

the seduction of the wind
and other bedtime stories for those nights
you wish the whole world in flames



jimmy t. hand
illustrations by robin

HALF THE BALLROOM floor opened to expose the basement. A great calliope—an organ of steam whistles—was revealed.

The gear slipped at last and the weight fell the last inch to the floor of the tower. On any other year, the power of the steam engines would have wound the stone back to the top of the tower. But that final year the thigh-thick rope was cut by its mechanisms. The steam engines began their ordered march and a great waltz began.

Throughout the house, walls were tuned to specific keys and were beaten with hammers made from the trunks of thousand-year-old trees.

The calliope's music grew slowly as the steam pressure began to build.

EVE LEFT THE room next to the great tower even as the first slow measure carried its way into the bowels of the earth and the breadths of the white heavens. When she appeared downstairs, Raven saw her and wept for his unrequited love and his yet-unborn child.

"YOU SHOULD DRINK, you should dance. Tonight is the last night." Malah looked calm for someone who believed that God was about to retire.

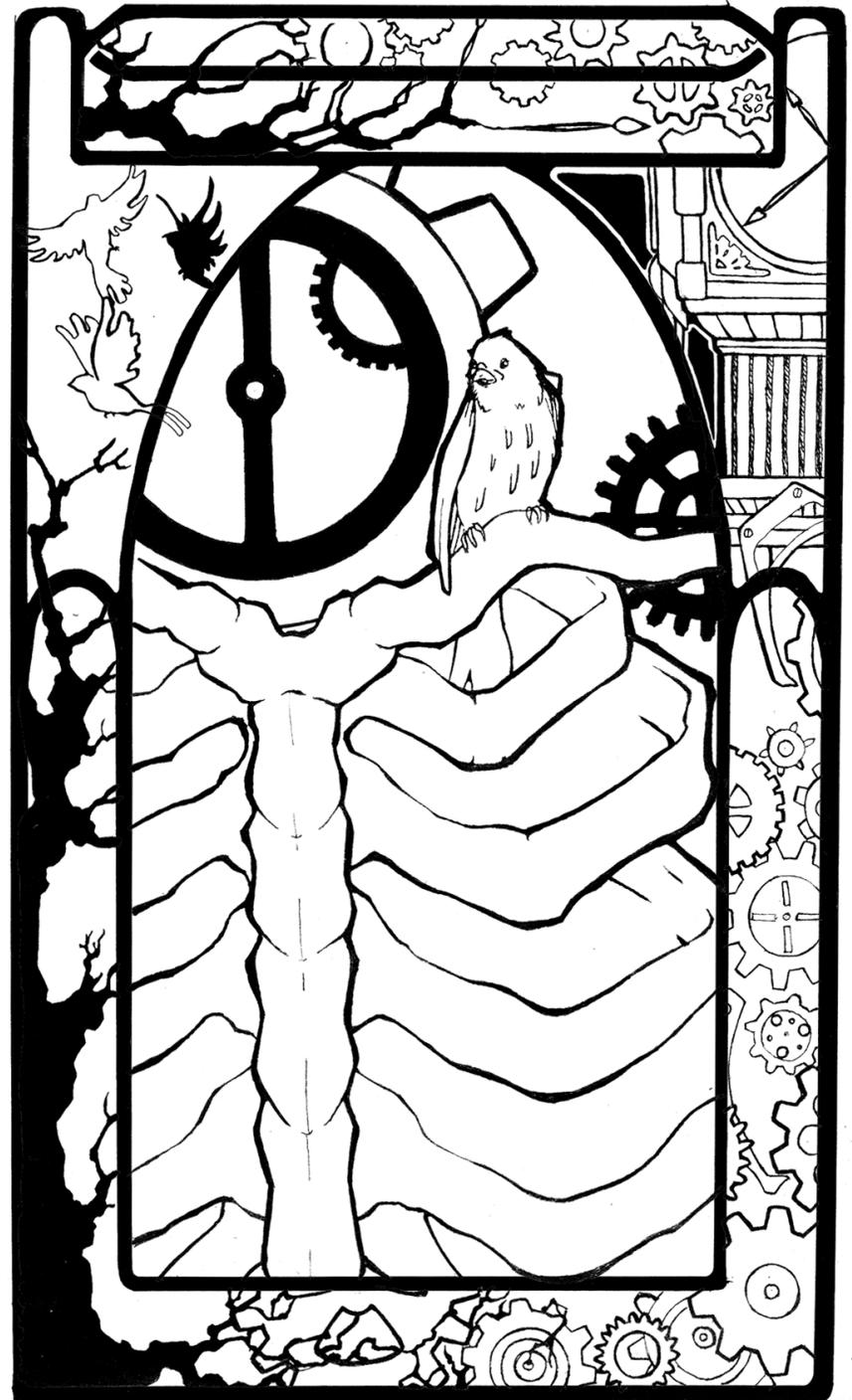
"Malah, why does this dying God sing so sadly?"

ACROSS THE OCEAN a people were rising up. Sewing machines were thrown at men with guns and young women were dying. But there were so many more young women than there were men with guns. Thread and blood mixed with screams of pain and the ecstasy of revolution.

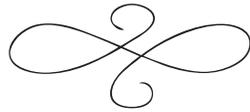
"YOU MISHEARD ME; you heard what you wanted to hear. Yes, this God is dying, but it is not his name we sing. We sing the name and the praise of the new God to come. We will have chaos, anarchy. We will have the old world back.

"Back before Order, some fool of a priest sang all two to the sixteenth names of the damned God we have now, and He stepped in. We work to reverse the damage done."

THE YOUNG LOVERS went down to dance on the floor of the hall while the courtyard erupted in fire. Sent through glass pipes that began to resonate chords, the belly-fire of the house illuminated the dark white forest outside. Malah grinned, Raven grew stoic and Eve smiled, one hand under the curve of her belly, the other around the father of her unborn child.



*These stories are dedicated to the person who
inspired me to write them. May she do well in all things.*



much crimethInc and had decided that capitalism was to be avoided at any costs, so he had left college.

Eve had spent too many mornings reading the crime blotter to figure out why her father hadn't come home, so she had run away.

They had both been living on the streets when they had met in a dumpster, digging for food. After a few months, they had parted ways. Raven had been offered a mysterious worktrade in the north and had given Eve a P.O. Box to reach him at.

Eve decided one day that she needed a different life and wrote him.

IF MALAH WAS to be believed, the name of God was pronounced only through music. 32,767 years ago Malah had finally found his way to that house, God's house, and he had begun to live in it. Everything had gone fine for the first 32,766 years, but then, a year ago, Malah had decided that he needed an assistant to help clean, repair, and cook.

Malah looked "ancient", but "ancient" in that probably-older-than-your-parents kind of way. He didn't look a day over 3,000, and Eve had a hard time believing him.

But 8 months after she had met him, as the clock struck 11 and she lay in feverish fits, Eve realized that she had come to believe Malah. In that house, with only three of them, the world only made sense if she believed him. And after the summer solstice song that she witnessed, 2 months into her stay, his words seemed as likely as anything else.

"DID YOU KNOW that the names of God are all in minor keys?" Raven had asked Eve. "I asked him about it, and there apparently hasn't been one happy song since the beginning of this God's reign."

"That surprises me, since he says this God is the God of Order. What does Malah claim will happen when all of God's names are spoken?"

"Well, I suppose the world will end, won't it?" Raven had thought for a minute, "I think he mentioned something about a new God taking control."

EVE HAD WORN all black when she had hopped trains and shot dope and slept in doorways, and her color scheme hadn't changed when she moved into the house. For some reason there were dozens of black dresses that fit her, although a bit loosely around the waist. She had no idea how old the things were. The fact that they were maternity dresses should have surprised her, perhaps should have worried her, but it didn't.

IN THE BALCONY overlooking the ballroom, Malah sat ready with wine that bore no label and knew no age. Three glasses were poured. When Raven arrived, at 11:52, he protested that Eve not be tempted to drink during her pregnancy.

somewhere in their cultural memory was the *concept* of the house, but nobody understood. In the middle of the longest day of the year, in the middle of the longest night of the year, strange things happened in the woods. The ghosts came together and danced, old men in bars would say. The younger generations wouldn't believe them until one year they too would venture out and hear the ghosts come together and dance. More years would pass, and eventually they became the disbelieved in the bars.

The old men weren't so far from the truth, if Malah was to be believed.

WHEN EVE FIRST arrived some eight months ago, Raven had picked her up in town with the groceries and taken her back to the house. They had driven through the woods, down spur roads that seemed to peter out but picked back up around lost corners. Nobody could figure it out, Raven said, unless they knew the way. Raven also claimed that magnetic compasses offered no hope either; powerful lodestones abounded at random in the maze of evergreens.

Raven thought that maybe a GPS unit would allow someone to map out the area, but nobody had tried. And if Malah was to be believed, they wouldn't have much more of a chance to do it.

The house stood in a small clearing, a natural valley among shallow hills. There was no way to see it from one hundred yards away, yet there it stood, majestic and gothic. Malah claimed the place had been there for about 32,800 years. Raven said that in the springtime he had to clear ivy from the walls and that during the summers he had to fix the leaky roof.

ANOTHER HOUR TREMBLED its way through Eve's fevered and pregnant belly. 10pm. Raven had tried to comfort her but Eve had thrown him out; Raven was more in love with Eve than Eve was with Raven. She did not want her child to have a father—she knew from experience what a horror fathers were.

So Raven was downstairs preparing for the evening, working with the boilers.

AS THEY HAD sat at dinner the first night, Malah had told her a lot of things. Eve had learned that, if Malah was to be believed, God, the present God, had a name with 65,536 permutations. 2 to the 16th power. This God was Order and Law. He was Science, Agriculture.

RAVEN HAD MET Eve a few years back, when he had still been cutting his teeth on the hobo life. He had read too much Kerouac and too

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if malah was to be believed

December 21st, 2012

THE HOUSE BANGED AND CARRIED ON OF ITS OWN ACCORD, AND not just on the solstices. Immense low booms accompanied every settled floorboard and sad whistles told of slight pressure changes in the boiler down below. Every hour the great stone fell an inch or so further down, when the next tooth in the gear caught and shifted the house's clock forward in time.

Eve's room was right next to the tower and she felt the weight move the ancient timbers of the house as it struck 9pm; the vibrations ran through the wall, the floor, and up the posts of her canopy bed right into her pregnant belly.

Outside it was white. In her fever, Eve came to believe that the sun itself had turned pale as snow. The ground was white; the trees were buried in white. There were neither blue skies nor green trees, and there wouldn't be until summer this far north, at the end of the world.

In reality, they were only in Montana, but for a belle from Birmingham, they might as well have been at the end of the world.

ON HER FIRST night at the house, Malah, the old man who had been at the house for the past 32,767 and a quarter years, asked her if she enjoyed the concepts of chaos as much as her young friend Raven, whom she was visiting.

Raven, who had been at the house for the past one and a quarter years, protested that it was an unfair question.

"No no... the question is quite valid. Do you, my dear, care about anarchy in the ways that Raven does?"

"I do."

"Ah, good. You will do quite well with what is to come."

THE HOUSE WAS never cold, even in the dead of winter. Great boilers in the basement provided all the mechanics of the house with energy. Steam engines worked constantly in a slow gear.

Nobody in town, fifteen miles away through thick forest, knew about the house. There were rumors of banshees in the forest, and

the seduction of the wind

WHEN ANDREW WAS A YOUNG BOY HE FELL IN LOVE WITH THE wind. This requires some explanation.

Andrew was raised in a new suburban development that bordered on farmland. If he walked a half an hour one direction, he would be at a stripmall; if he walked half an hour the other direction, he found open grassland, sparse copses of trees and freshly plowed fields.

His house was the only house in his neighborhood that pre-dated the housing development. Dwarfed by the sprawling five-bedroom, two-point-five-bathroom American Dreams about it, his parent's house was only two floors and three bedrooms. It had been renovated to match its neighbors with white vinyl siding but it revealed its age every night as the timbers moaned. All Andrew knew about his house was that in school the other students picked on him for being too poor to have a modern home.

There were no trees of any size to speak of in that neighborhood that had been named Forest Grove; the saplings that had been planted—three to every two houses—would take decades to provide shade or adventure. The wind tore through the neighborhood with abandon all summer and the local storm window salesman made quite a good living.

Andrew's house seemed the nexus of the swirling wind, sitting as it was at the end of a cul-de-sac lined with giant houses and fencing. Every summer the winds returned and flew through his open window, sending every piece of summer homework into the air.

He spent his days high up in the tall, thin pine trees on the edge of the country, letting the wind sway him back and forth. He built a platform and felt he was sailing, wished and dreamed that he was sailing.

The wind would never fail him, would come to him every summer, he decided.

IT WAS EARLY into puberty that he first realized the wind took human form. At dusk when the moon was in the sky and the sun's light had yet to fail she appeared away on the hill near his platform, her hair longer

than her body and twisting out ten feet in front of her. If he focused his eyes wrong she disappeared, and would not return until the next night.

He dreaded school like none of his peers because he knew that come September the wind would leave and he would have only himself. Andrew was a strange boy without friends, pretty in a mother's eyes but awkward to all the world. Sometimes in winter he would walk around his room throwing his homework into the air trying his hardest to become the zephyr he loved.

By the time he was fourteen he had learned to see her even when the moon wasn't out, an effort in understanding and passion. He watched her on the hill in the day, and he watched her in the evenings as she ran about his room tossing his papers with glee into the air.

He never told anyone about her. His friends at school weren't really his friends, really. His parents... well, he knew better than to tell his parents.

Every time he saw her he told her hello, but if she heard him she made no sign of it.

One summer evening, when he was fifteen, he set about a ritual to bring her to him. He closed the door to his room, opened the window and lit candles on the windowsill, tempting her to blow them out. He ground jade in a mortar and pestle until it was a fine powder. He chanted, making up the words as he went along, composing a love poem to the wind. As he said the final word, he tossed the meager jade powder into the air. The candles blew out as the wind poured into the room and spun the powder from the air. The dust collected as the green of her eyes.

She was not beautiful, nor was she plain. Her body, while not extremely thin, did not bear the curves that many associate with sex. She was neither old nor young, and her hair was tied back into elaborate loops on the top of her head.

"Hello," she said in a voice that carried quickly away, "hello."

"Um... hi." Andrew had not really expected his ritual to work, and had certainly not prepared anything to say.

"Well, I suppose you're going to ask some advice of me? Ask me the answer to some deep and trivial mortal question?"

"I... I don't really know what to ask. I love you. Are you a god?"

She didn't laugh, but instead really focused on looking at him.

"Gods..." she began, "No, I'm not a god."

"Oh..."

"A long time ago there was only nature. There were no gods, no greater spirits residing within creatures... no universal morality or

of moth & flame

WAY BACK IN TIME IMMEMORIAL, IN THOSE AGES WHEN HUMAN was not the Other, all of the animals of the forest lived together in relative peace. Sure, they ate each other and stole from one another, but at least there was still plenty of forest to live in relative peace within. Human was just another animal, but an animal that could control fire.

All of the other animals were afraid of fire, and rightly so. All except one, that is. Moth loved the fire and flew to it every night, dancing with it for hours. She loved the way it moved about chaotically. She tried to pattern her flight around the movements of the flame.

Every night when the fire died away, moth would return back to her own part of the forest, only to be scolded by every other animal that was still awake.

Raccoon would say to her, "Moth, that fire is hot; it will burn your wings and you will be forced to crawl about on the earth as I do."

Owl often scolded her, "Moth, fire is alive and fire is a predator. Fire will eat you if it can."

Moth knew that her friends were probably right, but she couldn't control herself. Night after night she danced with the flames anyway. She loved it.

One night she flew too close and fire ate her—wings, body and all.

The other animals mourned her passing, but they were assured of their superior wisdom.

"She should have known better," pointed out Raccoon to Owl.

"Indeed. She was foolish, but we certainly know better than her."

Soon Winter came, however, and ate both Owl and Raccoon.

come to her. Illa must, she rationalized, for no other human agent had ever advanced the goddess's cause so greatly.

JESSICA HAD WALKED into the front lobby of the headquarters of Shell. She had gone to the guard and spoken to him: "I serve myself," she had lied calmly, "and Iksi. The Greenpeace headquarters is in flames."

In the old days, the days of the One God, the guard would have simply thrown her out for lunacy. But the guard was a devoted servant of Iksi, and had gleefully rushed to the phone to announce the blaze over the intercom.

Soon the Shell building had emptied of all but a skeleton staff as Shell Oil sought to capitalize on the fire, and Jessica had cunningly made her way to the innermost chambers of the high priest. With Illa's sight, she had moved through the every lock with ease. And then she had found the holy books and changed a few choice words.

BELOW HER—ON the balcony of the Shell Building across the street—fires burned high on altars of stone. Soon her goddess would come to her. She watched with cold passion as the directors of Greenpeace were lined up along the altars. One priest, clad in a crimson suit, read in an ancient tongue from the book before him.

"We give these to you, oh lady of night sky, oh Illa the owl." The priest did not understand the ancient language in which he spoke, did not perceive his error. The throats were cut and the bodies heaved upon the fire. Jessica had tricked Illa's enemies into a powerful sacrifice of Illa's own followers to Illa. Illa would be pleased.

When Jessica turned around from the window, Illa was already there, a woman with grace but without sexuality.

"You have done me a great service, Jessica the Trickster." Her voice was as soothing as crickets.

"My love... I would do anything to advance you, to win your favor."

"So you wish to win my favor? What do you ask of me?"

"I seek you as consort, and I wish to see as you do."

Illa walked in close to Jessica and put one arm around her waist. Jessica breathed deeply in anticipation and made eye contact with the goddess of her wildest fantasies.

"Keep your eyes open, loyal one," Illa commanded, and Jessica obeyed. Illa raised one hand and her fingers looked as talons. She ripped Jessica's eyes out of her head, one by one. "Now you see as I do. All I see is pain."

Jessica was screaming in agony, blind.

"I am a nature god in this world of steel. Do you still wish to take me as your lover?"

Jessica could do naught but scream.

universal anything. There was only chaos. I was there, then. Humans were no different than the other animals. But then one day, adapting to the perils of the changing climates, they developed tools. With tools came... I'm not sure the right word. Call it existential angst. They looked for meaning because they were killing themselves. And so they invented gods. Thus, they had reason to live, purpose. I am no reason to live.

"I am not a god. I am a wind. I'm confused as to why you can see me, I must admit."

Andrew told her about how he had always been in love with her, about how he learned to see her and about how he wanted to be with her.

The wind laughed now, and seeing the hurt expression on Andrew's face she quickly stopped. "I'm not laughing at you, my dear. You think I think you just a boy... I don't. When last I was with a man or a woman, before they turned their sights to the gods, many people didn't live much past your age.

"I was laughing... I was laughing because it has been so long, so long since anyone loved me. I have never cared. Gods are for human things like love. I am a wind." She looked down at her body, then up at him. "If you live for me then you will suffer. If you want me regardless, know that I would have you."

They experienced each other as only a boy and a wind may, a love that cannot be reproduced in words. They lay together and through each other for a few hours before darkness set in.

"This house... this house has been here a long time. Back when these used to be fields of wheat that I ran through, my hands outstretched to brush the tops of the grain. Before that there was a forest and I flew across the upper boughs. Now... now I fly past these stale buildings that are locked to me. Only your room is open."

When darkness was complete she raised herself and fled through the window.

ALL THAT SUMMER she came to him every day and taught him things. She taught him the history of the world, she taught him about far away places and times. She taught him about the waters, the earth and fire. And Andrew was deeply in love.

At the end of August she came a last time to say goodbye. She hadn't been by in two days, and Andrew had done little but lay in bed inconsolable.

"I am leaving." She said.

"But I will see you next year?"

“Perhaps.”

“Take me with you then. Know that I love you, know that I want to be with you.”

She looked at him sadly and opened her arms. Always before when she had opened her arms they had seemed human, but this time thin leathery wings spread out underneath them. When her arms were fully extended she flicked open her hands and the wings continued out from her fingers, her wingspan as great as the room.

“You can’t follow me. I’m going south, where it is warm. Goodbye.”

That winter seemed colder than it had ever been, and Andrew spent most of it reading. Yet no books held anything that compared to the knowledge he had glimpsed.

With summer she did not return, as she had since he was young. No wind at all came to the housing division. He stole his parent’s car with intention of driving south, ne’er to return. But no sooner had he crested the first hills on the highway that he saw her.

Wind-power turbines had been set up across the plains and there was his wind, frantically running back and forth between them to keep them spinning, a miserable slave to humanity. He parked, walked underneath them and called to her, but if she heard him she gave no sign.

He returned home, and he never told his parents why he had stolen the car.

illa & iksi

THE WAR THAT ENDED WAR AS WE KNOW IT WAS NOT FOUGHT BY the race of men and women.

Ask a Christian, and they will say Lucifer Morningstar fought God—and owing to the homosexuality, feminism and heavy metal music prevalent in human society—won. Ask a Pagan and they will tell you that the old gods simply reclaimed what was theirs. Ask an atheist... well, most would rise to defend their previous atheism. It made sense at the time, you see.

The end of war as we know it was not the end of violence, death or cruelty. But with the fall of God (who, like in a king in chess, was subdued and not killed) fell centralized belief systems, without which the machinery of war could not operate.

The State fell alongside God, but freedom did not follow in its wake. The Corporation rose, and polytheistic boards of directors took to human sacrifice on altars of black glass in the highest skyscrapers. (The monotheists behaved no better, incidentally, but were underground as they had been 2000 years prior). Even the non-profits were involved with blood offerings to their various patrons, convinced as they were of the righteousness of their causes.

Greenpeace and Shell Oil were at each other’s throats as ever before.

Greenpeace worshiped Illa, goddess of dark, of self, of air and soil. In physical form, she manifested as an owl or as a slender innocuous woman. Illa saw all. The environmentalists did her bidding, sought her favor and sacrificed city animals, rodent and human, to appease her.

Shell Oil served Iksi, god of fire and smoke, of cities, of passionate love and cleanliness. Iksi felt all. Iksi was brother to Illa, and though the siblings had fought alongside one another in the final war, they were bitter rivals in the aftermath. Iksi appeared as a phoenix, the burning man, or an immaculate businessman with sharp features.

Our protagonist of sorts, Jessica, was an independent contractor who followed the way of the Trickster—a god of many names and forms. Jessica had worked often for Greenpeace and had fallen in love with Illa in a way that none who were subservient to Illa could possibly imagine. You see, unlike Iksi and so many of the gods, Illa did not take humans as lovers.

Yet Jessica stood on the 103rd floor of a building and plotted the impossible. Below her—on the balcony of the Shell Building across the street—fires burned high on altars of stone. Soon her goddess would

George spoke angrily, "If we do not fix this clock then we condemn others to die in our footsteps!"

The finch continued to laugh at them. "No, they will simply turn all other clocks back as well, and your illusory foolish 'measure' will be known as the sham it is."

"We will not cede to you. Your gods have taken everything from us that we have ever built. Our spirits are yet indomitable." With these words Anna reached for the bird, which fled out the window. They righted the clock and blocked the windows up with the bones of their peers. Soldiers in the war against the gods, they set about to die.

katherine the bear

EVERYTHING, EVEN TIME, RUNS IN CYCLES. A LONG, LONG TIME ago, so long ago that it was the far future, humans weren't around yet anymore.

Katherine was a bear who lived back then, in the lands of the north before the north knew snow. Katherine loved the sun, but in the winter it was hardly around at all.

"You're no cold-blooded iguana," Katherine's parents told her, "you don't need the sun." But Katherine was unconvinced. She spent the long summer days basking and the long winter nights depressed.

When she was old enough she went to go see Galina, the clan's medicine woman, and spoke of her woes.

"Young Katherine, it has not always been this way. A long time ago, there were people who didn't have fur to keep them warm." The medicine woman told Katherine this while the two were seated her small cave.

"Were they lizards, then?" Katherine asked in wonder.

"No, no. They were bears, same as you and I. They simply had no fur. And so these people, the *Hiltarwyn*, learned to trap the sun and bring him inside their caves."

"Like fire?" Fire was not unknown, even back then, since lightning would ignite entire forests. Some young, unwise philosophers among the bears spoke of how fire might one day be controlled.

"No, not like fire at all. Like the sun. These people lived south of here, three moons walking."

As spring first tipped towards summer Katherine the Bear left walking. It was the first time she had ever left her home.

She passed through lands she had never seen and had a great many adventures before three moons passed. All the while the days grew shorter, even though midsummer had not passed.

One day she parted some ferns and looked out onto a great wasteland without plant life. It was so vast that she couldn't see its end in any direction, and it was quiet—no birds chirped and no insects stirred.

A vast hill that stretched out before her, and on its crest stood a towering structure that looked of gray stone and black metal. It dominated the empty sky.

Before she had left home, Katherine would not have had the courage to walk across the dead land to the fortress on the hill. But the three moons had taught her to trust herself, and that fortune favored the brave.

It took her the rest of the afternoon to reach the building. As night came on Katherine noticed that the building was bright in the moonlight, glowing with an unearthly, pale luminescence that immediately brought death to mind for reasons she couldn't fathom.

Inside, the halls were lit pale green from the ceiling. At first, Katherine was ecstatic. Here, she realized, was the sun brought into caves. It was like foxfire, but a thousand times brighter.

Yet as she walked the flickering white-green corridors her opinion began to change. There were no shadows, she realized, and there was no dark in which to sleep. Shortly before dawn Katherine realized that this was an unholy place, unfit for bears to live.

She left and didn't rest until she reached the tree line. As she lay to nap in the shade of a tree, she thought about the foolish hairless bears and wondered what had become of them. Had they fled their metal and stone caves before everything had died? Or had they died along with the plants?

While Katherine the bear walked north under a gibbous moon, she realized that the sun was best far off in the sky, lest it scorch the earth.

they describe the gears I could keep track of. It was near to midnight when I heard my master scream. This, over here, is my transcription of the melody that night."

They studied the notes and the visible gears until the light failed. Grimly, they took note that the pattern had changed.

George realized it first. "Of course! If the song changes every night, so must the gears. Look here," he pointed to the old song, "and you will find your pattern."

They were working out the correlation when the clock struck 11. By the time the other clocks of the city began to chime midnight, they were ready. Three seconds passed and the night's song began.

They listened for the intervals between the notes of the bells. The first note was an E, the second an F. They moved forward a step and were not crushed. They proceeded in this fashion for several nerve-racking minutes, and Anna saved more than once by George's keen ear. As the last note sounded, low and mournful, they saw moonlight on the floor; they had reached the heart.

The thin windows of the tower room were broad enough only for moonlight and the smallest of birds. Dust covered everything and three human skeletons could be seen. Two of the dead were on the floor against the wall, the other seated at a stone desk in front of a miniature clock. The face of the clock on the desk was the twin of the clock outside in every way but scale.

A tiny finch was nested in Dr. Waldson's ribcage and Anna brought up the hood of her lantern to look. When the lamplight revealed it, it began to trill and laugh.

"You... you set back this little second hand, didn't you?" Anna was amazed.

Again the finch laughed.

"Well, then, George, we'll just have to correct the clock, release the finch outside and be on our merry way.

The finch spoke, and when it spoke it did so with the voice of a chorus of children. "You will not be on your way. You will die up here, dead soldiers in your foolish war against the gods."

Although the talking bird perturbed her, Anna was not cowed. "You're wrong. We know the secret of this tower and can leave anytime."

"No, today is a new day. You cannot retrace your steps any more than you can hear the song backwards tonight. Just ask those two." The finch turned its tiny beak towards the other two skeletons. "I offer you this; if you do not fix this clock, I will not return to alter it further and you may die here in peace."

“Anna, the great clock has lost three seconds.”

“Nonsense,” Anna said, “it could not have.”

But it had.

A meeting was called. All of the clockmakers in town arrived, punctually, at four. Twenty-three people sat around the giant table: twenty-two clockmakers and an aristocrat who was ostensibly in charge. “Order!” he called, but all reached silence regardless of his decree. In truth, he had no power over the group.

It was determined that Anna and George should investigate the great clock, ascertain the problem, and develop a solution. While she was at it, she was to draw up plans for navigating the clock in the future.

The great honor, they claimed, had been accorded her on account of her seniority and her position as the finest living clockmaker. In truth, she surmised, the young bloods were jealous, and eager for her death sentence.

“George, to die in Waldson’s tower is the best of deaths for a clockmaker, and it is as fine for you at 14 as it is for me at 45.”

“Anna, what will happen if we fail? There are none other so clever as us.”

“Most likely, all other clocks will be set back three seconds, and one man in his eagerness to prove himself alone against the gods will have cost us everything.”

It was nearly midsummer, so although they set out at 5pm they still had hours of daylight ahead of them. Yet Anna knew enough to bring lanterns.

They climbed steps for hours, resting only to drink the coppery, oily well water that was the lot of the lower class. They reached the first of the gears as the sunset blinded them through a western window.

The tower’s gears were placed over the stone steps to block the path, the teeth nearly scraping the floor as they turned at ponderous intervals.

“It has long been surmised that only by walking between the teeth—understanding the timing of the gears—can you reach the heart of the tower.” Anna said this in the fading light next to an inscription carved into the wall:

“Only the clockmaker may march, with sword in hand, into the heavens.”

“I was here once,” Anna continued, “when I was your age. My master brought me here with him to witness as he tested his hypothesis about the tower. I suppose he proved it false.”

Anna withdrew a stretched hide from her leather bag and stared at the charts inscribed upon it. “These are my notes from that night;

the baron

THE BARON WAS NOT AN EVIL CREATURE, WHATEVER HISTORY might claim one day. He ruled a vast section of the infamous Empire, but he was no tyrant. He demanded obedience when he issued an order, but he mostly left people to themselves.

The Baron ruled from his airship high above the land. His skin was as white as pitch is black and his clothes were gray-white and ashen. The oil that fueled his galleon’s propeller spat the loveliest pale smog.

The Baron breathed smog as you or I breathe air. He took a deep breath every the morning as he walked out of his cabin, savoring the thick, succulent poison that sank to the deck from the balloons that kept him aloft.

His subjects feared him as they would a dragon and no one spoke to him but when commanded. Even those down below who breathed smog as well, the smokelungs, avoided him, so tremendous was his ill-deserved reputation for villainous cruelty.

Thus the Baron lived in the loneliness known only to the rich, and no amount of reasoning or gift giving would unfetter him from infamy. He spent his days writing, watching the land below, and composing music. In the heart of his metal ship was a calliope, a great steam music box. He would write compositions and then send for engineers to create the studded, mechanical wheels that dictated the pitch and rhythm of the calliope.

It was one day early in his reign that a flock of birds, madly fleeing an oncoming storm, tore apart all of the balloons which kept him afloat. Quickly, the Baron inflated the emergency balloon, but it only served to slow his fall.

He fell through lightning and rain to crash, unharmed, into a vast industrial forest of pipes, silos, fire and smoke. The smog was fresh and the Baron breathed easily, but his airship was dashed and dented beyond any hope of immediate repair.

The Baron was not young, and had been through his share of adversity; he was quite used to taking care of himself.

“I’ll just walk until I reach civilization. I will commission a new

ship,” he reasoned, “and my duties, to be honest, are few, so my land will be alright until I return to the sky.”

With only the clothes on his back and a canister of crude oil, the Baron left the bird-and-gravity shattered remains of his old life and took off through the mechanical wilderness about him. His spirits were high—it had been years since he last visited the wild lands, the lungs which made the atmosphere habitable for smokelungs like him.

It wasn't long before he stumbled upon a camp of travelers, hearing their music long before they became visible in the thick air. Ten or twelve men and women sat in a circle while in the middle a pair of young women played outlandish instruments. To his amazement, a few of those present, including one of the musicians, wore gas masks—the sign of an air breather.

“Stranger!” A man called out, “Come sit with us awhile. It isn't easy to wander.” No one else spoke, and the musicians showed no sign of abating on account of him, so the Baron quietly walked over and sat on a half of an oil barrel before turning his attention to the two women.

The smokelung played an accordion, he realized, and the airlung was playing a wooden violin. He was a worldly fellow, but he could barely contain his horror to see someone play on tree flesh. His father before him had outlawed such barbaric practices years ago. And yet the music was powerful, hypnotic even.

Wisely, the Baron said nothing of his station and kept his revulsion for the barbarous airlungs from marring his expression.

The air became dark, as it is prone to do, though the sky was not visible through the haze. The Baron stayed on with the vagabonds. Almost all of them played instruments and those that didn't would dance. He wasn't certain they would ever stop. By the middle of the night, the Baron took off his boots and slept by an oilcan fire with his greatcoat as a blanket. He dreamed tremendous musical dreams.

The next morning most of the revelers were asleep, curled together like a litter of kittens; the only waking soul was an airlung keeping watch. For the first time in his life, he spoke to someone of the old world.

“Who are you people?” The Baron asked.

“Well, I am Ashen. My name, that is,” she answered, her voice strangely muffled through the mask, “but as for the rest of us... let me try to explain.

“Last night you heard us play music. Most of us sing, or dance, or play an instrument. Having learned one of these things, the others are easier. Do you practice the arts, Mister...”

“Mister B—,” the Baron introduced himself, “and I paint. Sometimes I compose, but I cannot sing or dance.”

anna the clockmaker

IN THE TIME AFTER QUARTZ AND ELECTRICITY HAD GONE THE WAY of knights and dinosaurs, being a clockmaker was a job for only the most hardy and brave of people.

Massive clocks towered over the city, behemoths of stone that spoke of humanity's consistent defiance of the gods. The gods had deprived humanity of its technologies one by one, attempting to return balance to the world. But despite the collapse of electricity, internal combustion, atomic power and alloyed metals, people continued to build.

Anna was a clockmaker. Her constitution allowed it, raised as she was in the oil-lamp-lit squalor of the lower streets. By 17, she had survived more plagues than a centurion of the upper castes.

Clocks were a testament to Measure, humanity's greatest weapon against their own animal nature, and Anna repaired them. Bourgeois poets lamented the irony that only the weight of poverty could produce gems such as her, capable of the most physically and mentally arduous task in society.

One clock dwarfed them all, spiring out of the skyline with hands long enough to be read from beyond the city walls. Its architect and engineer, the famed and deceased Dr. Waldson, had created it as his personal statement of humanity's revolt—it had been made to never lose time. Provided that the weight was reset every fourteen years, it was designed to run as flawless proof against entropy until the sun ate the earth. After its completion the plans were burned and the workers were buried in the floor.

On the hour it tolled. At midnight—villainously to those who tried to sleep—it played one of a seemingly endless array of compositions that hearkened back to the golden age of humanity. The clockmakers had studied it, but none had been able to discover a path betwixt the labyrinthine stone gears to its heart. According to legend, Dr. Waldson still resided within, composing the night's song and eating wayward birds.

One day, as Anna was in the park feeding pigeons the crumbs of her simple lunch, her apprentice George observed something startling.

“Ah, but you could, you could. The painter can dance, the singer can write. One informs the other. In truth, there is no other.” She paused before her next point. “The one is the other, the other is the one. Now, here is the secret: this is not some magical solution to anything. Understanding the oneness of the universe doesn’t just make everything okay.

“So this is who we are. In the same way all dance and song are the same, so are all living things.”

“This metaphor, then, you carry it across...” the Baron began but Ashen finished his thought.

“Everything,” she nodded, “but it isn’t a metaphor, it is literal. Music is the wild. You have your wild here, and I have my wild...” Through the mask her expression grew heavy. “We are a group of people who have sworn to uphold the balance of the wilds, organic and mechanical.”

Throughout all of his life, and certainly throughout all of his reign, the Baron had almost mindlessly promoted the expansion of the industrial forests at the expense of the organic. Indeed, over the whole of the planet’s surface the two worlds battled to control the atmosphere.

Two more long, lazy summer days passed in this way of music, dance and conversation by the fires of the wild. At dusk a guard was posted against the hydraulic creatures of the night.

On the third morning they left their encampment and the Baron chose to join them. He was hooked, and when he discovered that they were going to the organic land he was intensely curious.

So great was his new love for these people that he resolved, during the second day, to swear service to their cause. If by life or death he could promote balance and harmony, then he would do so.

When he told his new friend Ashen of his resolve, she laughed and slapped him on the back.

They arrived at the woods after a three-day trek. Initially he was quite frightened. At all times his smoke-mask was visible from the corner of his eyes, and nothing was sane anywhere about him.

But to his word, he spent five years serving that strange alliance. Owing to the present imbalance, he helped the organics reclaim mechanical land. He learned a great many instruments, although he never could bring himself to play the wooden fiddle or guitar. He cunningly planned and schemed against his own lands, and he grew to love his comrades deeply.

Yet at the close of five years, the kudzu and blackberries had spread too far into his old kingdom, threatening the smog his people depended on.

“Ashen my friend,” he said, “we need to stop the spread of organic life to maintain the balance.”

Ashen stayed silent. The Baron spun on his heel to the smokelungs of the group, eyeing them warily.

Only one spoke, the old man who had welcomed him to the fire those years ago. “The mechanical lands, the mechanical people... us... we have oppressed what is natural for too long already.”

“But that would mean your death! Our death!”

“All is one. We cannot truly die.”

“Madness!” But the Baron quickly mastered his voice, calming down. “I have been betrayed, I have been so terribly betrayed.”

With that he left, and when Ashen tried to block his path and speak to him he struck her down with his fist.

He walked straight to the Empire City, to the emperor himself, and reclaimed his post. And thus he became the Baron whose infamy lives still this day. With a song in his heart and fire in his eyes he used violence and concrete to reclaim his lands for his people.

One day, while teaching his young daughter and heiress to waltz, she asked him why he never took his lands past the great river.

“My daughter, my love, all is one. The airlungs and the smoke.”

“Yet father, you kill them with abandon on your lands.”

“And thus do we kill ourselves. But listen, there is no shame in killing, and there is no shame in mercy.”

of empire & village

HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO IN ASIA THERE WAS A SMALL VILLAGE under the unforgiving reign of a distant empire. Gangs of imperial soldiers would march through the village whenever it fit their whim, taking with them any thing or person for any reason.

One young woman resisted when a soldier tried to kidnap her. She fled back into the safety of her house. The soldier walked arrogantly up to the great wooden door and slashed an X into the wood with his sword. With this he had marked her entire household for death.

The villagers drew together and decided upon a plan. Soon, an identical X was carved on the door of every house—surely, they rationalized, the soldiers wouldn’t be able to distinguish the original X and would have to leave the woman’s family alone.

The soldiers returned to the village the next day. Since there was an X on the very first door they saw, they forced down the door and slew the entire family. And so, one house at a time, they murdered everyone in the village. Their bodies were left where they fell, and the town fell into ruin.