

Greetings and welcome to the Issue 0 of *Mothership Zeta*!

Issue 0 is a small reprint issue of some of our favorite stories from 2015. It's a special issue aligned with the Worldcon in Spokane, WA, USA this year.

Mothership Zeta, like our podcast sister, [Escape Pod](#), is looking for fun stories. There have been a lot of questions as to what "fun" is, and I suppose it's like art or pornography: we know it when we see it. But here's the thing: fun doesn't always have to mean funny. One of my favorite stories from *Escape Pod* was [Midnight Blue](#) by Will McIntosh. It's a story about a poor kid finding a rare magical item, and what he decides to do with it. It's immensely satisfying.

Satisfying is a good word that goes hand in hand with fun. When the story ends, you don't have that Greek tragedy feeling of "OH GOD IF THEY HAD JUST DONE X OR Y IT WOULDN'T HAVE ENDED LIKE THIS?" A fun story will more often than not have a happy ending. (Exception: *Cabin in the Woods*. Super fun movie. Super not-happy ending. Although I don't think anyone cried at the end. It was satisfying.)

Connie Willis (who writes amazingly fun stories, you should check them out) once told me that comedy and tragedy are very similar, only one ends in death and the other one ends in a wedding (if you're Shakespeare anyway).

I like to think of comedy making you feel satisfied and tragedy making you ache. We at *Mothership Zeta* appreciate a good ache story, but what we are publishing are the satisfying stories.

Thanks for checking us out, and please take the time to listen to our sister podcasts, [Escape Pod](#), [Podcastle](#), and [Pseudopod](#), and enjoy our trial issue! Our first full issue will be out this October!

Mur Lafferty, Editor-in-Chief



Karen Bovenmyer
Assistant Editor, Nonfiction

Welcome aboard, earthlings!

I'm excited and happy to be part of the *Mothership Zeta* team. We hope our nonfiction offerings are just as fun and uplifting as our fiction—future issues will feature reviews, science articles, and editorials on all things speculative fiction, including an ongoing *Story Doctor* feature by industry veteran and award-winning author James Patrick Kelly.

In this, our "teaser issue" of *Mothership Zeta*, I've asked authors Elizabeth Hand (World Fantasy Award winner) and Bonnie Stufflebeam (one of the brightest rising stars in short fiction) to weigh in on favorite speculative work of 2014 so you don't miss any of the wonderful novels and short stories published last year.

Welcome to the *Mothership*! There is no need to keep your hands and arms inside the vehicle, and you may shout WHEE as loud as you like.



Welcome to Issue 0 of *Mothership Zeta*, which contains fun stories like “Jackalope Wives,” a story I assumed was sad and tragic because it won awards.

Think about that for a second.

As a culture we seem to have equated quality with tragedy. The typical awards ballot is largely devoid of stories most people would consider “fun.” Enjoyable. Satisfying. Charming. Delightful. The stories that tend to make the rounds on Twitter, the Important ones, usually strike a nerve because they make people cry. And I get this, honestly I do: when I made a list of some of my favorite stories from last year, they were serious, emotionally-wrenching pieces. I’ve been conditioned to believe that those must have been the *best* stories. That a lighter story is automatically lesser. And so the fun stories are less recognized; the fun stories are less frequently aspired to.

When Mur asked me to join her new magazine that would focus on putting more fun stories out into the world, I couldn’t say no. I want to make people laugh. Make them smile. Maybe even make them hurt a little, but just a little, before the sunshine bursts through the clouds and fills their hearts. We write to induce emotions in our readers: why not induce positive emotions? A story can be both *fun* and *good*.

I’m excited to be a part of this project, and I hope we inspire people to write fun stories. The world needs far more of them.

Sunil Patel
Assistant Editor, Fiction

STORY:

JACKALOPE WIVES

BY URSULA VERNON

NONFICTION:

BEST BOOKS OF 2014

BY ELIZABETH HAND

STORY:

**THE CASE OF THE
PASSIONLESS BEES**

BY RHONDA EIKAMP

STORY:

DOUBLE TIME

BY JOHN CHU

NONFICTION:

BEST STORIES OF 2014

BY BONNIE JO STUFFLEBEAM

STORY:

THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

BY ANDREA G. STEWART

COMING SOON

THANKS!

Ursula Vernon is a gardener, artist, and author. She won a Hugo Award for her epic graphic story, *Digger*, and a Nebula for this story, which is considerably shorter (it's also nominated for the World Fantasy Award). "Jackalope Wives" was originally published in *Apex Magazine* in Jan. 2014. At the 2015 Worldcon, it was the recipient of a rare Alfie Award, given by George R.R. Martin at the Hugo Losers' Party. Ursula is humble and approaches her awards with a sense of pleased bafflement. While sporting many tattoos, she still hasn't gotten one that says, "I won a Hugo/Nebula" in Klingon script, no matter how often people encourage her. She excels in fairy tale retellings and stories with anthropomorphic animals. Her children's book *Hamster Princess: Harriet the Invincible* just came out a few weeks ago.

JACKALOPE WIVES

BY URSULA VERNON

The moon came up and the sun went down. The moonbeams went shattering down to the ground and the jackalope wives took off their skins and danced.

They danced like young deer pawing the ground, they danced like devils let out of hell for the evening. They swung their hips and pranced and drank their fill of cactus-fruit wine.

They were shy creatures, the jackalope wives, though there was nothing shy about the way they danced. You could go your whole life and see no more of them than the flash of a tail vanishing around the backside of a boulder. If you were lucky, you might catch a whole line of them outlined against the sky, on the top of a bluff, the shadow of horns rising off their brows.

And on the half-moon, when new and full were balanced across the saguaro's thorns, they'd come down to the desert and dance.

The young men used to get together and whisper, saying they were gonna catch them a jackalope wife. They'd lay belly down at the edge of the bluff and look down on the fire and the dancing shapes—and they'd go away aching, for all the good it did them.

For the jackalope wives were shy of humans. Their lovers were jackrabbits and antelope bucks, not human men. You

couldn't even get too close or they'd take fright and run away. One minute you'd see them kicking their heels up and hear them laugh, then the music would freeze and they'd all look at you with their eyes wide and their ears upswept.

The next second, they'd snatch up their skins and there'd be nothing left but a dozen skinny she-rabbits running off in all directions, and a campfire left that wouldn't burn out 'til morning.

It was uncanny, sure, but they never did anybody any harm. Grandma Harken, who lived down past the well, said that the jackalopes were the daughters of the rain and driving them off would bring on the drought. People said they didn't believe a word of it, but when you live in a desert, you don't take chances.

When the wild music came through town, a couple of notes skittering on the sand, then people knew the jackalope wives were out. They kept the dogs tied up and their brash sons occupied. The town got into the habit of having a dance that night, to keep the boys firmly fixed on human girls and to drown out the notes of the wild music.

Now, it happened there was a young man in town who had a touch of magic on him. It had come down to him on his mother's side, as happens now and again, and it was worse than useless.

A little magic is worse than none, for it draws the wrong sort of attention. It gave this young man feverish eyes and made him sullen. His grandmother used to tell him that it was a miracle he hadn't been drowned as a child, and for her he'd laugh, but not for anyone else.

He was tall and slim and had dark hair and young women found him fascinating.

This sort of thing happens often enough, even with boys as mortal as dirt. There's always one who learned how to brood early and often, and always girls who think they can heal him.

Eventually the girls learn better. Either the hurts are petty little things and they get tired of whining or the hurt's so deep and wide that they drown in it. The smart ones heave themselves back to shore and the slower ones wake up married with a husband who lies around and suffers in their direction. It's part of a dance as old as the jackalopes themselves.

But in this town at this time, the girls hadn't learned and the boy hadn't yet worn out his interest. At the dances, he leaned on the wall with his hands in his pockets and his eyes glittering. Other young men eyed him with dislike. He would slip away early, before the dance was ended, and never marked the eyes that followed him and wished that he would stay.

He himself had one thought and one thought only—to catch a jackalope wife.

They were beautiful creatures, with their long brown legs and their bodies splashed orange by the firelight. They had faces like no mortal woman and they moved like quicksilver and they played music that got down into your bones and thrummed like a sickness.

And there was one—he'd seen her. She danced farther out from the others and her horns were short and sharp as sickles. She was the last one to put on her rabbit skin when the sun came up. Long after the music had stopped, she danced to the rhythm of her own long feet on the sand.

(And now you will ask me about the musicians that played for the jackalope wives. Well, if you can find a place where they've been dancing, you might see something like sidewinder tracks in the dust, and more than that I cannot tell you. The desert chews its secrets right down to the bone.)

So the young man with the touch of magic watched the jackalope wife dancing and you know as well as I do what young men dream about. We will be charitable. She danced a little apart from her fellows, as he walked a little apart from his.

Perhaps he thought she might understand him. Perhaps he found her as interesting as the girls found him.

Perhaps we shouldn't always get what we think we want.

And the jackalope wife danced, out past the circle of the music and the firelight, in the light of the fierce desert stars.

Grandma Harken had settled in for the evening with a shawl on her shoulders and a cat on her lap when somebody started

hammering on the door.

"Grandma! Grandma! Come quick—open the door—oh god, Grandma, you have to help me—"

She knew that voice just fine. It was her own grandson, her daughter Eva's boy. Pretty and useless and charming when he set out to be.

She dumped the cat off her lap and stomped to the door. What trouble had the young fool gotten himself into?

"Sweet Saint Anthony," she muttered, "let him not have gotten some fool girl in a family way. That's just what we need."

She flung the door open and there was Eva's son and there was a girl and for a moment her worst fears were realized.

Then she saw what was huddled in the circle of her grandson's arms, and her worst fears were stomped flat and replaced by far greater ones.

"Oh Mary," she said. "Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Oh blessed Saint Anthony, you've caught a jackalope wife."

Her first impulse was to slam the door and lock the sight away.

Her grandson caught the edge of the door and hauled it open. His knuckles were raw and blistered. "Let me in," he said. He'd been crying and there was dust on his face, stuck to the tracks of tears. "Let me in, let me in, oh god, Grandma, you have to help me, it's all gone wrong—"

Grandma took two steps back, while he half-dragged the jackalope into the house. He dropped her down in front of the hearth and grabbed for his grandmother's hands. "Grandma—"

She ignored him and dropped to her knees. The thing across her hearth was hardly human. "What have you done?" she said. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing!" he said, recoiling.

"Don't look at that and tell me 'Nothing!' What in the name of our lord did you do to that girl?"

He stared down at his blistered hands. "Her skin," he mumbled. "The rabbit skin. You know."

"I do indeed," she said grimly. "Oh yes, I do. What did you do, you damned young fool? Caught up her skin and hid it from her to keep her changing?"

The jackalope wife stirred on the hearth and made a sound between a whimper and a sob.

"She was waiting for me!" he said. "She knew I was there! I'd been—we'd—I watched her, and she knew I was out there, and she let me get up close—I thought we could talk—"

Grandma Harken clenched one hand into a fist and rested her forehead on it.

"I grabbed the skin—I mean—it was right there—she was watching—I thought she wanted me to have it—"

She turned and looked at him. He sank down in her chair, all his grace gone.

"You have to burn it," mumbled her grandson. He slid down a little further in her chair. "You're supposed to burn it."

Everybody knows. To keep them changing.”

“Yes,” said Grandma Harken, curling her lip. “Yes, that’s the way of it, right enough.” She took the jackalope wife’s shoulders and turned her toward the lamp light.

She was a horror. Her hands were human enough, but she had a jackrabbit’s feet and a jackrabbit’s eyes. They were set too wide apart in a human face, with a cleft lip and long rabbit ears. Her horns were short, sharp spikes on her brow.

The jackalope wife let out another sob and tried to curl back into a ball. There were burnt patches on her arms and legs, a long red weal down her face. The fur across her breasts and belly was singed. She stank of urine and burning hair.

“What did you do?”

“I threw it in the fire,” he said. “You’re supposed to. But she screamed—she wasn’t supposed to scream—nobody said they screamed—and I thought she was dying, and I didn’t want to hurt her—I pulled it back out—”

He looked up at her with his feverish eyes, that useless, beautiful boy, and said “I didn’t want to hurt her. I thought I was supposed to—I gave her the skin back, she put it on, but then she fell down—it wasn’t supposed to work like that!”

Grandma Harken sat back. She exhaled very slowly. She was calm. She was going to be calm, because otherwise she was going to pick up the fire poker and club her own flesh and blood over the head with it.

And even that might not knock some sense into him. Oh, Eva, Eva, my dear, what a useless son you’ve raised. Who would have thought he had so much ambition in him, to catch a jackalope wife?

“You goddamn stupid fool,” she said. Every word slammed like a shutter in the wind. “Oh, you goddamn stupid fool. If you’re going to catch a jackalope wife, you burn the hide down to ashes and never mind how she screams.”

“But it sounded like it was hurting her!” he shot back. “You weren’t there! She screamed like a dying rabbit!”

“Of course it hurts her!” yelled Grandma. “You think you can have your skin and your freedom burned away in front of you and not scream? Sweet mother Mary, boy, think about what you’re doing! Be cruel or be kind, but don’t be both, because now you’ve made a mess you can’t clean up in a hurry.”

She stood up, breathing hard, and looked down at the wreck on her hearth. She could see it now, as clear as if she’d been standing there. The fool boy had been so shocked he’d yanked the burning skin back out. And the jackalope wife had one thought only and pulled on the burning hide—

Oh yes, she could see it clear.

Half gone, at least, if she was any judge. There couldn’t have been more than few scraps of fur left unburnt. He’d waited through at least one scream—or no, that was unkind.

More likely he’d dithered and looked for a stick and didn’t want to grab for it with his bare hands. Though by the look of his hands, he’d done just that in the end.

And the others were long gone by then and couldn’t stop her. There ought to have been one, at least, smart enough to know that you didn’t put on a half-burnt rabbit skin.

“Why does she look like that?” whispered her grandson, huddled into his chair.

“Because she’s trapped betwixt and between. You did that, with your goddamn pity. You should have let it burn. Or better yet, left her alone and never gone out in the desert at all.”

“She was beautiful,” he said. As if it were a reason.

As if it mattered.

As if it had ever mattered.

“Get out,” said Grandma wearily. “Tell your mother to make up a poultice for your hands. You did right at the end, bringing her here, even if you made a mess of the rest, from first to last.”

He scrambled to his feet and ran for the door.

On the threshold, he paused, and looked back. “You—you can fix her, right?”

Grandma let out a high bark, like a bitch-fox, barely a laugh at all. “No. No one can fix this, you stupid boy. This is broken past mending. All I can do is pick up the pieces.”

He ran. The door slammed shut, and left her alone with the wreckage of the jackalope wife.

She treated the burns and they healed. But there was nothing to be done for the shape of the jackalope’s face, or the too-wide eyes, or the horns shaped like a sickle moon.

At first, Grandma worried that the townspeople would see her, and lord knew what would happen then. But the jackalope wife was the color of dust and she still had a wild animal’s stillness. When somebody called, she lay flat in the garden, down among the beans, and nobody saw her at all.

The only person she didn’t hide from was Eva, Grandma’s daughter. There was no chance that she mistook them for each other—Eva was round and plump and comfortable, the way Grandma’s second husband, Eva’s father, had been round and plump and comfortable.

Maybe we smell alike, thought Grandma. It would make sense, I suppose.

Eva’s son didn’t come around at all.

“He thinks you’re mad at him,” said Eva mildly.

“He thinks correctly,” said Grandma.

She and Eva sat on the porch together, shelling beans, while the jackalope wife limped around the garden. The hairless places weren’t so obvious now, and the faint stripes across her legs might have been dust. If you didn’t look directly at her, she might almost have been human.

“She’s gotten good with the crutch,” said Eva. “I suppose she can’t walk?”

“Not well,” said Grandma. “Her feet weren’t made to stand up like that. She can do it, but it’s a terrible strain.”

“And talk?”

“No,” said Grandma shortly. The jackalope wife had tried,

once, and the noises she'd made were so terrible that it had reduced them both to weeping. She hadn't tried again. "She understands well enough, I suppose."

The jackalope wife sat down, slowly, in the shadow of the scarlet runner beans. A hummingbird zipped inches from her head, dabbing its bill into the flowers, and the jackalope's face turned, unsmiling, to follow it.

"He's not a bad boy, you know," said Eva, not looking at her mother. "He didn't mean to do her harm."

Grandma let out an explosive snort. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph! It doesn't matter what he meant to do. He should have left well enough alone, and if he couldn't do that, he should have finished what he started." She scowled down at the beans. They were striped red and white and the pods came apart easily in her gnarled hands. "Better all the way human than this. Better he'd bashed her head in with a rock than this."

"Better for her, or better for you?" asked Eva, who was only a fool about her son and knew her mother well.

Grandma snorted again. The hummingbird buzzed away. The jackalope wife lay still in the shadows, with only her thin ribs going up and down.

"You could have finished it, too," said Eva softly. "I've seen you kill chickens. She'd probably lay her head on the chopping block if you asked."

"She probably would," said Grandma. She looked away from Eva's weak, wise eyes. "But I'm a damn fool as well."

Her daughter smiled. "Maybe it runs in families."

Grandma Harken got up before dawn the next morning and went rummaging around the house.

"Well," she said. She pulled a dead mouse out of a mousetrap and took a half-dozen cigarettes down from behind the clock. She filled three water bottles and strapped them around her waist. "Well. I suppose we've done as much as humans can do, and now it's up to somebody else."

She went out into the garden and found the jackalope wife asleep under the stairs. "Come on," she said. "Wake up."

The air was cool and gray. The jackalope wife looked at her with doe-dark eyes and didn't move, and if she were a human, Grandma Harken would have itched to slap her.

Pay attention! Get mad! Do something!

But she wasn't human and rabbits freeze when they're scared past running. So Grandma gritted her teeth and reached down a hand and pulled the jackalope wife up into the pre-dawn dark.

They moved slow, the two of them. Grandma was old and carrying water for two, and the girl was on a crutch. The sun came up and the cicadas burnt the air with their wings.

A coyote watched them from up on the hillside. The jackalope wife looked up at him, recoiled, and Grandma laid a hand on her arm.

"Don't worry," she said. "I ain't got the patience for coyotes.

They'd maybe fix you up but we'd both be stuck in a tale past telling, and I'm too old for that. Come on."

They went a little further on, past a wash and a watering hole. There were palo verde trees spreading thin green shade over the water. A javelina looked up at them from the edge and stamped her hooved feet. Her children scraped their tusks together and grunted.

Grandma slid and slithered down the slope to the far side of the water and refilled the water bottles. "Not them either," she said to the jackalope wife. "They'll talk the legs off a wooden sheep. We'd both be dead of old age before they'd figured out what time to start."

The javelina dropped their heads and ignored them as they left the wash behind.

The sun was overhead and the sky turned turquoise, a color so hard you could bash your knuckles on it. A raven croaked overhead and another one snickered somewhere off to the east.

The jackalope wife paused, leaning on her crutch, and looked up at the wings with longing.

"Oh no," said Grandma. "I've got no patience for riddle games, and in the end they always eat someone's eyes. Relax, child. We're nearly there."

The last stretch was cruelly hard, up the side of a bluff. The sand was soft underfoot and miserably hard for a girl walking with a crutch. Grandma had to half-carry the jackalope wife at the end. She weighed no more than a child, but children are heavy and it took them both a long time.

At the top was a high fractured stone that cast a finger of shadow like the wedge of a sundial. Sand and sky and shadow and stone. Grandma Harken nodded, content.

"It'll do," she said. "It'll do." She laid the jackalope wife down in the shadow and laid her tools out on the stone. Cigarettes and dead mouse and a scrap of burnt fur from the jackalope's breast. "It'll do."

Then she sat down in the shadow herself and arranged her skirts.

She waited.

The sun went overhead and the level in the water bottle went down. The sun started to sink and the wind hissed and the jackalope wife was asleep or dead.

The ravens croaked a conversation to each other, from the branches of a palo verde tree, and whatever one said made the other one laugh.

"Well," said a voice behind Grandma's right ear, "looker what we have here."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!"

"Don't see them out here often," he said. "Not the right sort of place." He considered. "Your Saint Anthony, now...him I think I've seen. He understood about deserts."

Grandma's lips twisted. "Father of Rabbits," she said sourly. "Wasn't trying to call you up."

"Oh, I know." The Father of Rabbits grinned. "But you know I've always had a soft spot for you, Maggie Harken."

He sat down beside her on his heels. He looked like an old Mexican man, wearing a button-down shirt without any buttons. His hair was silver gray as a rabbit's fur. Grandma wasn't fooled for a minute.

"Get lonely down there in your town, Maggie?" he asked. "Did you come out here for a little wild company?"

Grandma Harken leaned over to the jackalope wife and smoothed one long ear back from her face. She looked up at them both with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

"Shit," said the Father of Rabbits. "Never seen that before." He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke into the air. "What did you do to her, Maggie?"

"I didn't do a damn thing, except not let her die when I should have."

"There's those would say that was more than enough." He exhaled another lungful of smoke.

"She put on a half-burnt skin. Don't suppose you can fix her up?" It cost Grandma a lot of pride to say that, and the Father of Rabbits tipped his chin in acknowledgment.

"Ha! No. If it was loose I could fix it up, maybe, but I couldn't get it off her now with a knife." He took another drag on the cigarette. "Now I see why you wanted one of the Patterned People."

Grandma nodded stiffly.

The Father of Rabbits shook his head. "He might want a life, you know. Piddly little dead mouse might not be enough."

"Then he can have mine."

"Ah, Maggie, Maggie... You'd have made a fine rabbit, once. Too many stones in your belly now." He shook his head regretfully. "Besides, it's not your life he's owed."

"It's my life he'd be getting. My kin did it, it's up to me to put it right." It occurred to her that she should have left Eva a note, telling her to send the fool boy back East, away from the desert.

Well. Too late now. Either she'd raised a fool for a daughter or not, and likely she wouldn't be around to tell.

"Suppose we'll find out," said the Father of Rabbits, and nodded.

A man came around the edge of the standing stone. He moved quick then slow and his eyes didn't blink. He was naked and his skin was covered in painted diamonds.

Grandma Harken bowed to him, because the Patterned People can't hear speech.

He looked at her and the Father of Rabbits and the jackalope wife. He looked down at the stone in front of him.

The cigarettes he ignored. The mouse he scooped up in two fingers and dropped into his mouth.

Then he crouched there, for a long time. He was so still that it made Grandma's eyes water, and she had to look away.

"Suppose he does it," said the Father of Rabbits. "Suppose he

sheds that skin right off her. Then what? You've got a human left over, not a jackalope wife."

Grandma stared down at her bony hands. "It's not so bad, being a human," she said. "You make do. And it's got to be better than that."

She jerked her chin in the direction of the jackalope wife.

"Still meddling, Maggie?" said the Father of Rabbits.

"And what do you call what you're doing?"

He grinned.

The Patterned Man stood up and nodded to the jackalope wife.

She looked at Grandma, who met her too-wide eyes. "He'll kill you," the old woman said. "Or cure you. Or maybe both. You don't have to do it. This is the bit where you get a choice. But when it's over, you'll be all the way something, even if it's just all the way dead."

The jackalope wife nodded.

She left the crutch lying on the stones and stood up. Rabbit legs weren't meant for it, but she walked three steps and the Patterned Man opened his arms and caught her.

He bit her on the forearm, where the thick veins run, and sank his teeth in up to the gums. Grandma cursed.

"Easy now," said the Father of Rabbits, putting a hand on her shoulder. "He's one of the Patterned People, and they only know the one way."

The jackalope wife's eyes rolled back in her head, and she sagged down onto the stone.

He set her down gently and picked up one of the cigarettes.

Grandma Harken stepped forward. She rolled both her sleeves up to the elbow and offered him her wrists.

The Patterned Man stared at her, unblinking. The ravens laughed to themselves at the bottom of the wash. Then he dipped his head and bowed to Grandma Harken and a rattlesnake as long as a man slithered away into the evening.

She let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. "He didn't ask for a life."

The Father of Rabbits grinned. "Ah, you know. Maybe he wasn't hungry. Maybe it was enough you made the offer."

"Maybe I'm too old and stringy," she said.

"Could be that, too."

The jackalope wife was breathing. Her pulse went fast then slow. Grandma sat down beside her and held her wrist between her own callused palms.

"How long you going to wait?" asked the Father of Rabbits.

"As long as it takes," she snapped back.

The sun went down while they were waiting. The coyotes sang up the moon. It was half-full, half-new, halfway between one thing and the other.

"She doesn't have to stay human, you know," said the Father of Rabbits. He picked up the cigarettes that the Patterned Man had left behind and offered one to Grandma.

"She doesn't have a jackalope skin any more."

He grinned. She could just see his teeth flash white in the dark. "Give her yours."

"I burned it," said Grandma Harken, sitting up ramrod straight. "I found where he hid it after he died and I burned it myself. Because I had a new husband and a little bitty baby girl and all I could think about was leaving them both behind and go dance."

The Father of Rabbits exhaled slowly in the dark.

"It was easier that way," she said. "You get over what you can't have faster than you get over what you could. And we shouldn't always get what we think we want."

They sat in silence at the top of the bluff. Between Grandma's hands, the pulse beat steady and strong.

"I never did like your first husband much," said the Father of Rabbits.

"Well," she said. She lit her cigarette off his. "He taught me how to swear. And the second one was better."

The jackalope wife stirred and stretched. Something flaked off her in long strands, like burnt scraps of paper, like a snake's skin shedding away. The wind tugged at them and sent them spinning off the side of the bluff.

From down in the desert, they heard the first notes of a sudden wild music.

"It happens I might have a spare skin," said the Father of Rabbits. He reached into his pack and pulled out a long gray roll of rabbit skin. The jackalope wife's eyes went wide and her body shook with longing, but it was human longing and a human body shaking.

"Where'd you get that?" asked Grandma Harken, suspicious.

"Oh, well, you know." He waved a hand. "Pulled it out of a fire once—must have been forty years ago now. Took some doing to fix it up again, but some people owed me favors. Suppose she might as well have it... Unless you want it?"

He held it out to Grandma Harken.

She took it in her hands and stroked it. It was as soft as it had been fifty years ago. The small sickle horns were hard weights in her hands.

"You were a hell of a dancer," said the Father of Rabbits.

"Still am," said Grandma Harken, and she flung the jackalope skin over the shoulders of the human jackalope wife.

It went on like it had been made for her, like it was her own. There was a jagged scar down one foreleg where the rattlesnake had bit her. She leapt up and darted away, circled back once and bumped Grandma's hand with her nose—and then she was bounding down the path from the top of the bluff.

The Father of Rabbits let out a long sigh. "Still are," he agreed.

"It's different when you got a choice," said Grandma Harken.

They shared another cigarette under the standing stone.

Down in the desert, the music played and the jackalope wives danced. And one scarred jackalope went leaping into the circle of firelight and danced like a demon, while the moon laid down across the saguaro's thorns.

Mothership Zeta aims to celebrate excellent original and reprint speculative fiction. We want to help you find new stories and authors to fall in love with, so we asked World-Fantasy-Award-winning author and reviewer Elizabeth Hand to share her favorite books from 2014. You'll see some award nominees here, as well as authors who are very deserving, but didn't appear on the famous lists. We hope you find some new books and authors herein to love.

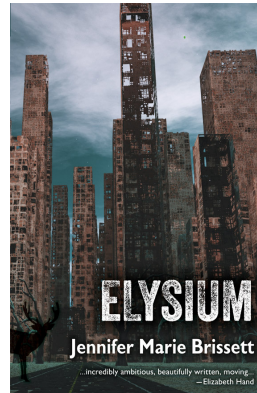
BEST BOOKS OF 2014

BY ELIZABETH HAND

Being a freelance reviewer is great. You get to read books, and ideally get paid for doing so, and share your passion for what you love most in the world with other readers. My sole regret in almost thirty years (did I really just write that????!!) of reviewing is that it doesn't always leave me time for pleasure reading. So unless I'm assigned to review that one new soon-to-be-award-winning book everyone is talking about, I may not get to it for months, or a year (or ever).

But precisely because those ARE the books everyone is talking about, I try whenever possible to highlight titles and writers that may fall between the cracks. Few things make me happier than to hear that someone's read a little-known book I recommended, and fallen in love with it. And of course it's always a pleasure to read a new novel by someone whose work you already love, and discover that it's even better than you'd dared hope.

So here's a short list of the books I loved most in 2014. Most of them are titles I covered for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, or *Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine*, and you can find my reviews online if you want to learn more. Most are not by household names (a few of you may have heard of Stephen King), though a few got much-deserved award attention here or abroad.



ELYSIUM, OR THE WORLD AFTER

Jennifer Marie Brissett
jennbrissett.com

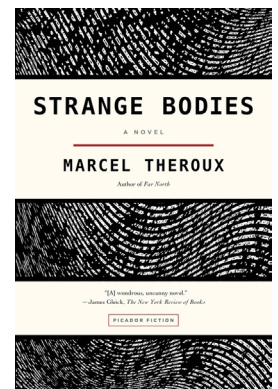
*Full disclosure: this debut novel was Brissett's MFA thesis, and I was her adviser. I had very little to advise on: her novel was a winner right out of the gate. One of the most talked-about books of 2014, *Elysium* received the Philip K. Dick Award*

*Special Citation, made the Tiptree Award longlist, and was a finalist for the Locus Award for Best First Novel. A genre and gender-bending tale of the collapse and recombination of empires, lovers, cultures, myths, and memory across thousands of years, *Elysium* is a thrilling meditation on what endures of our humanity when we confront unspeakable loss. Brissett is at work on a follow-up. I can't wait.*

STRANGE BODIES

Marcel Theroux.
marceltheroux.com

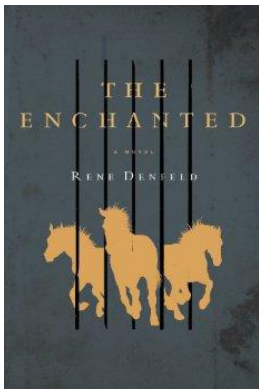
This brilliant riff on *Frankenstein* is narrated by a contemporary academic whose expertise in 18th century English literature expands considerably when he learns that Samuel Johnson has been resurrected via a macabre medical procedure. Outrageously funny and surprisingly poignant, *Strange Bodies* is also genuinely frightening, as it finds that sweet spot between science fiction and horror. A finalist for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, it deserved more attention on this side of the Atlantic.



THE ENCHANTED

Rene Denfeld
renedenfeld.com

Ellen Datlow raved about this book, so I thought it would be good. It's not: it's great. One of the best books I've come across in many years, *The Enchanted* is gorgeously written,



dark, heart-wrenching and unlike anything else I've ever read. The point of view shifts between that of a male prisoner on death row, and a death penalty investigator known only as the lady. An eerie enchantment seems to hang over the cellblock where the prisoner awaits execution: the story unfolds like the darkest, most beautiful Grimm's fairy tale you've ever read. Brutal and transcendent.



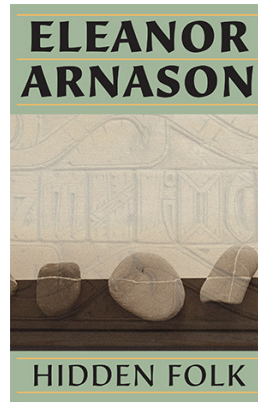
REVIVAL
Stephen King
stephenking.com

King's homage to Arthur Machen's classic novella "The Great God Pan" and one of King's best novels, period. Like *Strange Bodies*, this one straddles the line between SF and horror, and has one of King's creepiest villains in many moons. King's new novel, *Finders Keepers*, is terrific, too. Guy's on a roll.

HIDDEN FOLK: ICELANDIC FANTASIES

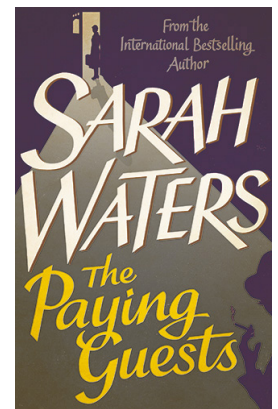
Eleanor Arnason
manyworldspress.com

I'm a sucker for anything about Iceland, and am continually surprised that the country's sagas and folklore haven't been mined more thoroughly in contemporary fantasy. Arnason helps correct that imbalance in this wonderful collection. Sly takes on the Prose Eddas and Egil's Saga mingle with terrific evocations of modern Reykjavik and the country's remarkable natural beauty. The huldurfolk—the elvish "hidden people" of the title—make their too-rare literary appearances, along with other figures from Icelandic legend. Delightful.



THE PAYING GUESTS
Sarah Waters
sarahwaters.com

Waters is another author who's no stranger to awards, the bestseller list, or supernatural literature. Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, her 2009 novel *The Little Stranger* was immediately hailed as a modern supernatural classic in the vein of "The Turn of the Screw" and *The Haunting of Hill House*. *The Paying Guests* eschews ghosts for the gothic, in a tale that's both an homage to Daphne DuMaurier's *Rebecca* and a nuanced examination of a lesbian love affair in post WWI London. The book's leisurely, sensual build-up explodes in a murder inspired by several true crimes of the era. The nailbiting tension of the courtroom scenes kept me reading until 3 AM.



Elizabeth Hand (a multiple World Fantasy, Nebula, Shirley Jackson, and International Horror Guild Award-winning author) is a longtime book reviewer whose work has appeared regularly in *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Salon*, and the *Boston Review*, among many others. She also writes a regular column for the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. elizabethhand.com



Rhonda Eikamp currently works as a translator for a German law firm and has previously worked at the UN in Vienna and picked grapes in Mainz. To our knowledge, she has no experience building robot detectives except in her imagination. This story originally appeared in the *Lightspeed* special issue *Women Destroy Science Fiction!*, but it would also fit in something called *Women Destroy Doyle! Or Women Destroy Bees!* Readers, prepare to meet Gearlock Holmes.

THE CASE OF THE PASSIONLESS BEES

BY RHONDA EIKAMP

Of all the strange sights I had been privy to during my acquaintanceship with that illustrious detective, none was as disturbing as seeing my old friend covered in bees. Naturally I was not concerned; his manaccanite skin was impervious to harm and I myself was at a safe distance, ensconced behind the clerestory window at Shading Coil Cottage, having been let in by a timid local girl whom I supposed to be the replacement for Mrs. Hudson. Perhaps sensing my arrival, Holmes turned and waved from the yard. Moments later he had shaken off his beloved bees and joined me in the drawing room.

"This business," he began, as always to the point. "A murder in my own home is one thing, Watson, but that my own housekeeper should be accused of the beastly act – I will not stand for it!" He chose an octave below his usual reedy voice for this utterance, I noted, and the gravity of the situation was not lost on me. "Glad you could make it, by the way. I will need someone on the side of the amalgamated in this case."

During his time in London, Dr. Bell's invention had made a name for himself solving cases the Yard had given up as hopeless, his inscrutable silver visage still well-known not only in Baker Street but beyond, and yet since his retirement I had seen little of him. There was much I cherished about Gearlock Holmes: that rigor that kept him like a bloodhound on the trail of criminals, the astonishing array of facts that had been programmed into him and which he himself broadened with unceasing study (employing the night hours while we the fleshly slept), the cooling tick-tick that arose from him when he overheated. Even his violin playing I had missed, passionless as it was, yet the sight of those articulated fingers moving with such precision through a pizzicato had never failed to awe me. Observing him now closely, in an attempt to emulate his own methods, I felt that Gearlock Holmes had lost some of his polish. Perhaps retirement did not suit him.

Perhaps it was only the circumstances.

He lost no time in filling me in, as he led me with a gentle but firm grip on my arm to the conservatory. "Miss Katharina Segalen and her brother-in-law Friedl Klapisch-Zuber, of Duesseldorf, Germany, had been my guests for three days prior to the murder. They are scientists with the German government in some capacity and had come uninvited to interview me, or spy me out if you will. On the continent the amalgamated are not so common as servants, I am given to

understand, and there was some hint from the two that the German government views the technology as a potential source of soldiery, so I'm afraid I was rather uncooperative. Here –"

Holmes threw open the door to the conservatory. Sunlight washed in through the windows and I heard the whine of his optical apertures adjusting. The plants were all neatly maintained, more for study than for decoration, I surmised, and so the debris in one corner was immediately noticeable. A clay pot of bridal-veil creeper had been overturned, wrenched from its jardinière by some struggle, or so it appeared, shattering into myriad pieces and spilling soil. I approached the spot. Tiny smears of blood dotted the bench and floor. In the soil – in fact all about the floor – lay dead bees. I counted thirty before I stopped.

"Your televoice mentioned bees," I began.

"Miss Segalen was highly sensitive apparently. She'd said nothing about it, and her death would have been written off as a terrible and tragic accident if there had been only a single errant bee involved, rather than what one must assume was a basketful introduced into the room deliberately. And if the door had not been locked from the outside." The servos of his mouth ground through their tracks, clenching his jaw. A sigh of steam escaped his neck-joint. "The stings on the corpse were too many for Dr. Culpepper to count. I believe that with her last air before her throat closed up entirely, Katharina Segalen had hoped to smash a window with one of the pots and make her exit or at the least draw someone's attention to her plight. A handsome woman, Watson, though you would not have known it had you seen her in death – the swelling had disfigured her so. And intelligent. She would have known she had but seconds to live after the first few stings."

"And your housekeeper Mrs. Hudson, you say, has been detained. But that is surely absurd!"

"Mrs. Hudson found her. She touched nothing, assessed that Miss Segalen was dead, and came directly to me. Not one to seize up in the face of death, Mrs. Hudson. Years of service with me have conditioned her and – well, I've made a few changes to her programming over the years, removed the worst of the housekeeperly fluttering her line's manufacturers insist on adding. I require reason and nerves of my servants above all else. Strictest confidence, eh?"

This last of course was in reference to the prohibition against any amalgamated meddling with the programming of another. I would never have betrayed him. The very fact that Gearlock Holmes, out of all the amalgamated with which we surround ourselves in our homes and stables and coaches, enjoyed special status by royal decree, was allowed to own property and employ amalgamated servants of his own, namely a housekeeper and a gardener, was due to his unique cogitating skills in service to Her Majesty. Holmes's creator Joseph Bell had left no notes before his death as to how he had

obtained this altogether greater level of cognizance in the one amalgamated designed by him. I only know it left Gearlock Holmes, in spite of his blank metal face and shiny limbs, closer to a fleshly man than any amalgamated I had ever met. And if he was a breaker of rules that had not been made to apply to the likes of him, I would certainly not out him.

"No," Holmes continued, "I'm afraid I am at fault for suspicion falling on poor Mrs. Hudson. I was too fastidious in my investigations, Watson."

"You will have to explain."

Holmes pointed to a rusty pair of parrot-bill gardening shears that lay in two halves in the soil. "That is not more detritus from the struggle. I have said that the murder victim was intelligent. When she saw that she could not use the pot to escape, that her death was inevitable, she must have wrenched these shears apart. They were old and loose and the central bolt that held the two blades together would have slipped out easily. She clutched that bolt in her hand as she died. It was I who pointed out to the constable that it could only be a sign meant to point to her killer. That it must indicate an amalgamated." I must have frowned at that. "Nuts and bolts, Watson. The very emblem of my species. Barring the possibility that some amalgamated servant from the surrounding households snuck into Shading Coil in broad daylight, that conclusion left only Mrs. Hudson and myself. They will shut her down, Watson" – I remarked the quaver in his voice, his throat valves sticking – "if I cannot bring the killer to justice."

"You suspect someone else then?"

Before he could speak the timid servant girl arrived to announce a visitor. Without waiting to be introduced a man pushed past her. He looked to be near forty, with florid features that could only be the result of a lifetime of good German beer and liverwurst.

"Herr Klapish-Zuber," Holmes greeted him. "I see they have chosen not to detain you. I presume you will wish to collect your things."

As if Holmes had not spoken, the German scientist nodded at me. It was a shock. It is customary among certain sorts to acknowledge the fleshly present while ignoring the amalgamated, yet years with Holmes and his unique situation had left me unaccustomed to it. It smacked of that movement whose members view all amalgamated as little better than flywheels and would restrict their rights accordingly.

"Why they should keep me?" he replied. Anger flushed his face redder. "I have done nothing. I want answer too. Katharina –" He could not look at the debris in the corner, I noted, his gaze sliding away from it in pain. "You." At last he addressed Holmes straight on, "You must have some suspect."

"What if I said I suspect you, mein Herr?" Holmes asked.

"Na und? The magistrate did as well."

"Yet not for some supposed professional rivalry. You were involved in an amorous affair with Miss Segalen, were you

not?" The German stared, aghast. "My good man, the scent of your cologne on her, a daisy in her hair after your walk together? My observational skills were not exactly put to the test. Did she wish to break it off? Did that enrage you to the point of murder? It all fits. Knowing her well, you would have been aware of her sensitivity to bees. And there is the matter of your name."

Klapish-Zuber had collapsed into a chair. His face abruptly resembled a crumbling brick façade.

"The word Zuber means a tin tub or pail in German," Holmes told me. "Perhaps the victim, in clutching at the bolt from the shears, meant to indicate her brother-in-law, her illicit lover, and reached for the only metal at hand."

"I did not kill her," the German exclaimed. "I loved Katharina! And she loved me! Yes, we were involving in this – what you say – illicit act, but we could not help ourself. Please, you must not tell the authorities. If my wife – Katharina's sister – is finding out back home, it will kill her. And you must believe me – I would never have hurt Katharina!" He buried his face in his large hands.

A silence I knew well descended on the room. It was that moment, presaging a conclusion reached, in which Holmes's constant sigh of cogs and coils, the ever-present thrum which emanates from an amalgamated and of which most of us are hardly aware, abruptly ceased. No more steam under the collar of Gearlock Holmes. Every one of his moving parts at perfect rest, a static state before the leap of cognition. I knew that if I touched him now he would feel cold.

"I do not believe you killed Katharina Segalen," he told the German.

"Why, Holmes –" I began.

He cut me off, then motioned us both to a window at the far end of the conservatory, away from the wreckage where the body had lain. "Please observe," he commanded.

I thought he must mean only the long winding lane with its border of yews that led up to Shading Coil Cottage, shadowed now by the rapidly advancing dusk, then I spotted the figure of a man leaning against the far gate, half-backed into the hanging clematis as though fearful of being seen.

"That is Peter Barstow," Klapisch-Zuber remarked. "But what does it mean?"

The man at the gate was gaunt, with thinning hair that bespoke middle age. He was dressed in the easy attire and muckboots of a Sussex country squire and he fondled a briar pipe, which he kept unlit, I presumed, so as not to draw attention to himself with the smoke. As we watched he turned several times to gaze up at the conservatory. An air of dejection lay about him, shoulders slumped in the manner of a man who has given up on action, and yet instinct said he must be spying on the house for some reason. We had lit no lanterns as dusk approached, and he could not have known that we returned his gaze.

"To clarify for Dr. Watson," said Holmes, "Peter Barstow is the owner of Barstow Mews, a small manor not far from here. He has often been a guest at Shading Coil, as I find him quite agreeable. He is himself a tinkerer in the programming of his servants and we have had many a lively conversation on tectronics. By chance he stopped by for dinner three evenings ago, as I was sitting down with my German guests. That is how Herr Klapisch-Zuber knows him."

"He does not look as though he considers himself welcome at Shading Coil," I pointed out.

"He has taken up his post there every evening since the murder. He does not come in. Regrettable as it may seem, I believe there was some connection between my friend Peter and Miss Segalen." I waited. Holmes's theories were always backed up by reason. "It was the moment when he was introduced to Miss Segalen at the dinner table. He was surprised when he saw her, he turned quite pale, in fact. I surmised that he recognized her from somewhere and that it frightened him, though I paid it little notice at the time."

"But Katharina is twenty years younger than this man," Klapish-Zuber interjected. "Rather, she was..." His voice broke.

"I made inquiries in the village," Holmes continued. "In his youth Peter Barstow travelled through Germany. There was a scandal, involving a lady of society. The sort of scandal that could have produced a child."

"Do you mean to say – Katharina Segalen was his daughter?"

Klapish-Zuber had gone pale. "My mother-in-law," he murmured. "There is still speaking of this scandal from her youth, some Englishman." He was shaking his head, either in disbelief or profound acceptance of Holmes's theory. "And Katharina was the very image of her mother at a younger age, all say."

Holmes nodded. "I believe Peter Barstow recognized her because of that resemblance. He may not have known until then that he had an illegitimate child."

My thoughts returned to the despair written on the man below. "It seems farfetched, Holmes. Why would he murder her?"

"Perhaps he did not want his secret uncovered. Perhaps an inheritance matter. He knows Shading Coil inside and out and could easily slip in. And he is knowledgeable about bees, as I know from our conversations. There is more to this than meets the eye, gentlemen." As if upon a signal the gardener Mr. Clewe appeared on the walk below our window, the lamp that hung from the portico casting a glow upon his metal face as he passed. As one, we withdrew from the window before we could be noticed and I saw Peter Barstow do the same, edging back into the clematis.

"Herr Klapish-Zuber, I would be grateful if you would stay here for the night." Holmes pressed a panel on his hip that opened with a hydraulic hiss and he withdrew a pocket watch.

An affectation, one of the many that endeared him to me. The great detective, whose internal clock never missed a second, had no need of watches. "I have reason to believe things will come to a head this very night. Witnesses will be needed. You will stay here as well of course, Watson?" I signalled my eagerness, though an uncanny shudder of trepidation ran through me – an unease when I glanced at the dead bees on the floor. The horrendousness of the killer's method chilled me. "Then let us proceed to dinner."

We retired to a dinner of cold mutton thrown together by the local girl and for which Holmes apologized profusely, assuming it was not up to Mrs. Hudson's standards, though naturally, as an amalgamated, he did not partake. I assured him the meal was excellent, as it was so. We bade one another good-night after sherry. In my room in the northwest corner no fire had been lit. Throughout the first part of the night I slept fitfully, discomfited, haunted by dreams of bees buzzing hugely, trapped in a metal container.

A sound awakened me. There was no moon. In the utter dark I made out a gaunt figure not far from my bed, bent over my physician's bag. Before reason could tell me to lie quiet, my heart woke, hammering in my chest, and drove me to action. With a cry of "Oi, you!" I stood and spun for my walking stick, which I recalled leaving on the divan, but the intruder was quicker. A blow to the side of my head drove me to my knees, consciousness a whirligig. I was incapacitated for mere seconds, aware only dimly of the figure fleeing the room, then I hauled myself up by the bedpost with nerveless hands and stumbled to the door. The hallway was empty. Dizziness overtook me again and as I slid down the doorjamb, bedroom doors to the right and left of mine flew open and Holmes and Klapish-Zuber hurried toward me. Holmes thrust the lantern he carried in my face.

"Intruder," I managed to mumble.

The detective stood very still for a moment and I knew he was listening with his attenuated sensory apparatus for any sound from within the house. Then he strode to the window at the end of the hall, unlatched it and gave a low, owl-like hoot. Moments later there was an outcry from the grounds. "Bring him up," I heard him order.

Soon we stood facing the gardener Clewe who clutched the apprehended Peter Barstow. Mr. Clewe was a dedicated gardener, equipped for heavy lifting, and his extendable midsection had unfolded to create a hand barrow in which he had dumped Barstow like a sack of swedes for transport, caging him in with steel arms, though the farmer continued to struggle. It should not have been possible for an amalgamated to restrain a fleshly of course, the prohibitions being quite clear, and I realized Holmes must have reprogrammed Clewe as well. For the second time that day, unease crept over me.

"What is this, Gearlock?" Barstow cried.

"If you go about breaking into other people's homes in the small hours of the night –"

"I have not been in Shading Coil since Ka – since Miss Segalen was killed!"

"Do you deny that she was your daughter?"

Barstow seemed to deflate, eyes widening in wonder, as was the wont of those confronted for the first time with Gearlock Holmes's skills of deduction. "Let me up," he begged. His position, on his back with his knees drawn up like a cradled infant in the bowl of Clewe's belly, did seem undignified. "I will explain."

Holmes gestured and Clewe released him. We stood about Barstow in the dim hallway as he told his story.

"I recognized Katharina right away," Barstow admitted. "Twenty-five years it's been, but a man does not forget his first love. It could have been her mother Karolina sitting there at your table that evening, Gearlock. When I heard they were from Duesseldorf, I understood. Oh, I was in a state all through the meal. Couldn't take my eyes off Katharina. Once home, I wrote her a long letter, revealing all, declaring how proud of her I was, her scientific accomplishments, and sent the letter with my boy."

"I recall a note arriving," Holmes said.

"She wrote back, asking me to come speak with her. I discovered her in the conservatory and we spoke of our lives. She bore me no ill will, though it came as a shock to her as well. Her mother had never told her about me. She assured me that the father who had raised her up would always be her true father, but that we might correspond once she returned to her country. She was gracious...and – when I left her, in any case – alive. I do not know who else might have been about. When I heard the next day that she had been murdered –" A sigh from the depths of his heart rose. "Something inside me broke like a reed. To have discovered a daughter and then to have her snatched away..." I thought of the despair that had been so clear to me earlier in his hunched shoulders. "I came to Shading Coil that evening, but I could not make myself go in. I tried again the next night. It became something of a wake, I suppose, watching that conservatory window. A vigil I could not explain to myself. Then I realized that if I watched the cottage and stayed quiet I might help solve her murder. The killer might return – some data, as you call it, Gearlock, might turn up. I took to staying longer, in the hope of avenging her."

Klapish-Zuber snorted. "You mean to say you stand there all the night?"

"Only until I am dropping with exhaustion. Every night, in the same spot from which Clewe so rudely procured me just now."

"You deny that you only just now entered my bedroom and tampered with my bag?" I demanded.

"I do not know you, sir, nor would I know your room."

I snatched Holmes's lamp from him and led our small party

back into my room, to where my bag stood open. The intruder had not had time to shut it. On the instant I remarked the blue-ribboned vial, and when I removed it from the bag and held it up against the light a chill wafted through my bones.

"Is there something missing?" Holmes asked.

"This vial is as it should be," I said and my voice trembled. "The blue ribbon tied about the neck is part of my own marking system. Yet the liquid has been replaced with another." A darker one, I thought, and I removed the stopper and held it to my nose. Terror gripped my mind. "The poison of the yew tree, I am near certain, Holmes. Fast-acting, simple to concoct. The trees are found throughout the countryside."

"Then someone else was meant to die besides Katharina," Klapish-Zuber surmised.

"Not someone else," I replied. Holmes gazed at me in consternation. Could his face be said to contain emotion at all, I read growing horror on it. "This vial normally contains a tonic I take myself, for my stiff joints. Were I not on my guard from having surprised an intruder, I would likely have swallowed this on the morrow without noticing the color."

"But my good man!" Holmes exploded. "Who could want you dead?"

Dark threads formed before my eyes. I had not truly recovered from the blow to my head. I was turned to Peter Barstow and as dizziness gripped me anew that gentleman's face seemed to loom large, until it filled my vision, the abrupt light that came into his own eyes disturbing and prophetic. Our gazes were locked on one another.

More than meets the eye, Holmes had said.

I sank into darkness.

I woke to the sound of the first dawn birds chirping. I lay on my bed beneath a soft blanket. A face unknown to me, sporting a gray goatee, bent near, and I felt the comforting scramble of medical beetles across my skin, one elongating to wrap itself around my thigh while another crouched above my heart. The stranger read their displays.

"Dr. Culpepper, I presume," I muttered.

"There now, man, you took quite a blow to the head. You've been unconscious for a good hour."

"Holmes has had great worryings for you." That was Klapish-Zuber, seated on the other side of the bed. "Watched over you every minute. He only just now went downstairs to assist Constable Granger and his men when they arrived." I must have frowned. "They are taking Peter Barstow in."

"At Holmes's instigation." A new man entered the room, sandy-haired and of dour mien, with a hint of some self-importance in his stride. I guessed him to be Constable Granger. "Bad news, that. Mr. Barstow is well-liked in these parts, but I'll take Gearlock Holmes's word any day." The constable stood looking down upon me, slightly repelled, I thought, while Dr. Culpepper reached beneath the blankets

and retrieved the beetles. "Anything else you might tell us, Dr. Watson? Having come so close to the intruder and all."

"Nothing you'll not have already had from the others, I'm afraid."

"My man can stay and guard, you know. Barstow'll be in custody, but he may have hired an accomplice to do his dirty work."

"No need," I assured him. "I'd quite rather be alone now."

My request garnered an exchange of dubious looks. "Of course," said Klapish-Zuber, rising. Culpepper herded his beetles into his bag and latched it. "Stay abed this day, and the next," the doctor intoned. "Though as a colleague I needn't tell you that."

Alone, I watched the dawn light grind a path across the window and when I felt myself ready I rose and made my way through the quiet cottage and out the kitchen door.

Holmes stood alone tending his bees, the sturdy square hives a good distance from the house, at the edge of the oak woods. I watched him lift a honey super and place it in a spinning machine of his own devising which he had once demonstrated for me, removing the honey by centrifugal force. Bees clouded the air about him. I stood as near as I dared, watching, until he turned. I believe he read in my face then what I had concluded.

He gestured at his hives. "The mindless bees working for their queen, Watson. Did you know that when the queen is old they kill her, crushing or stinging her to death, and replace her with another? It is not cruel; they know neither cruelty nor conscience. They are bred for a purpose, passionless, and that is as it should be."

"I do not understand why, Holmes." My voice rasped; it hurt me to speak. "Please help me to understand. Is it some malfunction?"

He straightened. "Joseph Bell was evil, doctor. Oh, I'm sure he considered himself to be doing a good thing – a great thing – by giving me consciousness. And yet what does it avail me? I cannot taste food, cannot know passion. I will never conduct a love affair or have children, nor even grieve over that fact. The emotion I summon to my voice is fakery, a program." He demonstrated. "Oh my dear Watson." He shrugged. "Our very friendship is a process in my circuitry. It does not touch me."

"You began to long for those things."

"Of all crimes, murder seemed to me the most human. I had seen so many apprehended murderers, raging or broken, informed by a passion I could not comprehend. Mayhap I confused cause and effect. I thought that if I took that horrendous, uncivilizing step, committed that most radical of acts, I would feel something. Anything. The idea had haunted me for some time, and then, suddenly, there were these Germans, strangers to me, blithely talking of turning amalgamated into killers. There were details that would aid me in my plan. I noticed aberrations – that Katharina Segalen began to wear long gloves and a veiled bonnet after

she discovered I kept bees. She was having an affair with her brother-in-law, an indiscretion that would make him the main suspect. I captured a small swarm of bees and waited until she was alone in a room that could be locked from the outside. It was murder with no rhyme or reason, you see – no motivation conceivable to the fleshly – and thus unsolvable.”

“And yet it did not help.”

“I felt nothing. Not as I locked the door behind me nor when I gazed down upon her swollen corpse later.”

I could hardly speak the words. “So you decided to try it on me.”

The tilt of his head toward me was admiring. Sunlight caught the glint of his silver hand gesturing futility. “I thought perhaps it was because Segalen had been a stranger to me. That if I killed the one human closest to me, I would surely feel at least a pang of regret. I sent you the televoice, knowing you would come.” He had grown still, I noted. Sweat had started on me. “Tell me, Watson, how did you guess? It was the bolt in her hand I told you about, was it not? She was indeed clever. I had not foreseen that, and I was amazed when suspicion still did not fall on me.”

“No.” I took a shuddering breath. “It was much simpler. It was when you came out of your bedroom with a lamp.” He raised an etched eyebrow. “Amalgamated do not need light, nor indeed sleep. Standing in their dark cupboards all night, ‘on the stand by’ as my wife calls it. And yet you had taken the time to light a lamp. It made me think of how the intruder had moved so infallibly inside my dark room. Reminded me of all the fleshly mannerisms you yourself have assumed to no end. I had only to follow that train of thought. That after spending so much of your calculating life on the human fallibility of murder, accosting and analyzing, you might take up the habit yourself.”

Holmes raised his arms and pressed smooth palms to his temples, too hard, metal scraping metal. “You do not know what it is like, here within the closes of my head, Watson. This incessant...insipid buzzing of my thoughts. The ennui.”

“I am going to shut you off now, Gearlock.”

He had entrusted me with the code to do so years before. I had only to reach the panel on his lower back. The moment I stepped forward a cloud of bees rose thrumming from their hives and descended upon Holmes in a thick scintillating layer. Some acoustic signal, I realized, inaudible to fleshly ears, which he had learned to emanate to control them. He had been practicing it the day before. His organic armor. My every nerve sang as I continued to approach, near enough to reach out a hand, prepared to be stung or worse, then a shot rang out behind me. A bullet tore a hole in Holmes’s right arm, creating a vent of steam and scattering the bees.

“Back away, Doctor!” cried Constable Granger. He emerged from the ivy that occluded the cottage walls, still a distance away from us but striding rapidly, holding a small pepperpot

revolver aimed at Holmes. The constable had had his suspicions then. Not quite the bumbler I had taken him for.

“He will never allow you to shut him off,” Granger called to me. “He must be destroyed.”

A whine of inner mechanisms such as I had never heard rose from Gearlock Holmes. For a second only, the myriad tracks and levers of his face, those amalgamated features meant to mimic fleshly expressions but which we all know fail utterly, coalesced into a countenance of such ultimate horror that it cast a shadow on my soul. Then he turned and sped on piston-driven legs into the forest, as straight and swift as the constable’s bullets that chased him and missed.

Gearlock Holmes was never found, of course. The news, a year later, that he had thrown himself from the Reichenbach Falls, mere bits of wreckage bearing his series number recovered as proof from the waters below, was a further shock. A tragic waste, as I am certain now that a few adjustments to his programming would have allowed his continued great use to society. I miss him, reader, and on certain days I am wont to recall that last horrified expression that crossed his metal face, and to hope that my friend did in the end experience true feeling.

Hugo winner John Chu's stories have appeared in many esteemed magazines from *Asimov's* to *Tor.com*, but the story presented here comes from the young adult SFF anthology *Kaleidoscope*. It's about a time traveling ice skater. Yes, we said *time traveling ice skater*. At the core of the story is the relationship between a mother and daughter, and we think it will time travel ice skate all over your heart.

DOUBLE TIME

BY JOHN CHU

Skaters in black practice outfits swerved around Shelly. Her music was playing over the PA system. She had right of way. A scattering of figure skating fans sat in the rink's hard, blue, plastic seats. Even to a practice session, some had brought their flags. Her mom sat near the boards and waved her US flag as though if only it had shook more fiercely last night, Shelly would have landed her triple Lutz-triple toe jump combination in the short program.

The arena twinkled. Flashes of gold shimmered into fans sitting near to their slightly younger selves. Apparently, something would happen in the next few minutes they wanted to jump back in time to see again. The Shelly who had just finished this practice skate stood by the boards with Mr. Song watching the current Shelly skate. She ignored all of that. If she didn't wrestle her attention back onto the ice, she'd miss the combination again. No one wanted that, least of all her mom. She set her mind back onto mustering as much technical excellence and expression into her free skate as possible. She was still jet-lagged.

Her music ended and the announcer called out the program length. Three minutes and fifty-nine seconds. In a competition, much longer than four minutes and she'd be assessed a time penalty. In a practice session, much longer than four minutes and the start of her practice skate would be too far in the past to jump back to watch. Mom insisted that Shelly witness her run throughs because video never gave a good sense of a skater's sense of speed or ice coverage and because Shelly never remembered what she'd actually done on the ice. Of course, seeing yourself skating live and in person wasn't even remotely creepy. Unfortunately, Mr. Song didn't see any harm. Shelly skated to the boards, ignored the four-minute-older version of her rushing back onto the ice, then squeezed the time jumper latched to her wrist. Its digital display started counting down from four and a half minutes.

The world flashed gold. It spun in one direction. Her stomach spun in the other. Mr. Song and the rest of the rink shimmered into being. He nodded then handed Shelly her blade guards. As she put them on, her name blasted over the PA system as the next to skate. Mr. Song and Shelly settled by the boards to watch her slightly younger self skate to the middle of the rink then strike the same opening pose as Michelle Kwan had in her iconic 1998 free skate to the same music, "Lyra Angelica." Shelly was just relieved Mom hadn't insisted that she simply ape Michelle Kwan move for move. Free skate requirements

had changed too much since then.

"I shouldn't be here." Shelly winced at her opening triple Lutz. "I'm not even supposed to be a Senior yet."

She was because, last season, Mom had made Shelly take her Senior-level test behind Mr. Song's back. When he found out, he wasn't angry. Mr. Song was never angry. He merely pointed out in his own wry way that Shelly had her work cut out for her. She had placed a miraculous sixth at Nationals and now here she was starting this season with a bye out of Regionals so that she could compete against the best figure skaters on the planet instead. Because that wouldn't lead to utter and all consuming humiliation. No, not at all.

"Don't worry about tonight's free skate. You'll do fine." Mr. Song folded his arms across his chest. "It's your first Senior international competition. Even your mom should understand you're not expected to do well. I mean, Michelle Kwan's first in 1993, she placed sixth after the short program and ended up seventh overall out of eight."

"Mom doesn't do pre-1995 or post-2000 Kwan." Shelly slumped, leaning into the boards. "As far as she's concerned, Michelle Kwan never placed lower than second in any competition."

"I'm sure she has a better—Hey, that's interesting." Mr. Song had a penchant for understatement. He pointed out Tatiana Mishina, both of them, spinning side-by-side on the ice. "She's going to do it."

The latest rule changes had just come into effect. All summer long, the rumor had been that the European and World gold medalist would time jump from the end of her free skate back to the start to skate the whole thing with herself in unison. Done wrong, the penalties would take her off the podium, possibly out of the top ten. Done right and well, the bonus points she'd rack up could make her unbeatable.

Dread slithered through Shelly's body. It coiled around her heart and lungs then squeezed. Tatiana had just landed a flawless side-by-side triple Lutz-triple toe combination earning Mom's rapt attention. Usually, Mom was busy scribbling down Shelly's mistakes. Right now, though, the gleam of the brilliant idea in Mom's mind was as impossible to miss as the flashes of gold popping across the arena as fans jumped back in time.

"Maybe Tatiana's just trying to psych out her competitors?"

Mr. Song looked at Shelly with the same incomprehension he did when Mom spoke in Mandarin too quickly. As though each sound made sense by itself, but not in sequence. Like Shelly, he was sort of fluent enough.

"Do you like going into double time?"

Just thinking about it made Shelly woozy. Besides, the amount of time you jumped back had to be made up with jumps forward. Lots of people did that at night just before going to sleep, but all those chunks of time added up. Between school work and practice, she got little enough sleep as it was.

"We can convince Mom that I'm not good enough to time jump back—"

"Actually, skating just the last two minutes in double time isn't a bad idea. You already train clean double run throughs—"

"But, Mr. Song—"

"Shelly, this is this future. Next season, all the elite skaters will do some part or all of their free skates in double time. We can train it and try it out at Sectionals. Even if it's a disaster, you'll still place well enough to qualify for Nationals."

Her music ended. The Shelly on the ice started skating for the boards.

"Can't talk about it now. I'm coming here. Meeting me would be way too awkward."

Shelly threw off her blade guards. She rushed back onto the ice, ignoring her four minute younger self.

By the time the Zambonis rolled onto the ice, Shelly had finished seventh like her namesake, Michelle Kwan, also had her first time out. A whole two skaters had placed behind her. However, while Mom wanted Shelly to skate like Michelle Kwan, this was not what Mom had in mind. Mom didn't share Shelly's relief at not placing last. For days afterwards, as Mom drove them to and from Shelly's three daily practices, silence hung in the car like the heavy air before a storm.

The car's headlights barely lit the empty street and Shelly's flashlight barely lit her AP Chemistry textbook. She was oddly grateful for the quiet. Not acing her chemistry exam would have made Mom about as happy as coming in seventh. The exam would have been easier had Mom allowed her to take regular chemistry first. She squeezed in classes between practices. Half days of school had its advantages, actually. No one really had the chance to call her a "ho" any more. Yes, it was her last name, sort of, but really? The name-calling had gotten old long before high school.

"Shelly, Mr. Song and I have had a talk."

Shelly sank into her seat. She'd hoped skating in unison with herself would be simple. A week where the two hers spun out of sync, didn't land jumps at the same time, not to mention didn't hit their end poses at the same time had changed her mind. Her unison had improved since but it couldn't possibly be perfect enough for Mom yet.

"Mom." Her ribcage seemed to shrink, squeezing the air from her lungs. "Isn't getting one international assignment this season good enough? Besides, Mr. Song said I don't need to skate in double time to win Sectionals."

"何穎珊." Shelly's full name. The only thing worse would be if Mom continued speaking in Mandarin. "Your father and I did not come to this country so that our eventual child could be merely good enough at anything. In any case, you won't be competing at Sectionals."

"I won't?" Shelly refused to get her hopes up. No way that Mom had decided Shelly didn't need to skate anymore.

Figure skating was an expensive sport. Mom and Dad had already given up so much for her.

"No, the USFSA has given you a bye through to Nationals. You'll be taking Emily Takahashi's remaining Grand Prix assignment next week."

Emily had suffered a stress fracture a month or so ago during her first Grand Prix competition of the season. The reigning US National gold medalist, Four Continents gold medalist, and World silver medalist had expected to recover in time for her second Grand Prix. Apparently not.

"Oh." Panic forced the air out of Shelly. "And I'll be skating in double time during my free skate?"

"Of course." Mom signaled her turn into the rink's parking lot. "I expect you to win this."

Shelly knew better than to argue with Mom. She slipped her textbook into her backpack. Skaters who might make the podium at Worlds skated the Grand Prix series. So much for a tune-up event to test skating in double time.

The opening notes of Shelly's free skate filled the rink. She slid over the ice in quick, elegant arcs. Tonight, the music's ethereal joy washed over her as her heart pounded through her chest. She'd nailed her triple Lutz-triple toe combination in the short program and was in second place entering the free skate by a healthy margin. Against some of the world's best, if she delivered the skate she'd been practicing for the past month, she might end up third overall. She'd stand on the podium at a Grand Prix competition. And, finally, Mom would be proud of her.

That joy lasted until her first jumping pass. She two-footed the landing of her triple Lutz, then squeaked out only a single toe loop in combination. Her jumps went downhill from there. She rolled through her falls determined that they wouldn't disrupt the choreography or flow of her program.

In the second half, she singled her second triple Lutz in more ways than one. Her future self was late or maybe her present self was rushing ahead of the music. Only one of her was on the ice to attempt the jump when she popped it, turning only one revolution in the air before landing.

Shelly's slightly older self showed up just in time for the side-by-side triple loop. Older Shelly landed a triple. Younger Shelly landed a double instead. Even with the bonus for elements completed in the second half of the program, she was hemorrhaging points.

Her lungs burned. Her body stung from the falls. The ice felt like mud beneath her skates. She'd never been so relieved to reach the combination spin that ended her program. By the time the older Shelly hit her final pose and the younger Shelly jumped back into double time, she'd landed two clean triples out of seven including her final jump, the side-by-side triple Salchow.

She hadn't exactly covered herself in glory but figure skating audiences were always generous. Their applause thundered across the rink even when someone skated like a human Zamboni. Mom's disappointment pounded through her head though and she hadn't even gotten off the ice yet.

Flowers and product placements dotted the kiss and cry area. Shelly and Mr. Song sat on a bench waiting for her score. The backdrop showed mountains and a camera was trained on them capturing their reactions. Her humiliation had been and would continue to be broadcast worldwide. However, she refused to cry.

"Well, that was a learning experience." Mr. Song rubbed his hands together. "Day after tomorrow, once we're back home, we'll look at the footage and we'll try it again so we get it right for Nationals."

"Mom has to be so disappointed in me." Maybe Shelly would cry after all.

"Don't start." Mr. Song crossed his arms over his chest. "You never gave up and you fought for every point. If the entire skate had been like those last thirty seconds, you'd be looking forward to your score right now. I'm sure your mom knows that."

Her score boomed over the PA system. She'd tumbled from second place to last overall. Skating in double time was stupid. Only two other skaters had attempted it here.

After that free skate, of course what Shelly wanted more than anything else in the world was to be strapped into the seat next to Mom's on the plane trip home. Mom sat by the aisle reading some engineering journal on her ereader. Shelly sat by the window staring at her tablet. Words gathered in dense blocks covered half the screen while a keyboard covered the other half. She'd rather have been sleeping but an analysis of the macaronic language in the works of James Joyce wouldn't write itself. Shelly kind of wished it would. Taking AP English early hadn't been her idea.

"I'm sorry, Mom." Avoiding the free skate from hell any longer would have just made it worse. "I'll do better at Nationals."

"It's okay. I haven't been reasonable." Mom reached for her bag sitting under the seat in front of her. She exchanged her ereader for an eye mask and neck pillow. "I was in grad school when I fell in love with Michelle Kwan's skating. When you were four and decided you wanted to skate, I was so happy, but skaters like her come once in a lifetime. I shouldn't have expected you to— You won't skate in double time any more. I'll talk to Mr. Song when we get home."

With that, Mom shut off her overhead light then went to sleep. The drone of engines covered up any other whispered conversations, isolating Shelly within her pool of light.

Tears welled in her eyes. Air wouldn't stay in her lungs and it was all she could do not to sob. She had never wanted to skate

in double time and now she didn't have to. For once, Mom had relented. Shelly should have been relieved, so why did she feel so awful?

Shelly returned to her tablet. Her fingers tapped the keyboard while she blinked away her tears.

It had been at least a decade since Mr. Song skated competitively but, in skates, he always looked as though he could land quad Lutzes as a warm up. On the ice, Mr. Song might have been a student waiting for his coach rather than a coach waiting for his student. Only senior-level skaters trained this early in the morning and, as they warmed up on the ice, Shelly took her time lacing her skates.

Even if she had just come back from a competition, she couldn't blame how long she was taking on jet-lag. She was stalling and she knew it. Nationals was only six weeks away. This wasn't the time to argue with Mr. Song but life didn't seem to be timing itself for her convenience.

She skated towards Mr. Song. He spotted the time jumper on her wrist then smiled.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"You were the one who said skating the last two minutes in double time wasn't a bad idea."

A mock seriousness spread across his face. "Your mother is not someone to be defied."

"Which is why we're not telling her."

"We hadn't prepared nearly well enough before. It'll be tougher this time." He spread his hands, showing her his palms. "Lots of unison work in double time. Do you have time elsewhere in the day to lose? Your mom's not going to notice that you're suddenly nowhere to be found for minutes at a time whenever you jump ahead to compensate?"

"Sure, I've worked it all out." In truth, she had no clue. She'd take her chances to jump ahead as she found them.

"And triple run throughs." If she could skate for twelve minutes straight in practice, she could survive skating six in competition.

"I know."

"Well, let's get started then." Mr. Song grinned as he rubbed his hands and Shelly started cross-stroking around the rink.

The next six weeks lurched by like the stick shift that she couldn't drive. Between school, all that skating in double time and the sleep she wasn't getting, Shelly didn't have time to wonder if she was doing the right thing.

The less Shelly thought about her short program at Nationals the better. The judges had rather generously placed her sixth, about ten points behind a still recovering Emily Takahashi in first. For the free skate, Shelly had drawn last in the skate order. Her free skate seemed more like a formality they had to plow through than anything to do with deciding who would advance to either Four Continents or Worlds.

The crowd cheered as she skated to center ice. They gasped when a human-shaped flash of gold on the ice turned into Shelly's future self. Emily Takahashi had backed off skating her entire routine in double time to spare her healing toe, skating only the back half that way as Shelly had also planned. The time jumper on future Shelly's wrist counted down from just over four minutes. Future her had gone too far back in time. Years seemed to pass before the world stopped teetering for either of them.

The referee signaled a warning. If Shelly didn't start now, she'd be disqualified.

Future Shelly shrugged as if to say, "Well, nothing to do about it except to think of this as the second half of a double run through." Future Shelly should have known how this skate would go having already skated it with herself. Realistically, though, if she ever remembered how she skated, Mom wouldn't have made her watch her own practices. They struck their opening poses then the music started.

Michelle Kwan once said that to skate "Lyra Angelica" she just went onto the ice then thought of angels. Shelly, on the other hand, focused on one element at a time, ticking each off her mental list then pretending it never happened, especially if it hadn't gone perfectly.

The two Shellys skated as one, hitting every jump and spin in unison. They glided across the rink etching intricate patterns in swift arcs on the ice. Her lungs burned and her legs grew rubbery. For three minutes and fifty-nine seconds, she was the avenging angel. Her every edge and gesture was determined to prove that she could too skate. She refused to implode on the ice. Not again.

Finally, the two Shellys hit their final pose to the last beat of the music and the younger disappeared with a flash of gold into the past. She might have under-rotated her triple Salchow and skipped some steps in her footwork. The Technical Caller would sort that out via slow-motion video replay after her skate.

The audience exploded into generous, even for Nationals, applause. Flowers wrapped in cellophane, teddy bears, and other stuffed animals fell like thick hail on the ice. Tiny girls, ten years old at most, swarmed the rink collecting it all. Everyone in the audience appeared to be... standing?

Shelly bowed. Every breath flayed her lungs and her legs felt like water. Getting to the kiss and cry felt as difficult as her eight minutes of skating. Relief that this horrible season was finally over pushed her off the ice.

It wouldn't be enough to please Mom, but she'd done the best she could. As far as Shelly was concerned, this skate meant more than any medal at Nationals. If she left the sport now, it'd be on a high note. Maybe she would quit. Now that her season was over, she'd have some time to think about it.

Mr. Song sat next to Shelly. He steepled his fingers, an amused expression on his face.

"You forgot to recalibrate your time jumper after this morning's practice session?" His amusement broke into a smile. "You realize now that the judges know what you're capable of, they're going to expect this every time."

"That's not funny." She'd look peeved at him except they were under the glare of a camera, waiting to catch her reaction to her score, if they ever got around to announcing it. "At least I'll never have to do that again."

"Excuse me?" Mr. Song stared up at a scoreboard that steadfastly refused to update with Shelly's scores. "Come Monday, we work on your short program and fine tune this free skate. We gave away a few points you'll need for Worlds."

Her scores boomed over the PA system and scrolled onto the scoreboard. They were too high. She'd won the free skate, beating Emily Takahashi by just under ten points, and placed second overall with no one left to skate. If she'd only fully rotated that Salchow, she might have won the whole thing. The audience exploded into applause again.

Her hands covered her mouth in surprise. She stood and waved to the audience before sitting down again.

"How?" The inevitable fell on Shelly like a boulder. The USFSA was going to send her to both Four Continents and Worlds. So much for quitting.

"Well, you didn't win because you didn't quite fill the short program sized hole you'd dug for yourself." Mr. Song shrugged. "In any case, Ms. Takahashi will decline her inevitable Four Continents assignment. The USFSA will want her to fully heal so that she can skate her entire program in double time at Worlds. That means you, Shelly, are now America's best chance to defend its gold medal at Four Continents. Congratulations."

"Oh." The world lurched beneath her. She gripped her chair for support.

"You look so disappointed. Yes, we both know you could have won this, but placing second and being named to the Worlds team in your second season as a Senior is not a bad thing." Mr. Song gently patted Shelly's back. "Don't worry about your mom. She'll see that."

Winning this thing had been the last thing on Shelly's mind. And she'd given up on the notion of pleasing Mom.

A reporter came up to Shelly. Then another. And then another. Suddenly, everyone wanted to interview her. She found herself wishing that Mom would barge in to tell her what to say.

After the medal ceremony, Shelly jumped ahead to compensate for the double time during her free skate. It cost her only a moment to create four minutes when no one could find her. By the time she sneaked out of the rink, the crowd was breaking up. People were heading to the parking garage, to the subway, or to the shuttle back to the hotel. Lamps, benches and piles of snow lined the way. Sparks of gold twinkled in the distance undoubtedly from people time jumping back to catch

the shuttle. Mom and Mr. Song sat on a bench scanning the crowd. Her silver medal still lay cold in her pocket. It ought to have a chance to warm up before she faced Mom. Not only had Shelly disobeyed her but she had done so in spectacular fashion and on national TV. If she'd won, she might have gotten away with it. Stupid triple Salchow.

"Shelly." Mr. Song waved then jogged to her. Mom pushed against the tide of the shuttle-bound in the distance. "You don't need to avoid your mom."

"Um... I—"

"You know she's so proud of you." He smiled at the disbelief on her face. "Really, she was just saying—"

"何穎珊, don't worry me like that. I've been looking for you everywhere." Mom planted herself next to Mr. Song. "You skated your entire program in double time."

"Yes, Mom." Shelly stared at her feet. The time of reckoning for disobeying Mom had come.

"What has Mr. Song told you about your triple Salchow? You could have beat Emily Takahashi." Mom paused to catch her breath. "He and I were just talking about the rest of this season and the next season. A gold at Four Continents is a given but Worlds—"

"Hey, that's Emily." Shelly pointed at a clump wearing thick, hooded coats. One of them might have been Emily. "I should go congratulate her."

She ran off before Mom could say otherwise. Time was awasting if she wanted to check out what Mr. Song had said. The time jumper couldn't take you back any further than about five minutes. She circled around to hide behind the pile of snow next to the bench where Mom and Mr. Song had talked, then squeezed the time jumper latched to her wrist.

Her gaze faded from gold into benches, lamps and piles of snow although the air still glittered with time jumping. Mr. Song sat on the bench. Mom paced around it, marking a ring of cement on the snow-dusted path. Shelly caught them in middle of small talk about the weather, Dad, and Mr. Song's boyfriend. Eventually, the conversation drifted to Worlds, Mom's plans for global domination of ladies' figure skating, and Shelly.

"I've known she was up to something for weeks. She can't hide her jumps forward in time as well as she thinks she can." Mom stopped pacing and her arms fell to her sides. "I couldn't be prouder of her. Even that first novice competition, she was so awful but she tried so hard. She's everything I could have asked for in a daughter."

Mom had never spoken those words to Shelly, ever. As Mom nattered on, Shelly's hand moved to the time jumper on her wrist, waiting for its display to count down to zero so she could jump back in time again. Even though she was now the favorite to win Four Continents, Mom's words to her were about her under-rotated triple Salchow and losing to Emily Takahashi. The only way she'd ever hear how proud Mom was

of her again in person was to jump back in time before the moment slipped too far back for her time jumper to reach.

Shelly looked down the path. Another Shelly hid behind a street lamp, listening.

Bonnie Stufflebeam is one of our favorite new writers, reads voraciously, and has published dozens of stories since she hit the SF scene a couple of years ago. We took advantage of Bonnie's expertise and asked her to share with you the stories she loved the most in 2014. Many of these stories are available for free reading online, and we've included links so you can find and enjoy them.

BEST SHORT FICTION OF 2014

by Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam

2014 saw a wealth of great short stories. From Margaret Atwood's first collection since 2006, *Stone Mattress*, to the first in Lightspeed's diversity-focused *Destroy!* series, *Women Destroy Science Fiction!*, to all the amazing work coming from magazines both online and in print. I've been tasked with naming my favorites.

First, a few disclaimers: I haven't included stories nominated for either the Nebula, Hugo, or Locus Award, as they've received a great deal of attention already. I read few magazines cover to cover. Instead, I rely on recommendations from blogs, social media, and reviews. I favor stories that are available online, as these are most accessible for me. My main criteria for a great story remains its staying power: did I think about it after I finished it or forget it? Did it leave chills?

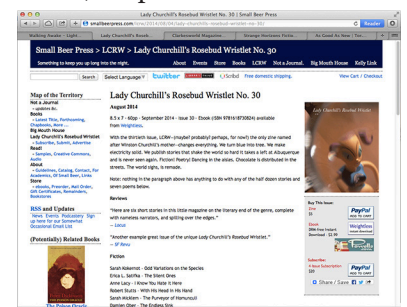
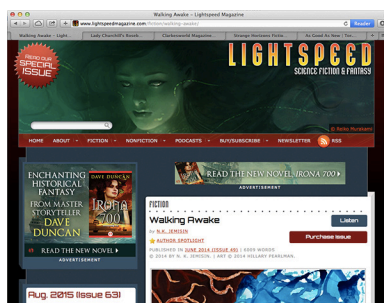
Let's start with Lightspeed and the well-received **Women Destroy Science Fiction!** special issue. One stand-out from this issue is N.K. Jemisin's memorable [Walking Awake](#), where seemingly alien, benevolent-but-terrifying life forms called Masters have taken over earth and require human hosts to survive. Sadie is a caregiver at the facility where they raise and train the hosts;

being bipolar, a refreshing characterization rarely explored in stories, she isn't allowed to host her own Master. But the Masters are not quite as they seem, and as Sadie learns where they came from, she questions the peaceful world they've made.

Adam-Troy Castro's weird, touching story of motherhood and geometry, [The Thing About Shapes to Come](#), also in Lightspeed, takes place in a world where people no longer give birth to human children but shapes, typically spheres. Monica births a cube but loves it all the same. The absurdity of the imaginative premise gives way to the relatability of the theme: a mother's unconditional love.

From the April 2014 Lightspeed, I haven't stopped thinking about Carmen Maria Machado's [Observations About Eggs from the Man Sitting Next to Me on a Flight from Chicago, Illinois to Cedar Rapids, Iowa](#). A monologue in parts, this surreal story takes the familiar experience of sitting next to a talkative individual on a plane and funnels it through the weird. The man's clever come-on monologue starts with eggs and quickly moves into the metaphysics of alternative worlds...or something. It's as arresting as overheard conversation itself. Also worth checking out is Carmen Maria Machado's subtly horrifying novelette "The Husband Stitch," which appeared in *Granta*.

A horror/humor hybrid, [Odd Variations on the Species](#) by Sarah Kokernot from Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet #30 (an excellent issue overall) explores human nature and our connection with other species. A young couple trying to get pregnant visits the husband's mother Mimi for her 80th birthday. The husband wanders across a species of crab thought extinct, a crab known to bestow those who eat it with enhanced fertility and who mimics human voices. Though the couple badly wants a child, they're charmed by the creature and realize the crab's worth to nature. The characters' ethical reactions are believably convoluted.



Another stand-out from this issue is Robert E. Stutts' *With His Head in His Hand*, inspired by Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, about a queer man, Morgan, who wanders into an enchanted house. He must pass a daily test in order to leave. A clever take on mythology tropes where Morgan's queerness is integral to his success rather than a burden, which provides a highly refreshing angle.

Another fairy tale, James Patrick Kelly's *The Rose Witch* in *Clarkesworld*, is a beautifully-spun ode to women who desire both fulfilling work and love but are told they cannot have both. A famous witch dies, leaving her enchanted garden. No one is sure which of her apprentices will take her place as its caretaker. Julianja tries but cannot keep the roses alive. When a cursed stranger visits the garden and is shown his future, he claims to see Julianja curing his curse. They set off together on a journey where, as with all good fairy tale journeys, Julianja discovers more about herself.

Strange Horizons had a great year, publishing several of my favorite stories. In LaShawn M. Wanak's magical realist *21 Steps to Enlightenment (Minus One)*, enchanted spiral staircases appear to people from thin air. If climbed, travelers reach an epiphany at the top. Isa has climbed three and is passing her wisdom on, advising those who climb that an epiphany is only as good as what you make of it, while she slowly reveals the bittersweet story of her own family.

Lara Elena Donnelly explores the nature of artistic genius in the historically-inspired *Chopin's Eyes*, revitalizing the story of Chopin and his mistress George Sand. During their affair, Sand realizes that Chopin is possessed by a demon; this demon is responsible for his talent. Sand encourages the demon in the name of greatness. This tale is a powerful take on the consuming nature of both creativity and love.

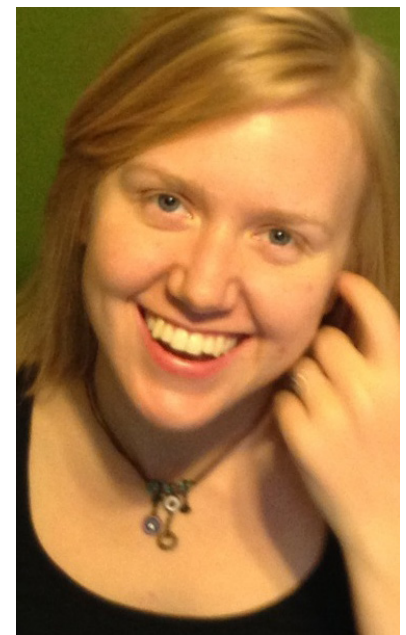
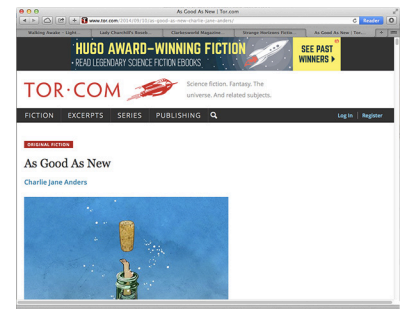
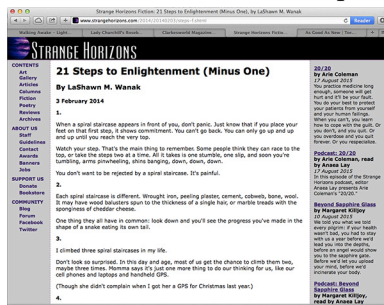
Charlie Jane Anders plays with the trope of the wish-granting genie in the futuristic apocalyptic story *As Good As New* from *Tor.com*. Highly realistic, this funny take on the end-of-the-

world scenario features the last person on earth, once-playwright Marisol, binging on streaming TV in her rich employer's bunker as she waits to emerge into the ravaged world. When she finally does, she discovers an ex-theatre-critic genie-in-a-bottle who accidentally reveals that this isn't the first end-of-the-world he's cured. She waits on her wishes, looking to TV for inspiration. Marisol's mundane response to a well-trod scenario makes this story highly entertaining and memorable.

Honorable mentions: K.J. Parker's twisty fantasy *Heaven Thunders the Truth* in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*; Sam J. Miller's ode to longing in *Kenneth: A User's Manual* in *Strange Horizons*; Oliver Buckram's innovative *Two Truths a Lie* in *Interzone*; Alex Shvartsman's heart-breaking nod to classic sci fi *Icarus Falls* in *Daily Science Fiction*; Rachael Ack's exploration of mental health after combat in *They Tell Me There Will Be No Pain* in *Lightspeed: Women Destroy Science Fiction*!

Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam has published more than thirty short stories in magazines such as *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Lightspeed*, *Interzone*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Black Static*. She's earned honorable mentions from Ellen Datlow's The Best Horror of the Year and Gardner Dozois' The Year's Best Science Fiction publications.

Bonnie has also written nonfiction for *Lightspeed Magazine* and has reviewed novels for *Publisher's Weekly*. Her 2012-2013 Short Story Review blog highlights more recent short fiction of note.



When we decided to have a promotional story to give out at Worldcon, we knew we needed someone who could tell something quick and fun. We approached Andrea G. Stewart, writer, painter, and suburban farmer to see what she could give us. She quickly sent us two stories, one SF, one fantasy. I had just had to put down my old dog, and the fantasy one made me cry, but I think any story about a pet would have done that. This story manages to pack in fun, bittersweet, and descriptive, all in 400 words.

THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

BY ANDREA G. STEWART

The ground convulsed, and all Marta McKenna thought about was the tongue-curling taste of seawater. The world stilled. “There’s a good lad,” she said. Hard not to think about swimming, she supposed, when you lived in the belly of a sea serpent. It hadn’t been her first choice of residence, but, as they say, desperate times. No matter how remote a spot she chose, men and women had always found her, begging her to heal wounds or tell them their futures, and never mind the cost to her lifespan. It gave her a right headache, besides.

She shifted in her seat and picked up the knitting needles from her lap. Her two wisps darted in closer, illuminating her work. She leaned back, feeling the steady pulse of the giant’s heart. Marta liked this spot in the throat, a little ways past the tongue—a raised bump from which she could wave at passing sailors as they swept past her and into the monster’s gullet. She could tell them their futures, all right.

The ground convulsed again. She clutched the knitting needles close. The scent of a long-dead whale wafted from the serpent’s belly. “Be still!” she cried out, and the monster

obeyed. With a smile, she patted the lump beneath her, then paused. The flesh was moist and slick, as it always was, but it felt harder than it had before.

The monster trembled. Without meaning to, Marta cast her gaze into the serpent’s future. She watched the serpent wend his way through the seas, she watched herself grow older, murmuring, “There’s a good lad,” as she leaned on a cane. She watched the bump growing, blocking the serpent’s throat. She watched him die, a long time after she did. As she came back to the present she shifted on her perch, an ache building between her temples. No point in bemoaning his fate, and she did so enjoy this spot.

“Oh hell,” she muttered. She pressed her hands to the flesh beneath her and breathed in deep, the taste of salt on the back of her tongue. The lump shrank, and the world around her shuddered as the disease disappeared. Marta placed a palm against the inside of the serpent’s throat and smiled, her head pounding fit to burst, new liver spots on the back of her hand. “There’s a good lad. Good lad.”

COMING SOON ON *MOTHERSHIP ZETA*

We received over 800 submissions in our first open submission period, and we loved far more stories than we could fit into our first issue. So we took them because it was the fun thing to do. From a Japanese noir detective story to a flash piece about, uh, quantum clowns, we think you'll be pleased to see what we have in store. We're proud to be featuring authors from all over the world: United States, Canada, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Finland, The Netherlands, Nigeria, and Singapore! In our inaugural year, you'll be reading amazing, fun stories by talented authors. Here's a small taste:

Rachael Acks
Jetse de Vries
Malon Edwards
Sarah Gailey
Dan Malakin
A. Merc Rustad

Carlie St. George
Bonnie Jo
Stufflebeam
Naru Sundar
Ursula Vernon

We still have a few submissions to read and are excited to add to this list. We can't wait to share these wonderful stories with you!

A final note: because we bought enough stories to fill our first *year* of publication, we will not be opening for submissions in October as originally planned. We will open again in 2016 to find the best stories for Year 2!

THANK YOU!

An enormous thank you to our amazing Associate Editors, Volunteer Readers, and Slush Pile Wranglers for their help during this submission cycle: Cecilia Dockins, Kristene Dontje, Robert Farnsworth, Sarah Hendrix, Andrew Kim, Victor Manuel, Sean Robinson, Holly Schofield, and Jean Shea. We couldn't do what we do without you!

COVER ART

Ursula Vernon

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