

# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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# **Jersey Devil Press**

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## Editor's Note

This is the one-hundred-twenty-fifth issue of the magazine Eirik Gumeny and Monica Rodriguez founded in 2009, and their coffee rings and home-fry fingerprints linger on every page like indelible diner marginalia. Jersey Devil Press was created as a haunted hotel for misfit stories and castaway poop jokes, and as successive caretakers (our production editor Sam Snoek-Brown, my predecessor Mike Sweeney, and me) have moved into the gloriously strange edifice they built, we've done our best to keep it that way.

As some of you may already know, Eirik died on July 8 from complications related to cystic fibrosis. And even that didn't stop him from being awesome—as a recipient of upcycled lungs himself, he chose to be an organ donor with a full understanding of what a difference it would make to a handful of people he would never meet. So at least some material parts of him are still out there knocking around in the world. And we have his words, which are immortal. Eirik's stories and essays showcase his exceptional talent for both broad and subtle comedy, but they also have a tendency to deal roundhouse kicks straight to the feelings when you least expect it. If you haven't read his stuff, you have been missing out and should treat yourself as soon as possible.

As a way of channeling a little of the grief of losing my friend into something meaningful, here are some specific things I believe Eirik would have enjoyed about this issue:

The humorously painful possibilities of the second line in Azzam Alkadhi's "Grace."

The irreverently casual voice of Betsy Streater's "Genesis 1 Chapter 1 H1C1."

The resonance of the sound and movement in John Repp's haiku.

The wonderfully absurd (yet profound) premise of Merri Andrew's "On the Job at IBIS."

The generous use of expressive adverbs in Toni Artuso's "Along the Banks of the Charles River."

The presence of Godzilla *and* Michael Crichton in Rob Tyler's "Retroscopy," as well as the way it evokes wistful longing without lapsing into sentimentality.

I miss you, Eirik. Wherever you are now, I hope you have a great view of the cosmos.

— Laura Garrison

# Grace

Azzam Alkadhi

My second kiss.  
The less said about my first, the better.

My second kiss and my first girlfriend.  
Maybe not girlfriend,  
I really don't know.

I remember wet snogs  
And my tongue scraping against braces.  
I remember holding hands  
Outside KFC on Gloucester Road.  
I remember buying her flowers.  
I remember struggling to get my hand down her trousers.  
I remember being nervous and embarrassed  
All the time.

I remember seeing her photo,  
Years later,  
In the Evening Standard.  
I don't remember why it was there,  
But I remember sitting on the Tube  
And vaguely recognising that face.

That's all I remember really.  
I don't know if she remembers much about me.  
And I don't really care.  
But it's an inextricable part of both of our stories.  
Paths which are probably so blindingly different,  
Or unique.  
But which were vaguely the same  
For a few short weeks  
Back in 1999. Ish.

**AZZAM ALKADHI** (@autistic.peacock.poetry) was born in London, UK, to Iraqi parents, and most recently spent eleven years living in Bogota, Colombia, before moving to Dubai last year. So he's clearly confused. Ever since he was ten and his cat died, poetry has been the easiest way for him to process and understand the complexities of a world that can seem overwhelmingly perplexing for somebody on the spectrum.



# Genesis 1 Chapter 1 H1C1

**Betsy Streeter**

One time, there was no time, because there was no space. God needed more room to breathe and so God stretched out a little. Stuff went flying everywhere and it was hilarious because everything was crashing into everything else and making big and ridiculous noises.

Things were unevenly distributed like toys on the floor of a child's room. Bits and pieces got stuck together and started whizzing around one another over and over and the resulting display was really shiny and God loved looking at it all which was the same as looking at oneself the mirror wearing a new outfit.

So there were the bigger planet and galaxy accidents, and at the same time there were also tiny little cells and bits of organic stuff running into each other, and in one place and time in particular a cell ate another cell but then for some reason the eaten one survived and together they became a two-cell thing, which was a whole new kettle of fish before there were fish.

The cells got ideas because God got ideas and the whole thing became an infinite Lego set and new forms and creatures abounded. A lot of these were half-baked and some didn't work at all or they got too hot or too cold and vanished.

But the cells/God got more and more tricky and teamed up together and soon there were whole-ass animals walking around and migrating and eating each other and even the plants sometimes ate each other and this was how God looked at God.

The dolphins and the orcas had a lot to say and so did the elephants and the bees and now pretty much everyone was going on about something and it got really noisy and God wondered what it would be like to have an actual conversation, more like a bit of a fireside chat. That would require some real engineering. God knew it might not come out on the first attempt or even the fiftieth but thought it would be worth the effort probably.

God got some bipedal things going and they developed all sorts of skills and some went in the trees and others didn't and some of those non-tree ones seemed like they had some potential as conversation partners. God knew this was going to be a trade-off because what if they never did shut up. But it was worth a try and God knew the slate could be wiped clean any time so why not. That's what happened to the big lizards when a colossal rock came in and altered things in a way no longer hospitable to their kind. This sort of thing went down from time to time. It was all interesting.

Some of the bipedal things started getting the hang of language and got into some interesting exchanges with God right from the get-go. Now God could talk to God in another way besides all the dolphins and orcas and bees and things eating and chasing each other around.

God said to the bipedal things, don't underestimate what a big deal it is that your front paws are freed up from walking and you have thumbs. I also gave you a particularly lumpy brain. It gives you the capacity for long-term thinking, for what that's worth. It comes up with things like music and algebra and cuisine. It imagines things that haven't happened yet, and which may never

happen. This is so we can hang out and talk about our ideas and how we are feeling.

This is not my first rodeo, said God. I have tried this before and it did not go well. Since I'm God I've rolled back time and made some adjustments and cued up the record again, more than once. This time around, I've turned the ego knob way down and added the H1C1 molecule.

Human person looked quizzical. They asked what's the H1C1 molecule? Also what is a rodeo?

Don't worry about it, God said. You will know both of these things when you see them.

God gave human person a tour. God said, look at all these mountains and oceans and life forms. It is all breathing life in and out in its own way and on its own time scale. Every one of these things is here simply because it is here, just like you are.

The human person was blown away. Their eyes were big. More human people came along and they were blown away too. They walked around just gaping in amazement at everything on the earth. The seed pods and the little eggs in rows on the undersides of leaves. The goo in tide pools. Hail. Spider webs. It was all just mind-boggling.

One day, after human person spoken language had been going on for a while, a human person looked around said, Holy Cow!

There it is, said God. That's the H1C1 molecule. Holy, and Cow.

This is just unbelievable, another human person said. Look here, look there. You can spend a whole lifetime looking and still not see it all. Holy Cow! This played out all over the earth, again and again.

The human people set about learning everything they could, just like God wanted because God wanted to learn. They became eyes and ears and fingers and feet over a whole entire planet. They invented ways to magnify bugs and amoebas and to look at objects that were far away. They studied and they measured and they took readings. They dug holes. They swam in the deep with special equipment. They climbed things. Every time they discovered a new creature or phenomenon or panoramic view they said, Holy Cow!

They told stories about what they saw. They made pictures of it and movies about it. They did dances and sang songs. God thought, well this experiment is going to a whole place I had not anticipated. And that was good.

The human people befriended animals that had better noses or could fly or whatnot, so they could gather even more information. They shared all this with God.

And God felt something unfamiliar. And the human people said, you feel like you are not alone, just like we are not alone. And God knew this was right. God was not lonely any more.

God made a quiet and cool breeze that gently touched the hair of the human people as they slept on their backs after a long evening of gazing up at the stars.

*H/T to Slaughterhouse 5 by Kurt Vonnegut, Orbital by Samantha Harvey, the Bible, An Immense World by Ed Yong*

**BETSY STREETER** is an artist, cartoonist, illustrator and writer. She once figured out how to score infinite points on Space Invaders for the Atari 2800. She is the creator of the Brainwaves cartoon feature which ran in syndication and appears all over the world in books, magazines, waiting rooms and refrigerator doors. She writes and draws Sloth and Manatee, a contemplative comic about nature and friendship. She has appeared previously in Jersey Devil Press with the story “Del, We’re Sorry, Please Stop” and the artwork for the cover of the March 2014 issue. She lives in the San Francisco East Bay. See more about her at [betsystreeter.com](http://betsystreeter.com).

## haiku

John Repp

thick heat—  
oak branch clatters down—  
our son kicks

**JOHN REPP** is a poet, fiction writer, folk photographer, and digital collagist living in Erie, Pennsylvania. Broadstone Books published his most recent collection, *The Soul of Rock & Roll: Poems Acoustic, Electric & Remixed, 1980-2020*.

## On the Job at IBIS

Merri Andrew

When recruiting, the first thing Tricia looked at was the candidate's orientation to Mess. She ruled out those who had too much of a crusading spirit, those who seemed to think Mess was evil. Of course, controlling Mess was vital for survival, but extreme thinking was contrary to the spirit and function of In Balance Inoculation Service (IBIS).

Tricia's latest recruit, Kevin, had the right kind of attitude, she thought. As they walked up the steps to his first job, she observed him approvingly: confident, polite, concerned for the client's wellbeing. And he had studied at UTyn, the best college for Mess Studies, where the great Professor Deborah Cantworth had first isolated, measured and photographed the fundamental building block of Mess—the inevitron.

Tricia herself had done a summer school at UTyn, as preparation for setting up IBIS. After Kevin's interview they enjoyed a few pleasant minutes reminiscing about the old campus, its raucous sticky-floored bar and musty lecture theatres, Professor Cantworth's eerie brilliance and intimidating aura. Tricia hired him on the spot, in her mind, although of course she checked his references and waited a dignified two days before calling him with an offer.

As he lifted his hand to knock on the door of his first call-out, Tricia could see that Kevin was wary but not frightened of Mess. That was important. She excluded at least one or two in each recruitment round who were recklessly blasé about the danger.

Some even held quasi-religious ideas about the value of Mess, about preserving it against the forces of modernity. They tended to speak at length about ‘wild spaces’ and how human immune systems needed to be exposed to dirt. Tricia was sympathetic to their cause, but IBIS was a pragmatic, solution-oriented business, not a church.

Now she watched as Kevin rapped his knuckles on the client’s door with just the right level of assertiveness, then stepped back politely. Or was not so much politeness as self-preservation? Tricia had told him about recent client visits that turned out to be ambushes: as soon as the door opened, she’d met a barrage of invective. All predictable Eliminationist stuff, delivered in that high-handed brittle tone they had. Just words, she told herself, just words. But the shock and hurt of it had lingered long after, and the disgusted way they had looked at her, as if she herself was contaminated, the pity and hatred in their faces—well, now she questioned clients a little more before agreeing to a home visit, and she never went alone.

Kevin looked over as they waited and gave her a friendly smile, and she was glad for his presence. When the door opened, she was relieved to see the client was a quiet, slightly stooped man, with long, delicate hands emerging from slightly too-short shirt sleeves. He welcomed them in, but seemed to shrink away from their gazes.

“May we look around?” Tricia asked, keen to get down to business.

A large photograph of a woman with chaotic red hair and playful eyes hung in the entry hall, and a candle burned with a neatly-trimmed wick just beneath. Apart from the image of the woman, though, everything was sterile.



Already Tricia could detect the tell-tale signs: the scoured surfaces, the strong smell of cleaning products and, most notably, the utter lack of clutter. Not a set of keys on the bench, not a book left on a table, or a coaster ready to receive a cup. Not a bag slumped against the wall or a tossed-aside brochure to be seen.

Everything was put away. And she guessed too that, unfortunately for this client, if she were to open a cupboard there would be no unruly cascade of objects escaping. This was not a healthy, superficial clean, with pockets of clutter and dust establishing the necessary equilibrium. This was the kind of dangerous, total clean that IBIS existed to correct.

The beep of the inevitrometer in Kevin's hand confirmed her assessment: levels in the thousands, well above the safe range (0-800in). It was a good thing they'd come now. Even one more day and there'd be an interpllosion.

It was happening more and more now. Tricia herself had seen it twice, and she wasn't keen on a third time. Especially with Kevin by her side, on his first day. She really didn't want to have to recruit again, after the last interpllosion had led to the Cora's resignation.

Cora had been a very good employee, for the two months leading up to the interpllosion. Tricia tried to explain to Cora at the outset what an interpllosion was like, what it was they were trying to prevent, but it was different actually seeing it in someone's home, or what was left of someone's home: the photographs with faces and hands erased; the howling hole in the centre of the master bedroom, and the heartrending weeping coming from it; the children's toys ground to a chunky dust the texture of cremated

human remains and sprinkled evenly (so evenly) over their stripped and empty rooms. Cora could not handle it.

In short, an interpllosion was not just a mess but a malevolent dis-ordering of home. And it lingered like a curse or radioactivity, so that even long after an interpllosion was cleaned up, things happened. A man mopping the floor would look down to see the water had turned to muck, and he'd smeared it over half the kitchen floor. During the night, all members of a household would dream the same dream: every wall of the home fallen, the interior exposed, the roof gone, nothing to protect them. Refrigerators would stop working and food would spoil. The effects were not fatal, but accumulated to destroy the feeling of safety and comfort that should come with 'home'.

Tricia would not wish it on her worst enemy, she certainly would not let it happen to this nice man—she checked the intake log—Carl.

She noticed that Kevin looked a little nervous now that they were in the unstable and sterile confines of the house. Good, he has a brain in his head, she thought.

She did hope Kevin wouldn't get supernatural about it. There were still those who wanted to blame ghosts, or evil spirits. There was even one cult that had sprung up where members purposely tried to bring on interplussions, thinking it would put them in touch with the divine.

Ridiculous, Tricia thought, the divine what? Divine task of picking crushed heirlooms out of your sugar-bowl? Divine cost of replacing every blue item in the house because now it smelled permanently of roadkill? Divine chore of sifting through the compost bin to retrieve your daughter's coin collection?

Totally unnecessary, when Professor Cantworth had definitively identified the mechanism by which the charge built up and then interploded. And by extension, how to prevent it, as IBIS was employed to do.

“It’s best if you wait outside, Carl, or elsewhere,” Tricia said gently. “We only need half an hour.”

Reluctantly Carl left, lingering by the bedroom door, and they got to work.

One of the rules was to work with what you had. If there was a lid without a pen lying in a drawer, good! Move it up onto the top of the dresser, perhaps behind a picture so that the resident wouldn’t see it and tidy it back away. If there were a few too many books crammed side by side, take one and place it across, atop the others. But just one; the aim was to incrementally increase the untidiness just enough to bring the inevitron levels down, without alarming the resident and setting off a new round of cleaning.

Kevin got to work in the living room, un-straightening cushions and tilting the rug just a degree off square. Tricia watched approvingly for a moment, then set off to tackle the kitchen: the epicentre of Mess mitigation, as well as the heart of the home.

Just then Tricia heard a light tapping from the back of the house. Kevin poked his head out into the hallway too. It got closer, pausing now and then as if... someone... stopping: There was a woman in the hallway. She was dressed from neck to boot-tip in stern navy twill. Her cane tapped on the spotless hardwood floor, landing next to the newly un-straightened rug, which she bent to inspect before pushing it square again with the end of her stick.

Tricia and Kevin gawked. The woman was somehow seven or eight feet tall, but her face was meek, a beige embroidery of

features. When she spoke, the menacing judgement of her tone contrasting jarringly with her mild expression.

“Fools. It has taken humanity millennia to crawl from the muck, and now you want us to live up to our necks in it?”

She pivoted her whole body in even, jerky increments to address a point near Kevin, but not quite him.

“Never!” she continued, “My mother, her mother, and all our foremothers did not sweat and toil so we could compromise with filth. You spit on their labour at your peril!”

After this speech she was awkward still for some seconds. Then she turned back, bit by bit, lay her cane perfectly parallel to the skirting board, and picked up a bucket and scrubbing brush that had not been there before.

Tricia thought about her foremothers. Until her mother’s generation, they certainly did all spend a great deal of time cleaning.

Her own grandmother was rounder and less stern than the tall woman, but she was similarly determined to push back the tide of disorder. Tricia remembered sitting next to her on her sofa, in front of a symmetrical array of best china she didn’t dare touch. Her grandmother rearranged the folds of Tricia’s dress on the sofa between them, making a neat pattern of three equal pleats, and then when Tricia wriggled and the folds shifted out of place, her grandmother delicately scoffed and flared her fine nostrils, as if she was at once disappointed and unsurprised.

Tricia’s mother had laughed and snorted her tea into droplets that rained onto the expensive rug. They retreated soon after to their blessedly chaotic flat. This was where Tricia’s mother worked on her collages and drawings, which spilled out of the tiny

sunroom she used as a studio, landing everywhere and especially under the furniture. There, they clogged the vacuum, causing a high panicked whir in the motor every time they did a proper clean-up (every three months or so).

During one cleaning session, Tricia's mother accidentally spilled the vacuum bag, scattering its contents onto the sunroom floor. Instead of despairing, she stepped carefully over the dirt to fetch her camera and photograph the mess, complete with magazine clippings, kitchen skerricks, pen scribbles and curls of coloured paper as well as dust and tangles of hair, before vacuuming it all up again. The resulting photos, blown up to A2 size and saturated with colour, had looked like ornate Liberty-style prints, almost floral until you looked closer and saw the dried peas and snipped fingernails.

Tricia generally felt, and thought again now, that her upbringing uniquely prepared her for this line of work. Work that this monstrous apparition, or assemblage, or actor was trying to end. The massive figure stepped forward, holding the brush like a weapon, and Tricia was suddenly very sure of her corporeality. That brush, too, now seemed terrifyingly solid, its bristles sharper and stiffer than they should be.

The figure was close enough now that Tricia could see the warp and weft of her lapel, the powdery folds of her neck, and she could smell something organic and... human.

Just then Kevin dashed forward, past the menacing figure, towards the back hallway. Coward! Tricia thought. She should have hired that other candidate instead, the tough-looking woman who had just come out of the army.

"Kevin!" Tricia called.

The tall woman turned to follow Kevin's movement, her brush scraping ugly gouges along the spotless wall.

Tricia saw then that Kevin was not fleeing; he was tackling someone in the bedroom doorway — Carl!

Carl gripped an ancient mother-of-pearl comb, large and luminous, angling it towards the tall woman as Kevin collided with him. The comb jerked upwards, and the tall woman raised her vicious brush in a matching movement. Tricia saw what Kevin had already understood — that Carl was controlling the big woman somehow with the comb.

Kevin wrestled Carl for the comb, jerking it around wildly, and with it the towering figure of the woman, until Tricia ducked under the swinging brush and applied an upward elbow-hit to make Carl release the comb. Kevin slammed his foot down on it quickly, holding it in place away from Carl.

The large woman fell like an oak, smashing a side-table and spilling water from a broken vase all over the silk cushions.

Good, thought Tricia. They hadn't gotten very far with the inoculation process and she was sure the inevitron levels were still dangerously high. This new damage would help.

Tricia looked down and saw she was holding Carl's wrists and his face was turned to the side, tears welling in the hollow of his uppermost eye. She loosened her grip but didn't let go.

"What are you doing?" she shouted. She felt weirdly calm and the harshness of her voice surprised her. Only now did she notice the adrenaline cramping in her veins as her pulse slowed.

"They said... they said, if I helped with this, they'd try to bring back my wife, or at least let me talk to her."

Tricia thought of the painting in the entrance hall, the mischievous, wild-haired woman, and loosened her grip further.

“They? Who’s they?”

Carl didn’t answer.

“Now they won’t help me, and I’ll never see her again,” he moaned, turning his pitiful face towards Carl and the tall woman as if to enlist their support.

The tall woman had recovered a little but stayed down on all fours, scouring a patch of the polished floor so hard that motes of wood dust were floating, glowing around her in the light from the frosted glass of the back door. Stripped of its varnish, the wood looked raw and pale. She took no interest in their conversation, caring only for her task, in which she seemed to be stuck, like a wind-up toy whirring against a wall.

“Who’s they?” Tricia repeated, louder, and moved her hands up to shake Carl’s shoulders.

Kevin picked up the comb, which glowed intermittently.

“Eliminationists,” Kevin said, indicating the small inlaid design on one end of the comb—a stylised broom inside a circle.

“It was all them,” Carl said, “I only held the comb. And controlled Edith. Oh, and I wrote her speech. I was a political speechwriter before I retired,” he ended, a trace of pride briefly eclipsing his fear.

Tricia tightened her grip on his shoulders.

She gestured to the tall woman. “Is she...?”

Despite being pinned to the ground, Carl seemed to relish the chance to explain.

“Dead? Oh no. Well, not in a singular sense.”

Kevin and Tricia exchanged an eyeroll. Whatever his pitiful reasons, they'd make sure this sneaky gasbag wouldn't get away unpunished.

"She is an amalgam of matriarchs and mothers past," Carl continued. "The Elims made her from family photos, stories, clothes, brushes, buckets—but the interesting thing is that she was activated by sweat."

The smell, Tricia thought.

"You know a lot for someone who was hardly involved," Kevin said.

Carl blinked and then continued his explanation, eyes shining excitedly.

"All the district members, when they were doing their housework, they collected their sweat."

Gross, thought Tricia. Carl seemed to want to explain further, but Kevin interrupted, bringing the comb down swiftly onto his upswinging knee, breaking it in two.

"So, the aim was what, scare us into shutting down IBIS?" Tricia asked.

Silence from Carl.

"Worse? You were going to make her hurt us?"

Tricia glanced around and they all turned to see that the giant woman was gone, together with her bucket and brush. More fine wood dust rose from the patch of floor she had been scrubbing and faint sounds came from the kitchen.

Tricia dragged Carl to his feet and Kevin held his other arm as they followed the clink of crockery. Edith was bent over, looking in the fridge. Her brush and bucket lay abandoned by the door. One hard, clean, short-nailed finger tapped the outside of the fridge



door as she looked, finally pulling out a container of cake and placing it on the table.

“Edith,” Carl hissed, “the mission!”

She glanced at him blankly and turned back to the dishwasher, which had just finished its cycle and popped open, steam rising. Edith opened it, pulled out a warm, clean spoon and held it up to the light.

Her plain, neutral face softened and a smile spread across her features as she sat down, still staring at the spoon. Her huge knees bumped at the table as the layers of navy twill squeezed under.

“Edith!” Carl called. There was no response and he muttered, “The codeword...” before calling out again to her: “Hygiene! Hygiene!”

Carl tried to grab the pieces of comb from Kevin, but Kevin pulled them away. In doing so, he knocked a plastic magnet off the fridge. They all looked at it lying there on the floor. It was a vibrant purple against the polished wooden boards. A little Mess, beautiful. A shifting beam of light touched its edge and ignited a violet glow. Mum would love that, Tricia thought.

Carl moved to pick up the magnet but Kevin put his foot on it and shook his head.

They stood listening to the sound of Edith’s spoon rhythmically clinking on the glass container, watching the pleasure she took in devouring half the raspberry vanilla sponge cake. When she had eaten her fill, Edith put the dirty spoon straight onto the table, pushed the dish away, and put her head down on her arms. A moment later two narrow black boots flopped out from under the table with a flump. They stayed where they landed.

“Don’t you bother her!” Tricia whispered menacingly to Carl, as she let him go. “She needs her rest.”

The inevitrometer clicked gently from the other room and Tricia could tell from the tone that it was now showing around 900—almost in the safe range, thanks to Edith. Maybe, Tricia thought... would she have room in her team for another worker? A decision for another day, she told herself, taking a loose button from her pocket and dropping it into the fruit bowl.

“Payment is thirty days, Carl,” Tricia said.

She glanced at the large piece of cream and berry cake that remained.

“You can wait outside while we finish up here.”

**MERRI ANDREW** is a writer who lives on Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country in Canberra, Australia. Her work can be found in *Strange Horizons*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, *Corporeal*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Daikaijuzine* and *Antipodean SF*. Merri enjoys

baking, naps, and watching praying mantises. You can read more of her work at [www.merriandrew.com](http://www.merriandrew.com)

# Along the Banks of the Charles River

Toni Artuso

I tread gingerly, crunching on mud  
made suddenly solid  
by capricious Arctic blasts  
that throw Spring's thaw into reverse.

I stop,  
arrested by the rustle of chimes:  
thin, delicate music from

a bed of upstart tulips,  
red-and-yellow flashes  
in a miry field.

Swaying on spindly stems,  
tossed by the bitter breeze,  
frozen brittle petals become bells,

until the next warm day,  
when they will brown, curl,  
fall into the softened muck.

**TONI ARTUSO** (she/her/hers) is a trans female writer from Salem, Massachusetts. Her verse has appeared in *Honeyguide Literary Magazine*, which nominated one of her villanelles for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Her poems have also appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Eclectica*, *Space City Underground Literary Magazine*, *samfiftyfour*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *Molecule*, *Salamander*, *The Cackling Kettle*, *The Lyric*, *Star\*Line*, and *Ibbetson Street Press*. X (Twitter): @TAltrina. Instagram: @tonialtrina.

## Retroscopy

Rob Tyler

The night Godzilla blew through town, Jake fought claustrophobia with a hundred other people in a bomb shelter beneath the basement of their cold-war-era apartment building. The ventilation was bad and the only light came from a string of bare bulbs hanging from the vaulted concrete ceiling.

He sat on a rusted iron bench next to the cute blonde he'd seen coming and going from 7b.

"This room was designed to withstand a 20-megaton airburst directly overhead," he said.

She turned to him. "Godzilla could crush this building like it was made of papier-mâché and bury us alive under 30 feet of rubble," she said, "We'd suffocate in hours."

She had pale skin and big hazel eyes. He liked her shape.

"What do you do for a living?" he asked.

"I'm a salad holographer," she said.

"Is there much call for that?"

"Vegetables are scarce and they don't last. People pay me lots of money to take holographs of fancy salads they make for special occasions. To decorate their dining table, or whatever."

The all-clear sounded. Someone opened the lead-lined blast door and they filed up a dank, narrow stairway to the laundry room, between rows of washers and dryers, past a wall of electric meters, and up another set of stairs into the lobby.

"What do you do," she said.

"Retroscopy. I'm a relevancy evaluator."

“Relevancy of what?”

“People,” he said. “DOD nineteen sixty-five to two thousand fifteen. The Hindsight Project.”

They walked out to the street. The sun was setting behind the shattered downtown skyline. A warm breeze, bearing the minty smell of benzene, came from the river.

“Cool,” she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “What, exactly, makes someone relevant?”

“If they might have made a difference.”

“What kind of difference?”

“You name it. There are thousands of criteria. I evaluate for precognition.”

“No kidding.”

Across the street, debris crashed to the sidewalk. A small Asian man in a dirty white tee-shirt and khakis shoveled drywall and a broken toilet through a crescent-shaped gap in the wall four stories up.

“They made Godzilla movies a hundred years ago,” Jake said. “Incredible likeness—same fiery breath, same screechy cry. Someone precogged him.”

“A lot of good it did us.”

“That’s just it,” he said, “they had no idea what they were dealing with. Ya gotta wonder, what else has been overlooked?”

“So...you’re a government agent, rummaging through the past, trying to change the future?”

“Did I mention,” he said, “that if I told you all this, I’d have to kill you?”

She laughed. They walked to the corner and crossed to the park, wending their way past splintered maples and a dry marble fountain.

She said, "What do you do when you find someone relevant?"

"Send back a message. Point them in the right direction. Help them prevent this," he said, spreading his arms. "For what it costs per kilobyte-year, we can't say much, but it's better than nothing."

Michael Crichton left the nondescript ranch house in the LA suburbs and headed home to his place in Monterey. He'd just spent four hours on the astral plane with a spiritual guide, traveling through time. The experience had left him exhausted but exhilarated and absolutely convinced — after years of doubt and experimentation — that there were vast realms of psychic power that were being ignored by the scientific establishment.

He'd just published *Travels*, which had been received with mixed reviews by readers who had come to expect from him a steady stream of science fiction and fast-action thrillers. By contrast, in *Travels*, he explored his adventures across careers and continents, and to the puzzlement of many, his experience with psychedelic drugs, altered states, and prognostication. His editors urged him to stick to what he was best known for — money-making page-turners like *The Andromeda Strain* and *Westworld*. But his imagination extended far beyond cheap entertainment.

Ideas blossomed in his head as he drove. He was in a unique position to change conventional thinking about the capabilities of the human mind. He had scientific credentials, celebrity status, and



wealth. He envisioned a foundation for psychic research, funded in perpetuity by royalties from his novels and movies...

When he got home, he sat down to compose a message to his agent. As he waited for his PC to boot, his modem came to life.

"What the hell," he said, "That's not supposed to happen." Then the monitor turned itself on. QUIT SMOKING, in blocky DOS characters, flashed across the screen.

He'd never been hacked before, but there was a first time for everything.

"Fuck you," he said, and shut down. He lit up his 35th cigarette of the day and concentrated on balancing his chi. If his computer was compromised, he'd buy another. Meanwhile he could develop his ideas for the foundation. He took a deep drag and exhaled with satisfaction. There was plenty of time.

**ROB TYLER** lives in a barn on thirty acres of scrubland in Upstate New York. His short stories and flash fiction have appeared in *Jersey Devil Press*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *10 By 10 Flash Fiction Stories*, *Pif Magazine*, *the Schuylkill Valley Journal*, and elsewhere, and have been produced as podcasts by Manawaker Studio and by Disturbing Frequencies, a project of Rochester Speculative Literature Association. When not writing, Rob can be found wrangling his feral cat, pulling up knotweed by the roots, or shooting pool at the local watering hole.





On the cover:

**“Endless Night Sky”**

**SAMUEL SNOEK-BROWN** is the production editor for Jersey Devil Press. He took this photo of the night sky while on a writing retreat in central Washington. Go there, or anywhere away from highways and city lights, somewhere alone out in the strange country where mysteries might lurk in the darkness of the whispering trees, and look up on some moonless night, and think about who might be looking back.