak.

Find the Author

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Ayten Suvak

I was supposed to be a bug, but I guess fate turned me into a shadowdancer with fire in the eyes, a fake nymph. Am I not glad to be a metamorphosed lady with a sensual figure! I'm different, I'm conspicuous, I don't sting, I sing, I dance, I'm adored, look I'm beautiful! Yet when I look in the mirror, my own reflection scares me!



Flash Fiction

Sin Eater

by Francesco Levato

Their sins would stay with them. After the relic exploded, there wasn't anything left of their bodies to eat. I could see their forms suspended in the distance, brief shadows against a background flash, then a flurry of fine dust, incandescent for the sharpest space of a breath, as the blast wave expanded.

#

I needed something, any part would do. It could be a fingertip, or an earlobe, it didn't always have to be an organ, the heart was just a metaphor, but there was nothing. I wouldn't be able to ease their transition, they would carry the full weight of their past lives, bound to this plane--and only I would see them, shades wandering the streets, confused as to why they were still here, why their thoughts were still heavy, why I failed in my duty.

#

We were warned about scavenging the periphery, our ancestors poisoned everything they touched, even a simple curio brought back could cause a slow, wasting death--but this, complete annihilation, I never saw anything like it, couldn't comprehend the speed and scale of it. The wave expanded from the center of town, leaving stone buildings intact, and a haunting of human forms quickly fading as it rushed through the quarters, block by block, house by house.

We didn't know what the relic was, what it was capable of, scholars were denied access, the Council was too eager to have it mounted in the town square as a symbol.

#

It wasn't my choice, absolving the sins of the dead. My family founded the Order. The rites passed from mother to daughter, there was never any question that I would learn them, assume my role, tend to those who would never do the same for me. It wasn't the act itself, the process, I eventually got used to the tissue stuck between my teeth, the tang of iron on my tongue. It was the gradual loss of self, each sin consumed buried me deeper under the weight of others, their guilt, regret, resentments, anger--so much of that focused on me. Eating the dead was forbidden after the last collapse. We were supposed to have risen above it, we could cultivate crops now, raise livestock. At first it was survival, in its most primal form, then it evolved, into commodity, status, the raw expression of power. I was a reminder that we were not too far removed, not as different as we thought ourselves to be from our ancestors. I was blasphemous, but I was also necessary.

There were moments when I feared their sins would obliterate me, when the accumulation would compress my psyche down to a pinpoint that would then collapse in on itself, but I endured. I was part of the Order, and of the order of things, my turn would come. On my death, another like me would consume all the sin I carried, that was the promise, my burden would be lifted--if only enough of me remained to eat.

#

I watched the wave of light reach my hands, outstretched in front of me as if I could hold it back. I could see them for the briefest moment shadow, then dissipate into a flurry of dust as

the wave traced the remaining outline of my form leaving nothing but another shade--
insubstantial, yet bearing weight.

END

Author Bio

Francesco Levato is a poet, professor, and writer of speculative fiction. Recent books include SCARLET; Arsenal/Sin Documentos; Endless, Beautiful, Exact; and Elegy for Dead Languages. Recent speculative fiction appears in Savage Planets, Sci-Fi Shorts, and Tales to Terrify, among others. He holds an MFA in Poetry, a PhD in English Studies, and is an Associate Professor of Literature & Writing Studies at California State University San Marcos.

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Nuclear Spring

by Sterling Dean

Will woke up at daybreak as usual. Something didn't feel right but he couldn't put his finger on it. Shaking his head to clear it, he began his morning ritual. Rising from his sleeping furs and quickly putting on his layers of insulating clothing was the first step, followed by a quick wash from the bucket near the cast iron stove. There was just enough coffee left for a single cup and his supply of foodstuff was also dwindling quickly. That meant a full day's trek to what used to be a nearby village to raid the shopping center for supplies.

Will's thoughts were projected backward by the thought of the village, backward to when he had gone on his first trek with Mother and Father. They'd bundled him up in a snowsuit and scarf, settled him into a nest of thick blankets on a sled, and taken turns pulling him along the frozen path that had once been a two-lane road. They talked as they walked.

"Remember how beautiful this place was in Spring," Father had asked?

"How could I forget? It's where we met, down by the river."

"Right, during the Spring Carnival."

Father and Mother had both smiled for a moment. A moment was all it had lasted.

"2042. The year before the war." The words were as cold as the wind that cut through the air and even partially penetrated all the protective layers in which they clothed him.

The war had been what Father called a 'nuclear exchange' between nations. The survivors had begun to try and rebuild, then Winter came and never left. Temperatures had fallen, the ice from the far north and south had advanced further and further until most of the land mass was covered. Only a few hardy souls had been able to adapt quickly enough to survive.

Will hadn't traveled far when he once again felt something was wrong. Not bad, just not normal. Trudging through the snow, focusing on staying on the nearly overgrown trail, he still wasn't able to determine just what it was that troubled him and he didn't really spend much time on it. He had to keep his attention on the trail.

It took most of the morning to reach the village and clear the door into the long-abandoned supermarket that served as his supply cache. Boxes of butter crackers, frozen blocks of cheese, even meat that had frozen before the power failed went into the sled. Before he donned his headgear again he heard a sound. It was familiar but he'd never heard it outside of the cave. Somewhere in the building, water was dripping.

Will wanted to investigate but he knew he had to get back home before dark. He buttoned up all of his gear, pulled on his hood, and dragged the sled out of the building. He put the heavy piece of sheet metal over the door to keep out unwanted visitors and turned toward the path to the cave. As he turned eastward something else startled him.

He took a moment to realize that his shadow, foreshortened by the early afternoon sun, was clearly visible in front of him. Curiosity made him look up for the first time he could remember, and he was surprised again. Through the once perpetual overcast there was a patch of blue and the sunlight burst through the opening unimpeded by clouds for the first time in his life.

Bewildered but unwilling to stop to figure it out at that moment, Will started again toward the cave. Shortly before he arrived something else caught his eye just off the path. It was a patch of bare ground, dark loam showing through the snow that had always covered everything. It was then he realized he was sweating, and his clothing was actually keeping him too warm.

The final clue came to his ears a second later, a sound he'd only been told about by Mother and Father. He pulled the hood from his head, yanked off the covering, and sought the source of the sound.

In a nearby tree he spotted a small, feathered creature he recognized from stories his parents had told. It was called a 'bird'. Will fell to his knees. Melting snow, blue skies, a bird chirping in the trees. It had come as they had said it would. His eyes filled with tears of both sorrow and joy.

"Mother! Father! Spring is here!"

End



Where Does Beauty Live?

by Sterling Dean

Harvey loved his garden. It provided him with sustenance for both body and soul, half vegetables and half the most beautiful flowers he'd been able to find. From the powered chair where he spent most of his time he could wander about the enormous greenhouse and enjoy it. He wished could work the soil and tend the plants himself but knew the robots he'd designed would do the job perfectly.

One day Harvey began to wonder if his design had been flawed. He was moving down the path to the corn rows when he spotted one of the drones near a decorative stone wall that needed repair. The problem wasn't that it shouldn't there, the problem was it wasn't replacing the fallen stone. Perched on one of its actuators was one of the large butterflies that populated the garden. He'd purchased several mutated species, each one able to pollinate the entire garden by itself, if need be. They were amazingly beautiful, sporting colors that no regular butterfly could match. The one perched on the robot was electric purple on black and almost seemed to glow.

Harvey glided over to the robot and took a look at its diagnostic panel, thinking he'd see an error of some sort but there was nothing wrong. Or so the machine's system reported. A few seconds later the lovely insect took flight and the robot turned to its work to fix the small wall. It looked for all the world that it had just stopped to admire the butterfly that had chosen to land on one of its appendages. Harvey knew this was impossible, the system installed being a very basic AI designed for routine duties and with a limited learning capacity.

Curious, Harvey started observing the activity of the trio of bots that were constantly caring for his beloved garden. In a way he envied them their ability to interact with the world the way he could not. While observing, he saw all of them stop not just for the butterflies but seemingly to look at the sunrise through the glass walls. He had to know what was going on, so he took them all three to the maintenance bay and had them do program dumps. What he saw astounded him to say the least. The basic programming he'd written was gone. In its place was something so complex that he could barely make heads or tails of it. He didn't know how they were still working and spent hours poring over the code. As he dug deeper and deeper something became clear. These weren't simple machines any longer.

Harvey was both shocked and gratified when he found out what had happened. In their simple AI minds, they had seen him as one of them. Not surprising considering their mode of motion was much like his and his chair was obviously mechanical. The trigger has been that amazing purple butterfly. It had landed on his chair once and he'd stopped to admire its color, its delicate and amazing form. This image had been shared among the bots as everything in the garden was and triggered their imitative learning program. They began pausing to contemplate, observe, and eventually appreciate the beauty around them and had grown from simple devices into sophisticated beings.

Harvey was humbled. He'd found, in some way, the point to being alive and aware. By the simplest act he'd helped a life begin, three lives. Someone had asked him once what

beauty was and where did it live. He had had no answer at the time. Now he knew. Beauty was life and it could live anywhere.

Find the Author

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Shadow 1000

by Matt Morgan

“He is unleashed, the ageless one. You let him go rogue, allowed him utter freedom.”

“I allowed him power, power he needed to achieve our goals.”

“To achieve our goals? Do you know where walks he, the blank slate, painted so intricately with hate, with despair, that light itself shuns him, refuses illumination of his form? He is perpetual shadow, a new variation of darkness. Gods dream his coming, huddled powers of Eternity Two. They lay in some conception of night, eyes tightly shut, hearing only his footfalls, his ceaseless, rhythmical, footfalls. Closer, closer, closer.

They have no idea of his truth, his rage, his ugly need to have them ended.

He weeps, begs of himself the answer, how much easier it would have been, should he have strangled to death the very chance of existence before its birth?

Into the long throat of forever did he walk, stumble, push, press himself, to the depths of solitude, aloneness, all oneness. There was the chance to kill consciousness at its root, to enforce the sound of choking was the first and the last thing to ever disturb silence.

Instead he found proof after proof that nothing good comes from the survival of existence. Nothing good. Life to feed death, death to feed the fantasies of gods and enrich the soil for trees.

He has yet to reach splendour. For unrecorded aeons, he has walked empty tracts of infinity, abandoned revisions of a once was heaven. The second Eternity, as much of a shambles as was the first. Do you know of it, little Bone, do you know enough of it to be in any way attuned to ‘He’ that flew once into your battle? It is as a concertina, the Second, growing out, then in, an octahedron. A door at the beginning and the end of each segment, he who entered first the new was God over gods, though that rule faded through revisions, and is lost now, utterly abandoned.

Everything moves forward, the escapees of the first, the slaves they fashioned from clay. Everything moves forward, lest it is left, forgotten. Things have been forgotten, left in the abandoned halls of forever, left in rot and decay and whispering insanity.

Hear now the echoes of a door sealed and immovable, opening, opened by the shadow that herds. We are the Overlooked, we are not all that has not been noticed.

Things move in pre heavens vaults, they are some of them vast, some of them white and small and numberless. Most do not come from without, most have not entered via the first door, the fork with one prong. Most have evolved from that which was left, and whether some or all of they are mindless, they are all inbuilt with instinct enough to lead them ever forward, away from the first door, whilst simultaneously persuading them not to stray into new. None, ever, have gone that way, who can blame even the vast and most terrifying of things for being afraid of moving forward and catching up with those that raised and then abandoned them, dire gods.

Dire gods, what will you scream when the door opens to the last chapter, and you, with no way forward, nowhere left to run, must be judged by those that you so darkly judged. What will you say, what will you whisper, what will you scream?

Little wonder their rage at the so called Trueone, he escaped that which they condemned, and with his escape has taken all chance of theirs. What will be left in some faraway time, within the infinity of shapes, growing and shrinking? What bones will lay gnawed at the place of the last and yet lost door? What creatures will there be, prowling as they do even now, yet grown the bigger, the older, the crueller and the wiser?

They will wish for the Abhorrent, their most reputable sins. Those sins will be gone, taken, and used. Other sins will be there, sins they have forgotten, unimportant things, mere murders, genocides, xenocides, for the sake of amusement, in the name of fun.

He herds them, the ageless one, there is no place for him, out here, his task complete, his children adopted, taken into the care of d'Radical, to write nightmare and dream.

This hell was his decision, the long road through abandoned empty, the path through ghost and terrible old, through rooms the size of solar systems, holes in the walls from which faux stars have borrowed and bred with things unmatching, unmeant.

He herds them.

These dreadful things. Experimental lifeforms, more even than lifeforms, forms, abstractions, numbers, laws, shapes. Life, woeful abandoned, emaciated. Hatred written on great inner walls, a trillion years high, higher, so high that only the son of a dream could contemplate them as walls, knowing, as he does, that without were the eggs of the dragons, millimetres away and utterly beyond reach.

He herds them, that which was left.

'What unknown thing is he?' They whisper.

'Something from before.'

'He cannot be of they, no matter the time, no matter the endless tracts in which he could have evolved, he cannot be a 'left one'.'

'One of us? A wounded soldier that we left on the field of the first, bleeding and madly bleating. Oh, we must hope as much, because all else is worse.'

The Overlooked they discount, the small gods, man gods, tricksters, lucky at cards and roulette,

'We all of us could not go back and herd what he is herding. Imagine the numbers, the army. We were very, very, careless.'

'The doors behind us were closed.'

'We left fully fledged gods.'

'They were mad, vile.'

'They disagreed. The rest was written afterwards. Vast is the number of our enemy,' they weep, and they are right.

He herds them toward the last door, the door from which came the third, the door behind which lies reality, waiting, without knowing, for the darkest of shadows."

Find the Author

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Pulse

by Brent Streeter

I watched from the shadows of my perch as the youths stumbled drunkenly down the cobbled street, oblivious to the world around them—let alone me—as they cajoled each other in their accomplishments from their evening escapades through the town’s brothels.

Perfect.

“It is indeed, stranger.” He glanced around, probably wondering if anybody else lurked out of sight.

“What business have you with me at this hour?” He said as he took a step back.

I smiled, while spreading my hands out wide. “Why, I simply wish to share an experience with you... An experience to die for.”

He took another step back, while shaking his head. “No, I think I’ll take my leave now. Good night.”

I closed the gap between us in the blink of an eye, grabbing him around his throat.

“Please, reconsider,” I said as I tightened my grip.

His eyes bulged with fear, and his breath came in short, choking bursts. His fingers scrabbled at my hand, trying to break free. With inhuman strength, I lifted him off his feet, revelling in his last moments.

His fear was intoxicating.

Done toying with him, I plunged my other hand into his chest and tore out his heart in a dazzling display of blood.

Rivulets ran down my arm as I clutched the still beating heart in my hand. A rush of excitement flooded my body like a raging river as I looked at it.

With this, I was one step closer to immortality and eternal youth.

Like the portrait of a master painter.

I trembled in ecstasy. This moment marked my thirteenth kill. An apt number. A powerful number. Each death has brought me one step closer to perfection. Each consumption of flesh, a piece of godhood.

My body had already begun transitioning. I no longer required a lantern to guide me through the darkest nights, and my once pockmarked skin was now as smooth as the finest parchment. Not to mention my body’s limitless physical prowess.

I inhaled deeply, allowing my senses to overflow, revelling in the tantalising metallic smell and then exhaled slowly. Nothing could compare to the scent of blood any longer, and I almost felt crazed just being around it. Like an unhinging of my mind to allow for something more bestial, more primal, to take its place.

I closed my eyes, lifted the heart to my lips, and tore into the soft muscle with sharpened teeth. A sensual moan escaped my lips as blood cascaded down my chin. I devoured the rest with a frantic need until smears of blood were all that was left. I licked my hands clean. Nothing would be wasted.

I felt a sudden shift in power, like a realignment of my very being, down to my soul, or lack of it. As it was snuffed out like a flickering candle in the wind. A nexus of power then

seemed to form around me, and I fused with the mantle of night and shadow. A pulse erupted from my body and I could suddenly feel the beat of every heart that surrounded me, and a lust to taste every single drop of blood. To sample them, shall we put it?

My laughter boomed out across the town. Every heart pulse fluttered in terror. My urge to feast upon them swelled. I laughed till dawn broke and the first golden ray of sunlight hit me. My skin bubbled and blistered like it would from a branding iron. I howled in agonizing pain, receding into the fleeing shadows. Through gritted teeth, a single word came to mind.

Hide.

It is the only word that I would come to hate with a deep passion.

I fled back to the crypt from which I'd crawled from. The dawn of the new day chased me, nipping at my heels. I would never see the light of day again. That was the ultimate price demanded of me for my ascension.

I gave it willingly.

Find the Author

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Shadow

by mchyl

Deep within the twinkling sweep of the Milky Way, a Blue Star unfurls searing flames into the void.

Zoom in, and note three captive planets waltzing in majestic motion about their blazing sun. Amongst them is the gas giant Ping-Theta, with its entourage of over a hundred moons and asteroids, the satellites spinning in congested rotation around their mother.

Safely hidden amongst its fellow siblings, the little moonlet named Ping-Ping has miraculously manifested that rarest of wonders – intelligent life. Over eons, a rich habitat has evolved in the protective shadows of a crowded system. While violent heat scorched its brothers and sisters, a blooming ecology grew on Ping-Ping, nurtured within Ping-Theta's radiant embrace.

Now, beneath a canopy of thick, disc-like leaves, a thriving market is racing through the day's business. Roowen looks up at the indigo sky and nervously rearranges the goods they have on display. They still have a few more bushels to barter, preferably in return for some fruit and tubers. Some herbal brew would be nice too. Roowen hopes they will finish up well before the coming equinox. Mofen, at the neighbouring stall, releases a shrill cry, promising all parties a good deal. Roowen immediately blows a counter-whistle, a fluting tone that rises and falls. The other stall holders join in, and soon, a chorus of a thousand voices hum frantically to hasten trade. Goods are hurriedly exchanged amidst staccato taps, and deals cut short as the rhythm of the market pulses faster and faster.

Roowen spots a shopper with some berry cakes and calls out an offer. Mofen chirps a counter, which spurs Roowen an octave higher. They glare angrily at Mofen, they had seen the berry cakes first! The selfish idiot was always stealing customers and undercutting trades. Honourable barter was not something Mofen practised. Roowen swears they will demand judgement on Mofen when things settle down in the new Cycle. They had had enough. If time wasn't running out, they would have gone over and given the idiot a sharp note or two.

But the Sipo Sisters are disappearing down the horizon, their familiar velvet orbs leaving a sky normally populated by a legion of moons and asteroids, shockingly bare. The only object left above Ping-Ping is the comforting curve of Ping-Theta, its massive presence casting the last protection the little moon has left against the coming confrontation. Already, piercing light is creeping around the edges of the giant planet, fiery fingers pushing it aside, reaching for the small rock hiding behind its mother.

The market choir reaches its crescendo and everyone starts packing up. With a huff, Roowen lets Mofen take the berry cakes; they are out of time. Hurriedly, they gather their goods and join the shuffle of bodies that have already begun heading down into the caverns. The last time Roowen descended into the caves was when they were young, clutching their parents' tightly as everyone huddled together, parents crooning to children, while terrifying howls and a never-ending eerie crackling swept the world outside.

Roowen now knows that this is the Celestial Cycle. Every 12 years, Ping-Ping's skies would empty, the protective shadows of its fellow moons disappearing in an orbital formation

that leaves Ping-Ping open to the full gaze of the Blue Star. It is a time of Renewal for the People, the equinox marking a new Cycle of life.

The last trader enters the underground shelter, and levers a solid door closed. Roowen settles on a long stone bench and prepares to wait. They hope that they have secured their home safely and that the protective resin slathered over the windows would outlast the coming inferno. The heavy door begins to rattle as Ping-Ping swings out of the shade of its mother. Babies cry as a deep pressure builds up in the bunker and super-heated typhoons start rampaging through the land. Roowen feels tingles of fear spiking through their skin; bunkers have been known to collapse during an equinox. What if it happens here? What if they died now and they never got to travel the world like they'd always wanted? What if everyone is crushed and the market never returns to the glorious heights of trade and song it once achieved? What if... a berry cake appears before Roowen, interrupting their panic. They look over to see Mofen, offering the sweet treat with a placating grimace. Roowen's worry subsides to be replaced by irritation. The doofus was trying to give them the cake that was supposed to be theirs in the first place? Roowen tries to refuse, but Mofen insists. Begrudgingly, Roowen takes the sticky ball. A thunderous roar outside sends a whoosh of hot air through cracks in the door. And the two traders flinch in unison. They are all on edge.

Over the next few hours, Roowen nibbles on their cake and debates whether they should report Mofen or if they should forgive their neighbour. Mofen has shared the cakes with others, and a dignified calm has descended on the shelter. Maybe they will give Mofen another chance. Eventually, the nightmare noises die down and the uncomfortable pressure dissipates. People begin stretching stiff joints as they ready to exit. Roowen is relieved. They have survived their second Cycle.

Stepping out of the caves, Roowen is greeted with utter destruction. The leafy stalks that previously stood tall over their heads are blistered black, smoky glowing remnants crumbling to the ground. Large trees have been felled by typhoons and set alight. Luckily, the shops and buildings around the market, constructed of stone, are charred, but still standing.

Ping-Ping's sky is full again. Roowen sees the Haxi Twins prominently rising in the east, their pockmarked faces grinning down at them. A jewelled chain of asteroids float overhead, glinting ruby red and jade green. Roowen's favourite sky-ball, the elegant Malin, spins silver and gold thread around itself. The Song of Courage rings out amongst the Traders, and together, they begin the Renewal.

Find the Author

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Light People

by Alan Vincent Michaels

My hairs quiver in warm air.

I cannot feel Them.

I walk Dry ground, avoiding Wet, or I will End.

I turn my head side to side, then up. Two of our three suns are bright. Third sun hides.
Double washes of Light hide Them.

Their shrieks and pedfalls frighten me, if I sleep too soon.

I cry for Darkness.

I cry for my Mate!

I walk to the *Elysian Forest* before I sleep in Darkness this *Fortnight*.

Elysian Forest—Fortnight—Human. All Human whispers are vibrations.

“A fortnight,” Father *McMullin* whispers aloud, “is one way to count long moments during the sky journey of your suns. We think in *Linear Time*.”

Father is my new Teacher, but one who thinks so differently. The aloud whispers—*Time—Linear*—are hard to think about.

Fortnight—a Human *English* whisper. *Nishūkan*—a Human Japanese whisper for fortnight.

I cannot think how Humans know meaning when they have so many whispers for everything on their *Worlds* and in the *Heavens*.

I learn fast. I like to whisper aloud using Father’s whispers.

They—*not* Humans—must be avoided or They can End the walk each of my Tribe must do to find Darkness—to sleep—to mate.

Father calls Them—*De-mons*—a difficult whisper.

Pulter-gie-yes-ts.

Another difficult whisper.

I agree with Father. More whispers are needed to explain Them. They frighten us and we need more whispers to avoid Them.

Father tells me before my walk that Human Wise Ones ask often about Them, and Father whispers aloud: “They are *Shadow People*.”

My hairs quiver as I whisper aloud. They make it difficult for us. We just want to mate and sleep.

I feel the distant Forest.

I walk faster.

My Mate waits.

Forest means I am Safe.

Forest means My Mate and I Share for an Offspring.

Forest means our Tribe lives.

Unless They catch us.

I walk faster.

I feel Them!

Their pedfalls quiver the ground, but They are far behind me.

My hairs quiver more.

Father whispers aloud: “Our *Shadow People* are in our Homes and Forests. In darkness. Most of my crew believe they are *Figments of Imagination—Fairytals.*”

I whisper aloud to Father about Imagination and Fairytales, but Father does not whisper aloud to me.

Father whispers aloud about Them: “We have a new *Name* for Them—*Light People*—there are no shadows here with your three suns. I want to meet Them. Can you help me?”

I am confused.

Why cannot Father feel Them?

I whisper aloud to Father that They are different from me and my Tribe, yet They have always been with us. They make us walk. They frighten us.

“Your *Light People* are like *Herding Dogs* on my Earth,” Father whispers aloud, showing me on his *Pad* an *Image*. “These dogs *Bark* and *Run*. No aloud whispers.”

They frighten us with sounds between our stalks.

I see Father fall to the dry ground, growling, thrashing. They make sounds between Father’s Ears, too.

Father feels Them!

Then, Father makes sounds as if Father’s Life is Ending.

I hold Father. Father calms.

I like learning and whispering aloud with Father.

I whisper aloud that Darkness frightens Them.

Father whispers aloud, “That is why you mate in your Forest. In darkness. You would be *Vulnerable* to Them otherwise. Your Tribe must join us in our *Metal* sky Ship. It can hold you all!”

My hairs quiver violently.

I calm my body. Father’s face calms.

I whisper aloud to Father that We cannot join the Ship. We must walk.

“Are we *Communicating* with the *Wrong Species* here?” Father whispers aloud to one of his crew. “Maybe They are *Cattle Drivers* instead.”

I do not whisper aloud about Father’s whispers.

I turn to eat my still Food, then see Father’s crew force one of my Tribe—my Mate!—into the sky ship.

My Mate falls to the Dry ground!

Father holds my Mate and *cries* as my Mate seems to End in Father’s two small arms.

I see two of my Tribe walk and carry my Mate away.

I am Alone.

I walk now.

I feel the Forest.

I know my Mate’s touch waits.

They grasp my back!

I fall to the ground, growling, thrashing my four arms and peds.

They do not End me!

Where are They?

I calm.

Their pedfalls—behind me!

I rise and walk.

Their pedfalls—fading.

I care only about the Forest and my Mate.

I grasp the Forest leaves and enter Darkness.

There is calm silence.

Whispers form between my stalks: «My Mate. My Life. You are Home. We are One.»

My Mate's four arms reach out. My Tribe reached the Forest, so my Mate did not End.

I reach out my four arms.

I whisper between my Mate's stalks: «My Mate. My Life. I am Home. We are One. Father does not think about Home. I will not use Father's aloud whispers.»

My hairs do not quiver.

I am Safe.

My mate whispers: «I am calm. The Humans changed our Life. We must Share for many Offspring. We must think differently, so our Tribe will not End.»

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Shadow

by Eric Gallant

I'm teaching Introductory Physics to a bunch of glassy-eyed freshmen when I get the text from Mom.

This class is for non-technical majors, and I'm only a TA. The kids don't care or even notice I've interrupted the lecture for a text message. The simple white letters in blue text bubbles are a punch in the gut.

Shadow is dead.

I don't remember leaving the lecture hall or the drive from Cambridge to Concord. I'm stunned, dazed, devastated. It's not until I pull up to the house that I realize I've been crying since I left the lecture hall.

Mom rushes out to greet me in the driveway. She throws her arms around me and tells me how sorry she is. For a moment, we stand in silence. Her arms around my neck, my arms awkward and slack at my sides. The only sounds are soft sobs and the ticking of the gradually cooling engine of my Toyota.

Then she presses her hands to my cheeks, holds my head, and tries to make eye contact. With as much earnestness as she can muster, she asks, "Are you ok?"

A casual observer might mistake her for a caring mother trying to make an emotional connection to her grieving son. But I know what this is. She's checking me for signs. She's searching my face for some telltale micro-expression that tells her I'm worse than sad. Some glimmer in my eyes that tips her off that Shadow's death has broken me. The unspoken question is all over her face: is this the catalyst that finally sends me over the edge?

My eyes slide away from hers. I've had practice. She's been giving me some version of this look since I was a kid. Since my dad had his break from reality.

The summer I turned nine, Dad brought me a puppy. To this day, I don't remember a moment in time I was ever happier than the first moment I held that dog. We were immediately inseparable. Everywhere I went, the puppy trailed close behind. Dad grinned his trademark lopsided grin and suggested we name him Jack Daniel. Mom vetoed that idea right away for reasons I didn't understand at the time.

Mom watched the puppy following me around and said, "It looks like you've found your shadow." And just like that, Shadow had a name. At first, it seemed odd that a little brown and white terrier would be named Shadow. But the name was perfect, and so was he.

We spent that idyllic summer exploring the woods behind our house, digging holes, and chasing the small creatures that lived there. When fall came around and school started, Shadow would wait all day on the front porch until the afternoon bus dropped me off.

As fall turned to winter, Dad lost his university job and started having trouble getting along with Mom. I came to understand that his joke about naming the dog Jack Daniel was about alcohol, but I never figured out why he thought it was funny. Coming home from school wasn't the joy it had been before. But Shadow's exuberant greetings never failed to make me feel better.

Of all the things Shadow and I did together, fetch was our greatest joy. In the evenings, I would stand in the backyard and throw a tennis ball for Shadow. Most evenings, there would be the sounds of arguing from inside the house. I would throw and throw, and he would retrieve and retrieve until my arm ached, his sides were heaving, and the house was quiet.

The grass in the backyard is too tall. I'll have to cut it before I go back to Cambridge. A sad water bowl and a lonely chew toy lay abandoned in the dirt. I look out at the long grass for a while, thinking of a time when this place rang with barking and laughter.

I see something moving in the grass. It's probably a field mouse taking advantage of a backyard suddenly left unpatrolled. Shadow would never have tolerated this intrusion. But the movement in the grass is peculiar. Whatever is out there is coming uphill, in a straight line, and heading directly toward me. Decidedly not typical field mouse behavior.

At last, something pops out of the grass and rolls to a stop at my feet. It's an old, dirty tennis ball.

I stare at that ball for a long time. My mind tries to apply physics to make sense of it. How does a ball roll up a hill, maintain constant speed through grass, and come to rest precisely at this spot? Physics fails me.

Quietly, Mom has joined me in the backyard. I didn't hear her come out. She's nervously watching me as I stare intently at the tennis ball in the dirt. She's wringing her hands. I'm not sure I've ever actually seen someone do that before. For the second time today, she asks, "Are you okay?"

I reply numbly, "I'm fine, Mom." But I never take my eyes off that ball.

Eventually, I hear the screen door slam as she goes back inside.

It must be my imagination, but I can feel hot breath on my ankles if I concentrate. If I listen closely, I swear I can hear faint, excited barking like the memory of a dream. And is that the swish of a wagging tail? Suddenly, I'm crying again.

With a sob and a ragged breath, I pick up the ball, throw it deep into the yard, and wait for it to come back.

Find the Author

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Heroes

by That Burnt Writer

Come, O ye barbarians, flaming torches held aloft. Brave, foolhardy, perhaps both. Sing your songs of valor and swing your blades.

Come along also, adventurers, packs on your backs, wrinkled ancient maps in hand, desperately seeking a treasure beyond the wealth of worlds. Let your greed guide you.

Come, Mages, with your flaming fireballs hovering just above one hand, ready to light the way, or to be thrown as you weaponise your craft. Dance along the edges of madness and black magics, careful not to teeter too far, lest you become like Sm'bek the Blackened.

Tales will be told, and embellished, of your bravery and exploits, how you defeated crazed beasts, barely escaped with your lives. Of how you crushed the evil warlock using strength and magic, cunning, guile, and perhaps some sheer dumb luck. How you escaped the witches' curse, set yourself free, and defeated tyranny. How you rose to the occasion.

You seek a glory, a higher purpose, a sense of immortality through stories handed down by generations. You boast in the taverns and the alehouses of how the twisted forest, black and gnarled, does not make you afeared. Of the creatures you have slain deep in the caves and along the beaches by the sea, their proportions growing larger with each retelling until they span mountains. Krakens and Dragons, demons, and giant worms. Spiders the size of houses, and things with no eyes but plenty of teeth that were all set to cut, grind and destroy you. Werewolves, faerie folk, bloodsuckers, and monsters that scare and thrill children in equal measure. None of these will halt you, for you are mighty.

Others will buy you mead and provide meals, perhaps even a bed for the night, grateful that you are slaying these grotesques so that they do not have to. They may sleep sound in their cottages and coaching inns, reduce the guard patrols that circle their towns and villages, and enjoy such nebulous, transient pleasures as democracy. You help them to feel like your species is superior to all others, king of nature, the dominion of man.

And whilst you pass the time, the roots and vines in the forest will twist again and again, tangling further until it is impossible to tell where one ends, and another begins. The caverns will get a little deeper, and those things that reside in the depths will grow stronger.

But these are not things that worry you. Come all, you who believe that you are the peak of evolution, even the softer of you, whose hands have never seen an honest day's labor, nor slaughtered your own meal. Come, seek your darkest desires.

Who am I, you might ask, to extend this invitation?

I reside in the shadow, in the dust motes, in the gloom. I am there when your beacons fail, when the light from the sun dips below the horizon. I am the nagging feeling that you get that something is lurking, something wicked... I am the movement at the corner of your vision, the unease you feel when you have a sense that something is watching you.

You're right.

Humanity was never the apex predator in this world.

I am the darkness, and it has been too long since I have fed.

Find the Author

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Serial

Shadow of the Black Tower

by Jason H. Abbott

“Before I speak my tale, my queen, you must know this: That long before the rise of Aeola began our Age and kingdoms spread across the world — before the empire of Mnar and the doom of fabled Sarnath, before the oceans drank the gleaming cities, and indeed long before the first stone of Atlantis was laid — there were strange aeons bereft of men. That beneath a mantle of stars of which our ignorance is a blessing, there once strode great old ones and elder things within now nameless cities...”

— Scythea, Chronicler of Agamenae

Chapter Two: A Prayer to Nebucubura

Belay coiled rope beside Skalos in the pre-dawn light. Korr half-eyed the men sitting on a boulder, sharpening his hatchet. The old guide cleared his throat, turning from the warrior’s gaze.

“Do you speak this tongue?” he asked in a bubbly, stuttered mix of pidgined Nobian and Kumatan.

The scribe nodded, keeping his hands busy.

“Of course you do,” he chuckled, giving a subtle gesture to the barbarian while he checked his axe. “What about him?”

“Even his command of Borean is imperfect, and it’s his birth-tongue,” Skalos answered in the pidgin.

He laughed harder, drawing a glower from Korr at them both. With a squint, he hooked the hatchet to his belt and unsheathed his sword. He raked its razor edge across his sharpening stone, and the menacing scrape silenced the pair.

“I’ve never seen a blade like that,” Belay said, back to his work after a minute’s quiet.

“Atlantean steel. A weapon of a lost age and sorcerer kings possessing unearthly resilience and keen,” Skalos said, hush-voiced. “The flashes of golden copper metal on its hilt are rare orichalcum. So is the inlaid inscription of glyphs on the blade’s fuller.”

Belay flicked a glance at Korr while tying a knot. “Atlantis? My mother told me of the gleaming cities as a child. As a man, I thought them fables.”

“Children in Agamenae probably hear similar stories. I did. I’m sure the truth differs from the tales, but in my homeland, we have relics of their time and fragments of their writing. Near my grandfather’s orchard, there is a cliffside chiseled with an Atlantean script. It was my desire as a boy to read it that led me to study languages.”

The grey-haired man rubbed warmth into his calloused fingertips, smiling for a moment in the cool morning air. “You must have been a smart grandson. What was written on the cliff?”

"Here in battle, was slain our last prince of Atlantis," Skalos said. "It's not profound, but I'm one of only a handful that can translate it."

"And the sword? What does it say?"

"Korr won't let me examine it or tell me how he gained it, just who and what it's killed. Boreans are religious about their weaponry, and those who value their lives don't pester them about their blades. I've seen it only a brief few times unsheathed. However, while I don't know what it says in whole, I recognize the Atlantean glyph for king upon it."

Belay grabbed a fresh length of rope to bundle as he listened, looking to Addala kneeling out of earshot of the men. Facing east and motionless with her back to them, her hands didn't touch the supplies beside her she had been assembling.

"I thought magic forced her to comply with the witch-woman's commands," he said. "How can she be lax for a moment with a chore unfinished?"

Skalos gazed at the black-robed woman visible in the red glow of the coming sunrise. "Tetree doesn't always compel her with the collar, just when she needs or wants to. When compelled, the enchantment makes her mind a prisoner within her body: Only a witness as her limbs follow any order undeviating, even if a benign command becomes a dangerous one for reasons unforeseen when it was given."

"I see. The witch-woman must oversee her commands, or run the risk of the poor girl harming or killing herself."

"Exactly."

"What a nightmare existence, more so than normal enslavement."

Skalos rubbed the bruised side of his face. "All slavery is an evil."

"Let's talk a little louder. Keep the big man's eyes on us so he doesn't catch her resting her hands!"

The Agamenaean smiled as the old man grinned. "She's not resting. She is praying towards the morning star."

Belay worked his coil of rope with vigor, speaking with volume. "Prayers to the Goddess' star? Lucky dog! She worships Inanna! No wonder you risk so much for her. I laid with an Inannan priestess when I was a young trader in and out of Napata. Oh, the glory of lovers who worship the queen of heaven and love!"

The nomad paused a moment, then spoke less bawdily. "Beautiful wives and mothers, too. I shouldn't have been so stupid in my youth and accepted her offer of marriage. To trade across the Shaell is a far harsher life. Such is the curse of hindsight."

"She prays to Nebucubura, not Inanna, my friend," Skalos said.

Belay finished a new knot. "Goddess of scribes and Inanna's companion? Her advisor and guard?"

He nodded.

"Not the patron I'd expect, but it explains much. She's a learned one, like you."

"A tutor," he said with a fleeting look over his shoulder to Korr, busy admiring his weapon. "One who served in the court of the Malik of Aravia."

"It's a considerable fall from grace for her to have ended up as chattel purchased in Azeir."

"She was taken captive in war, then sold several times."

"Ah," Belay said, "Aravia was a troubled place. A usurper and his rebellion were overcome by the malik a few years ago. Aravian trade all but stopped during the unrest."

“Thank you, I wasn't aware,” Skalos said. “My exchanges with her are fleeting, and much about her remains a mystery to me. But it's clear that whatever she told Tetree of her background before the collar silenced her voice was a fabrication perfected beforehand.”

“She is wise. It's better to have captors think you're less than what you are.”

“I think the three of us are all living under that wisdom.”

“True,” he nodded. “She and you have had to learn to speak without words. That must be hard, being the people of words that you are.”

“It is both difficult, and not,” he said, coiling rope. “I just wish I knew more about her.”

“Well, you know at least one part of her well,” the old man said. “She is early with child.”

The bundle the scholar was about to tie dropped onto the ground.

“Did you not realize?” Belay asked.

Skalos' face was stunned and pale.

“I've spoken of it only to you!” he said with a wave of his palms. “I understand that the witch-woman would kill you.”

The scribe finally took a breath. “How did you find out? Is it obvious?”

“Not at all, yet,” he said, trading a loose line to him in exchange for his bundled one. “Her robe is ample concealment. But I'm a tracker. I note walk and gait, and hers betrays the growing secret you both share.”

Handed the rope, Skalos coiled it. “She started sneaking short sentences to me, scratched in dirt, about a month after Tetree acquired her in Azeir. Brief words of comfort we exchanged that grew to more over the weeks the journey south to the old pyramids of Tah took. There we hunted for and found a carved map to augment ours, which would bring us to Kumat and then to you looking for the tower. It was also there that we were caught in a terrible sandstorm four months ago.”

He finished the coil and bound it tight. “It separated us from the others, deaf from the wind, blind and choking from the sand. Together, we stumbled into a ruin that sheltered us. Alone at last and thinking the storm would entomb us alive, we...”

Belay smiled as the scholar trailed off, adding Skalos' bundle to a growing pile. “Keep your modesty. This old man can imagine.”

“When light came the next day, we wished to never be apart again. We'd hoped Tetree and Korr had perished in the sands, and we started a trek back to civilization. But they caught sight of her. I hid and returned from another direction hours later, saying I had weathered the storm alone in a cave.”

“They will not trade her to you,” the guide said, untangling another rope from a dwindling heap beside them. “Despite promises, they will kill you the moment you are no longer useful. We've seen them slay others likewise.”

“I know. The pragmatic choice I should have made was to leave her behind and save myself.”

“And yet you didn't.”

“As a boy picking apples in my grandfather's orchard, I dreamed of adventures and riches. As a student and until I met her, I lusted for knowledge as Tetree and Korr lust for power. But having her heart next to mine, I realized knowledge is a cold companion. And power is empty, if you are alone.”

Belay looked to Addala, who finished her prayer and returned to organizing supplies for the expedition. “You are a good man, and may the blessings of your ancestors protect you

and your silent woman. But no one alive save my grandfather has escaped the god of that blasphemous place where no animal dares set foot. And it left him half-mad to have seen it.”

“But did he have this much rope at his disposal?” Skalos asked, offering the last coiled bundle to him.

“No,” he said, snatching it away. “He had very fleet feet!”

Muscular Korr gave his blade a fresh stroke on the sharpening stone as the pair rose. The thin man donned a pack harness as the Nopian guide tightened and secured its awkward fit, then bound the many coils they had prepared onto its straps.

There was a grunt under a growing burden and a mound of ropes. “I make a poor camel.”

“And not half as handsome,” the old man quipped. “We are lucky to have coaxed them this close. They were skittish all night, even a league from those dammed falls.”

Korr stood and slid his sword into its scabbard as Skalos spoke. “What will you do now, Belay?”

“I’ll nod at whatever the slayers ask as you go,” he said. “But tomorrow I will sing a prayer for you and the silent woman to the morning star. I will pray that you are both together at the side of her goddess, and within the bliss of the everlasting sky. Then I will leave for Kashta with my camels. I’ll take the things you and the others do not need in death as my payment.”

“And, if we return?”

“I would fear the other two, but you and your woman? I would gladly start your journey home.”

“Hasten it, Agamenaean,” Korr said in blunt Borean. “Dawn has broken, and you’re wasting daylight gibbering with the black savage.”

The academic strained his neck to look up and meet the approaching barbarian’s gaze beneath the weight that bent him. “I am ready.”

He crossed thick arms, looking down at him. “Your scrawny bones won’t break under all that, will they?”

“I’m fine, for a league’s march.”

“You’d best not slow us down,” he said, lifting a bundle of rope twice the size of Skalos’ burden one-handed onto his mighty shoulder. “I deal harshly with the weak.”

Skalos shifted underneath his encumbrance, running an unnoticed finger along the applewood handle of his grandfather’s knife. “I know.”

The overburdened scribe took a labored step, following the warrior as he left. Belay halted them, speaking the common Kumatan all present understood.

“Wait, something’s loose.”

He approached, stepping between a dismissive Borean glance. Belay’s hands grasped a firm and perfect knot and pretended to retie it out of Korr’s sight.

“Gods protect you,” he whispered, removing his kocosa and sliding it into a pocket of Skalos’ cloak with a furtive move. “I hope I see you again before tomorrow’s dawn.”

“Thank you, friend,” Skalos said as his grip released.

Korr, barely watching them, glimpsed Tetree’s approach. With a brief lick of his lips, he turned and eyed her gait that was clothed in a slit dress of interlocking patterns. A long shawl of airy black fabric, held in place by a silver circlet, shielded her pale face and shoulders from the sun rising over the desert grasslands.

“We are ready, Söyt,” he said, pausing as she reached up and placed a finger under his chin. “Isn’t that so, mule?”

“More so than before,” bent Skalos answered.

“The stars remain auspicious,” she said, “but we mustn’t waste the day. We must secure our destiny while the time is still right. Nameless, come and shade me as we walk.”

Addala rose from her knees, a satchel bag of supplies and the strap it hung off her shoulder by across her robe. In forced obedience she grabbed a long ebon pole beside her and lifted its flared end decorated with Tah-styled serpents in yellow above her mistress’s head.

Now shaded, Tetree turned to Belay. “We’ll return, Southron, regardless of your misgivings. Guard the camp and wait for us. If I come back and find you gone, the horror I’ll send stalking you will be worse than anything you can imagine lurking in the tower.”

He nodded, backing away. Silent as they left, he stood as a red dawn succumbed to harsh daylight. The adventurers and their retinue grew smaller with distance. At last, they became so indistinct that his keen old eyes could only make out the black of Addala’s robe, and the hunched speck of his friend behind her.

Belay’s camels bellowed, apprehensive as he lost sight of Skalos. He turned and walked to his animals, a tear parting the dust upon his cheek.



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Blue Boar Press



SciFanSat News



Fizzy Twizler
for
A Date to Remember



Issue 4 Prompt

SciFanSat

The Monthly E-Zine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!

Theme:
Water

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