

TEN POEMS FOR THE MOSSUMS, ONE FOR THE MAN

Suzanne Palmer

Suzanne Palmer's latest tale is about a man attempting to cope in an alien environment. She tells us, "For me, stories are rarely lightning bolts of inspiration, but far more often a steady rain of tiny drops of ideas and images. When enough accumulate to form a puddle it's just a matter of putting on my Writer Boots and seeing how far I can splash the mud. The initial inspirations for this story, though, came from a friend and fellow writer named Alice, to whom I am deeply grateful. If stories are rain-storms, friends are the necessary sunshine between."

1.

Sky egg blue, a nest
of walls,
a floor of fissioning stone
cottage made for close company
lonely of but one.

* * *

Not that he really understands how the house floor works, given the odd impositions of the world surrounding him. It works, though; radiating warmth up through his feet as he paces, casting furtive glances back at the replica of an ancient machine where it sits upon a replica of an ancient desk, through which he has been trying to pull—tap tap—new words.

It's the first poem he hasn't crumpled up and tossed into the fireplace at the end of the vaulted room. The novelty of paper, of fire relentlessly marching from crisp edge to blackened ash, has consumed several salvageable scraps of work, but he's not here for scraps, for minute victories; he has come to be the flame, set his long-slumbering and cold imagination alight, and perhaps also to bury the embers of something else that never was meant to be.

The exhausting act of having crafted something that might not suck propels him past the desk, the textured matte black bulk of the Underwood, the thin flag of paper still standing his tiny effort up into the air. He needs to walk before he can judge: keep as is, keep going, fall into the limbo of tinkering, or smother now before he gets too attached.

The Project has thoughtfully provided him with boots and a walking stick propped by the door. He slips his feet into the boots and glances up at the large thermometer mounted on a turquoise porch post just outside the door. Turning, he checks the mechanical clock over the fireplace, then picks up the old-fashioned inkpen where it dangles on its string from the logbook by the door.

Day 7. 11:43. 12C, he writes on the next empty line. *Sunny. 1070 hPa*. The task is not as onerous a condition of his residency as he'd feared.

He slips on his coat, notebook in pocket, and steps out the door. Pausing there, he marvels at the pure existential joy of going for a stroll on an alien world, and one that he has, effectively, entirely to himself. For someone who had lived much of his adult life in the cramped and crowded towers of Old New York, the rolling hills and wide skies of Ekye are a dream. As a poet floundering, rendered wordless by the stale dregs of his own substanceless life, it is an offer of resurrection, reincarnation.

The hills that nestle around the cottage are a deep green, covered in a thick tangled carpet of a grasslike creeper named popim-weed. A forest of blue and green umbah-trees lines the ridge, and a lazy river winds its way down below through a field of green, fuzzy boulders called mossums.

Be cautious outdoors above 20C, they'd said.

That had worried him, but they assured him he was in no direct danger. *The landscape gets more active on warmer days*, they'd explained. *Keep your walking stick and watch your footing, and you'll be fine. Remember you're on an alien planet.*

Oh, and if it gets above 30C, don't linger below a mossum field.

A thick stone wall curves along the hillside behind the cottage, and above that, mossums are scattered in the bright midday sun like enormous green pebbles tossed from the riverbed.

* * *

2.

I walk with my eyes half-open,
the familiar and the unfamiliar
side by side, long-lost brothers

yes—

—the landscape of memory

tree and root and stone

succumb, uncomfortable,

to pattern recognition

but hold fast, immovable,

to lost particulars,

like and unlike.

* * *

The cottage has stockpiles of both paper and notebooks, the latter for recording observations, but he doesn't think it improper if he carries one for moments of his own inspiration. They know he is a writer, that he wanted the long solitude of the post, was willing (eager!) to live under the low-tech strictures of Ekye. Loneliness is less terrible to bear when alone.

During orientation, the Project had explained about the swarming creatures—nochers—attracted by strong electromagnetic fields, much as moths were to flame; it was why the main heat source for the house was embedded inside a two-meter-thick block of hardened polymer, why he had a typewriter instead of a voice-text composer, why he made tea in a pot swung on a hook into the fire on his hearth.

He had spent nearly the entire first twenty-two-hour day obsessively tapping at the Underwood's space bar, eyes closed, listening to the keys as if he was hearing the hidden music of a thousand writers long dead. Then, in a burst of enthusiastic excess, he'd jammed them all up in a pile and slunk away out onto the porch in the spring rain. He is embarrassed by how much time he spent trying to figure out how to reboot the typewriter before he gave up and gently pressed the keys back into their proper places with his fingers.

The sun is warm after several cloudy days, so he goes to the cottage's shed, opens the door, and contemplates the bicycle. He's been told it requires practice, has seen vid of people riding them, but not how they got on or off. After staring at its thin, silver frame for some time, standing beside it in different ways to see if some method of getting safely aboard might become apparent, he decides he'll walk.

He climbs up the rolling hills that surround his cottage and sits in the sun with his back against a moss, then pulls out the notebook and doodles a sketch of the view. He was never more than a passable artist, but it is sufficient skill for his own satisfaction.

The cottage is not far from the coast. A herd of creatures is moving across a meadow between him and the bright blue line on the horizon. Like inchworms the size of horses, hairy and horned and bright hues of blue, together they move like their own undulating wave of strangeness. The Project told him their name, but he cannot recall it, and, letting his gaze unfocus while he tries to remember, he slips into a light doze.

It is the name—*feffalons*, as if everything here has been named by a fanciful child—and the sense of weight pressing against his back that rouse him. The day has grown warmer.

He stands, stretches, repockets his notebook, and can't find his pen. He pokes through the ground cover, looking for it.

The popim-weed is a strange texture. Ferny, almost feathery, the whorls of green spray in a spiral helix up the stem to a point, where a small round bulb grows. *Flower buds?* he wonders. The end of his pen protrudes from a dense patch of the weed, just at the edge of the moss he was leaning on. He grabs the tip, pulls, and discovers it is stuck beneath the moss.

Reaching out, he touches it. It is as he expects: a solid boulder with a thick coating of moss-like fuzz, warm where the sun has fallen on it, chilly where it has not. He presses harder and it yields slightly. He is able to pull his pen free, and hastily pockets it.

There is a flattened patch of weed uphill from the moss.

He is unnerved that the moss may have moved. He's a poet, after all, not a geologist or mossologist or xenobiowhateverist. Next time he will sit beside an umbah-tree or on the upslope side of the mosses, and if the day is warm enough, he will watch.

* * *

3.

Not all rolling stones
gather, but are gathered by
impossible moss.

* * *

No, he doesn't like that. Trite, stupid. Writing haiku always makes him deeply

self-conscious, as if failure has been predetermined before he even starts. He turns the little knob that advances the paper in satisfyingly analog increments until the offending bit of doggerel hangs over the back of the Underwood, out of sight.

* * *

4.

There once was a poet named Davin,
Who'd found his own private heaven,
but the rocks, they rolled
as the feffalons strolled
—second thoughts, should he be a'havin'?

* * *

At least no one is looking over his shoulder, no one nearer than geostationary orbit to pass silent judgment. He yanks the paper free of the machine, crumples it up, and tucks it beneath the dead ashes of the morning's fire as a solemn promise for later.

One wall of the main room has bookshelves, and although the vast majority are a seemingly random assortment of static biography—Hypatia, Aaron Swartz, Mel Blanc (a desperate proxy crowd for some previous, lonely occupant?)—there are a few fiction books and a lone, hand-bound collection of watercolors. He can feel the texture of the paper, the way the paint buckled it slightly in places. It feels more real a presence than a dozen volumes of the stories of dead people.

The paintings are all dated within a few months of each other from the previous year. His predecessor, then. He wonders why she did not stay longer.

The second painting has been done from the cottage's front porch, the posts neatly framing the path down to the river, the small bridge that crosses it, and the low hillside beyond. He carries the book to the door and stands there, glancing down at the wash of vibrant color, up at the sunset-soaked landscape. The nearer stand of umbah-trees is taller now but accurately rendered, as is the flow and ebb of the land around it. The mossums on the hills, though, are mostly absent from the paper, and his own unhindered river instead shown choked with them.

Rocks rolling down . . . *that* he could process, if not find reason in. But *up*? Some unseen hand at work?

He closes the book and sets it on a small table by the door. The rest of his evening is spent idly thumbing through an impenetrably distant biography of Mary Anning, trying to dispel a quiet disorientation and the suspicion that he may be the unwitting target of a hoax.

In the end, only as he is drifting off to sleep in his bed do the sheer logistical and financial impracticalities of his various paranoias convince him that whatever is happening, however opaque to reason, is unlikely to be anything to do with him.

* * *

5.

The stone shifts in its coat of moss
in the wakening sun,
considers and discards
millennia of geologic

and poetic common sense,
and goes for a roll.
The hill, for its part, is unsure
what the bold stone portends,
if it should protest
measured or stridenbtkjs
* * *

The keys are jammed again.

He hasn't yet adapted to the notion that he must compose tethered to the machine's needs, that creation is no longer the performance of a conductor to a rising orchestra of his own vision, but the precise and small monotones of a technical transcriptionist. Frustrated, he sets down his half-drunk tea, leaving the chair and the broken, dangling disaster of a poem to go check on his other project.

He has found a roll of flexible sticky-tape and used it to hang a single sheet of paper beside each window that overlooks the mossum fields. On each, in a burst of morning diligence not usually his style, he has made a reference drawing of the locations of what should be fixed elements. Umbah-trees, hills and valleys, mossums of assorted sizes, and so forth. The drawings are a mockery of the fine watercolors that gave him the idea, but a solid reference. He has also used his pen to mark a tiny x on the floor about a meter and a half from the glass, which takes him several minutes to find. He hopes they'll escape the scrutiny of the Project, should they be looking for any petty (if well-intentioned) vandalisms during his stay.

Standing on the x, he studies his drawing, the scene out the window, then his drawing again. The thermometer at the door reads 15C. He is not certain, but it seems that the mossums have all shifted slightly further down the hill since his morning drawings, now several hours old.

He resolves to check again later. In the meantime, today is report day.

There is a logbook. He has already copied over into it each day's weather observations for the past four weeks, and adds the day's readings. The barometer has dropped, which he is learning means there could be rain. He has a window near the typewriter open, and a breeze is rifling through the corners of his poems, slowly sliding one toward the desk edge.

That reminds him that there is a mechanical device tucked up among the ceiling beams, a pen on a stick scribbling away tiny lines as the small windmill on the roof turns and spins in the wind. He drags a stool beneath its niche. Swapping out the paper is not as straightforward as the Project made it seem, but once he sees how it fits it is easily done.

Later, he turns to the survey the Project has provided him. Although ostensibly he is here as an exchange of needs—they need a reliable, intelligent observer who can function for extended periods in an isolated, low-tech environment and carry out occasional sampling and testing tasks, while he desires that self-same environment to try to reconnect with his creative self—part of the overhead of keeping him alive is making sure he isn't, to put it poetically, completely losing his marbles.

The survey is a series of mostly unobtrusive health questions, followed by a self-assessment of his mental well-being. Is he lonely? No more so here than where he came from. Is there anything he misses? Music. There is a space for questions/concerns about bodily matters, of which he has none, a supply checklist, and another blank space for items he would like. *Binoculars*, he writes in. He is fairly sure those can be made without electronics. *More of this*, he adds, and puts a small piece of the sticky-tape on the paper, drawing a line to it.

He picks up the weather log, wind-machine scribbles, and his survey, and then fetches a small, red metal tube from a cupboard. Opening a few more windows to let

out the last lingering odors of bread he let burn in his distraction, he goes outside and walks up the steep hill behind the cottage.

There are a few clouds moving in, high pencil-line wisps that seem a precursor to most weather here. He hurries, feeling the pull in the backs of his calves and thighs, still unused to the exercise.

At the top there is a concrete circle with a metal pipe sticking out of it. He unlatches and removes the cap, trying to remember the sequence he went over ad nauseam one world too many ago. Anxiously he sets down his pile of papers and pipe and rummages in his coat, pulling out the instructions he had tucked into an inside pocket for just such a circumstance.

There are things he needs tucked inside the tube. As soon as he picks it up, his pile of papers is caught by the wind and takes flight down the hill. "No no no!" he cries and scrambles after them.

By the time he has caught the last, he's short of breath and more than a little irritated. Stomping back to the top of the hill, he stubs his toe on a small mossy half-buried in the poppy-weed. He picks it up, intending to hurl it, but the solid weight of it in his hand gives him an idea.

Back at the launch site he uses the mossy to keep his papers from escaping again, and then empties out the contents of the red tube. A small black device, pin-hole in one end, fits snugly onto the base of the tube. Once on, he is careful not to touch it further, despite assurances that it won't activate until it's in the launch pipe. He knows it will attract the nochers when it does.

There is a small bag with some mealy, oatmeal-like clumps in it that he spreads out on the ground several paces from the pipe. It will give the nocher swarm something to eat while he escapes back to the cottage.

Setting the mossy aside, he rolls the papers into a tight bundle and slides them down inside the tube. The last piece is the cap, which when inverted makes a pointed cone on the end. It makes the tube look like an ancient rocket, from back in the era before disc ships.

Everything is prepared. He can see the front now, a gray line on the horizon, the last bits of cobalt-blue sky fleeing ahead of the storm. He considers sitting atop the hill until the storm overtakes him, as if he were but a part of the landscape, but knows in his heart that it will only leave him damp, chilled, and in a fouler mood.

There's nothing else to do, so he slides the rocket into the pipe. It's been explained that there's a small, sharp needle in the base that will activate the cylinder, which will then launch the device. Putting both hands on the sides of the rocket, he bears down gently. There is a faint but clear click as it connects. He was told to immediately step away, but nowhere has anyone warned him how quickly the rocket would exit. Its progress is only markable by the bright column of smoke it paints up into the sky.

"Whoa," he says.

Somewhere high up, out of reach of the nochers, a drone will sense the coming rocket and intercept it, taking it to the Project station in orbit. He's still watching the thinning trail when he notices a strange humming, whistling sound in the wind.

He has imagined the nochers as bloated, one-eyed flying rats, but what emerges from the umbra-forest at first looks like mist, then resolves into whitish fluff, gigantic dandelion seed-tufts. They are converging and drifting up the hill.

As soon as you launch, go back to the cottage and stay indoors for at least an hour, the Project has told him.

He picks up the mossy from the cement, intending to throw it, but the cloud is picking up speed, so he drops it into his pocket and runs. Moving down the hill as fast as he can, he is terrified he's going to catch his foot on another mossy or in the poppy-weed and pitch headfirst the rest of the way.

He makes it to the door safely, breathing so heavily his entire body is one giant, thudding heartbeat. He can no longer see the top of the hill for its seething mass of white. Inside, he closes the windows and gathers up all his papers where they have blown around the room, and sets them on the desk with the mosses atop to keep them in place.

He picks at the burnt loaf of bread, eating pieces absently until it is gone and the swarm is too.

* * *

6.

Benign is in the eye of memory,
childhood and soft summer laughs—
I remember your hand in mine
as we wished on tiny seeds sailing
the careless breeze.

Now, where are we? Wishes forgotten
or remembered with jaded mockery—
for the innocence we endured
with impatient fortitude,
as we waited to grow up.

We have traded dreams for lives,
let go for a grounded world—
all now is always as it seems,
ambition moves us step by step,
and surety keeps us apart.

I have taken a chance, returning to the dream
where danger and delight inspire—
I slough off my own dearest shadows
only to wake in a new day,
still missing you.

* * *

The rain is a frenetic drumbeat on the cottage roof for more than a week. He likes the sound of it at night, drifting in and out of sleep, but by day he craves the missing sun, someone to talk to, something else to do beside stare at the mercurial Underwood and listen to the wind howl. Words are failing him, and it is all he can do to not spend the days curled up in the bed, feeling lost at the bottom of a well of desolate emptiness.

In the Blanc biography, he finds loose notes tucked inside by the watercolor artist. They are scribbled, incoherent, dated past the last of the paintings, and talk of ghosts stalking the hillsides. His nerves frayed by days indoors, he considers feeding the pages into the fire, but instead tucks them back inside the book and returns it to the highest shelf.

When at last the blue sky peeks out, he is startled to see something bright red, high up in the sky, growing larger: the parachute for the supply drop. In his haste he almost loses his balance pulling his boots on. Catching himself, he knocks over his mug of tea onto the floor. The mug doesn't break, but the tea spreads out in a long puddle.

It will wait. He races out after the parachute.

A medium-sized inflatable crate lands fairly close to the house, bouncing and rolling until it comes to rest against a pair of mosses. He lets the air out, then unzips the recessed openings until he can pull free the items within. There is more toilet paper, sunscreen, a smaller crate of food items, a padded case holding a pair of

binoculars, a roll of thick sticky-tape, and a packet of papers.

It takes him a few trips to carry everything up to the porch, the ground soggy and slick from the rain. He packs the deflated crate and bundled parachute into the shed, eyeing again the unmet challenge of the bicycle, before going back to the house and taking off his mud-covered boots outside the door.

Inside, he stops, hand still on the doorframe.

His poems are scattered again, and the mossum he was using to hold them down has fallen and is lying in the center of the floor.

“Hello?” he calls. He feels silly, but also angry. As little as an hour ago he was feeling the desperate drain of solitude. Now he is furious at the idea that it might have been violated. “I know someone is here!”

He bends down to pick up the mossum in case he needs to defend himself. The mossum is wet, spongy.

The puddle of tea is gone.

Davin Arturo Gordon-Fauci, Resident Poet-Hermit of Ekye, starts to laugh.

* * *

7.

When is a rock not a rock?
When it invites itself over to tea.
When is a fool not a fool?
When he slips off a life's lens
and at last learns to see.

* * *

He has put the mossum on the floor, and not far from it a small saucer of water. Rather than stare at it the whole day, he has turned his back to it as he sorts through the new papers. The windows are closed, the door latched, and, in what he has decided to ascribe to thoroughness rather than paranoia, he has made sure the cottage is indeed free of intruders. The idea of ghosts holds no allure beyond the merely symbolic.

There is a folded newsheet, a throwback still in use in some of the tech-averse colonies, and perhaps this is simply one of their editions; it is free of the more salacious stories so embarrassingly popular on Earth and many of the colony worlds. It's comforting to have this window into current events available, but he can't summon much interest. None of it is relevant, anyway, not here or now.

Mr. G-F, the enclosed note reads, We've included another wellness survey and a small tube. Our Soils division has requested, if you are able, that you send back a sample of the riverbed silt. Weather looks to be agreeable for the coming weeks in your location, with some significant warming over the next few days. We hope you are settled in and finding your stay conducive to your creative needs, and we look forward to hearing more about your impressions.

He flips through the newsheet a while longer, then abandons it in a stack of paper waiting for the evening's fire. The mossum on the floor has not moved. Maybe he is wrong? Going to the windows, he checks his drawings, and the difference is unmistakable. The mossums are all moving toward the river.

It's 16C out and the barometer is regaining lost ground. He puts on his boots and climbs toward the top of the hill, intent on scouting out a stretch of level ground on which to finally test the bicycle; while there would be a certain poetic comedy in plummeting down the hill into the river and collecting the Project's soil sample with his face, he prefers to leave that particular bit of life's comedy unwritten.

When he reaches the launch pipe, he finds the popim-weed where he threw the

oatmeal stuff ripped to shreds. A lone mossum nearby is scored by deep gouges, black sticky pitch seeping through what's left of the moss. The idea of the nochers as dandelion fluff is torn apart; again, he has fallen into the trap of benign assumptions that are as alien to this world as he is.

He takes the time to roll the damaged mossum lower down the hill, to where he hopes it will be safer. From here he can see a low plateau, ideal for his bicycle adventure, but his momentum toward the experience has waned again. *Maybe after lunch*, he thinks. *Or another day entirely.*

As ever, he does his best not to think about how good he has always been at putting off things, and people too.

Walking back down the hill, neck and shoulders stiff from moving the heavy mossum, he hears and does not pay attention to what, at first, sounds merely like a dog barking in the distance. When the impossibility of that sinks in, he stops and stares across the vista ahead of him, eyes and ears straining for a source.

It comes again, and this time it is the flash of blue that catches his eye. A herd of feffalons on the meadow breaks and runs, as a thing lumbers out of the umbah-trees behind them. He has brought the new binoculars, and after a vertigo-inducing sweep of the land he catches the feffalons in passing, and then the creature giving chase.

It is dark red, about the size of a small pony, and looks like what you'd get if you crossed a six-legged Tyrannosaurus Rex with a poorly knit wool sock. The feffalons have quickly left it behind. He watches as it opens its three-part, ridged jaw to the sky and calls again.

The Project has not warned him about predators other than the nocher swarm. It picks up a mossum and crushes it in its huge jaws, scattering debris and black fluids everywhere, before lurching out of sight behind more umbah-trees.

He flees down the hill at breakneck speed and into the cottage. If he'd gone for his walk on the far side of the river, over there . . .

Determined not to be lost in what-if terrors, he picks up a piece of paper and does his best to draw the thing's likeness and put down as many notes about his brief observation as he can. On consideration, he names it "Red Rex." His handwriting is appalling.

He turns in his chair and looks around the room. His mossum is gone. Bending down, he finally spies it under the desk along the back wall. Coincidence, or some awareness of the predator? He feels an enormous empathy for his moss-covered rock.

"The truth is," he tells it, "a good part of me wants to crawl under there and hide with you."

* * *

8.

Mothers of mine, I've had a bad dream—
 a monster that came in the night!
 All my delight, my magic and care
 faltered, and then took flight.
 I fear now to slumber
 lest all the wonder
 be turned thus from the light.

O Child of ours, the truth you must know—
 the monsters are always here.
 They walk our dreams, our waking days
 whispering doubts in our ear.

The truth to hold tight,
in sun, or in night
is that love, ever, is nearer.

* * *

He does not see or hear the Red Rex again, although he never forgets it is out there, not while outside, not while staring stagnant and dull at the blank sheet in the Underwood, not while lying in his bed at night trying not to imagine the worst thing creeping up silently upon him. In the shed behind the bicycle and underneath a fishing net he finds an old saw, and takes to carrying it whenever he is out; still, he doesn't stray far from the house.

At last he decides he should send up a rocket, even though it's several days early. He packs up his drawings and a tube and the saw and hurries to the top of the hill, staring around him as if the Red Rex—or a pack of them!—could be anywhere. Poor sleep has left him jumpy, restless, and feeling dangerously dull-witted.

He scatters the nocher-bait on the barest ground he can find. Over the last few, warm days, most of the mossums have moved much farther down the hill toward the river. The damaged one hasn't changed position. He wonders if he should pour water on it, or beside it, or something.

One thing he is entirely certain of is that they are alive, although he cannot say what specifically that means.

After one last, fretful look around, he finishes prepping the rocket, presses it into the tube, and hurries down the hill toward the cottage without looking back. He does not want to see the nochers coming, not now while fear already has such a grip on him.

It's 26C out, even warmer inside. The mossum in his house is sitting on the floor where sunlight streams in from the window. It has all the appearance of nothing more than a rock, and although he has still not caught it in motion, he knows that as the day has progressed the bright rectangle of light has shifted across the floor, and the mossum has remained in the center of it.

He picks it up from its warm spot. "Time to earn your keep," he tells it, and sets it atop his papers so he can open the windows and get air moving through the house.

As he does, he can hear a faint crackling sound in the distance, like popcorn. He pauses, hand on the windowsill, and listens. The sound is getting closer, and then suddenly it's as if the ground is alive, squirming. There is a flash of white, a moving line, like the front edge of a wave.

Then it reaches the cottage and he sees.

The swelling buds on the popim-weed are bursting, laid open to snow-white interiors, as bundles of squiggly, springy pale green threads explode out in all directions, tangling in the air before falling back to earth and muting the brief beauty of the open buds in masses of zigzag confetti.

Popim-weed, he thinks. *Turns out to be a good name.*

The synchronicity of it, the surprise of it, is almost overwhelming, and he is startled to realize there are tears on his cheeks. Fear has cost him irreplaceable weeks of his time on this planet, this beautiful, unexpected place. He feels unworthy, unbelievably blessed.

He goes outside and sits on the porch with his feet dangling over the edge, watching as the wave of white sweeps down to the river, pauses, then in fits and starts appears on the other side and transforms the distant banks. The mossums clustered down by the water are now stark green motes against the backdrop.

* * *

Be an island of iron-cliff shores—
 impervious to all incoming storms
 unswayed by the movement of sea
 built of immovable earth
 no inhabitants to drain you,
 no friend to speak out of turn

—that exists, but will not be.

Or be an island lost among thousands—
 drenched by the fury of storms,
 buried in fleeting wealth
 bidden and unbidden,
 cautious and carefree,
 frightening and fantastical

—that dwells in an ocean of all things.

* * *

Mr. G-F, the next letter from the Project reads. *Your "Red Rex" (Project Nomenclature likes the name and would like to adopt it for official use, if you do not object) is a predator that is normally found in much hotter climes, where it has both more prey and more competition. Our theory is that the most recent storm somehow brought it to your island.*

As you guessed, it is extremely dangerous. If you wish us to extricate you, please notify us. We also have dispatched extra drones to the airspace above the island but have been unable to locate it. There is always the possibility it has gone back to where it came from—

I could live with that, he thinks.

—but more likely it has burrowed in somewhere and will emerge again when hungry. If we are able to locate the Red Rex we will keep you informed. In the meantime, please exercise all caution. Project Safety recommends you do not leave the cottage except for necessary—and short—outings until this is resolved.

The recommendation is sound, and up until the popim-weed explosion, exactly in line with his own miserable intentions. Now, though . . .

He has been a coward—here, and before here—and he cannot bear to reckon what it has cost him. There is no more running away. He takes the saw, a notebook and pen, and goes to get the bicycle out of the shed.

* * *

10.

Two meters and a handspan, twice over
 I measure the circumference of my world
 with spoke and rim, moving circles,
 and eyes caught wide.

Ten poems I have written for the mossy stones
 my only audience, adrift in my fields,
 that illuminate my interior landscape
 in obstinate incomprehension.

A thousand words written on endless pages,

set down with awful integrity and focus
will never out-measure the silence,
where I should have said I loved you.
* * *

Three months have carried Ekyc fully into its summer. He is standing in the river in bare feet, eyes closed, enjoying the coolness of the slow-moving water. There's a vial in his hand—destined for yet another silt sample—but so far he's content to let the currents swirl around him, feel the sun hot on his back, half oblivious to everything except the raw feed of his other senses.

The banks and river itself are cluttered with mossums, the hills above nearly bare of them now. He has come to think of them as a slow-moving herd; the conception of them as stones, as inanimate objects, has been thoroughly dispelled and forgotten, and in its place he finds them amiable companions: silent, self-sufficient, present in the entirely self-contained way of sleeping cats. He still has not managed, despite great effort, to see them in motion.

So it is an enormous shock when a mid-sized mossum tumbles down the bank to bump against his leg. Opening his eyes, he stares down at it, then slowly moves his leg away. It remains where it is, so he takes one more step back, and another mossum bumps him from the other side.

"What?" he asks them, then jumps as an enormous mossum upstream drops into the river with a loud splash.

The banks are hard to see past where the big mossum fell, the water and shore occluded by curving, reedy plants. They are thrashing back and forth now, and for a moment he wonders if this is some spectacular natural phenomenon like the budding of the popim-weed. But no. Something large is moving up the bank, through the reeds, straight toward him.

He scrambles out of the river and grabs his saw from the bank just as the Red Rex breaks cover and lurches toward him. The water slows it down, and he is able to swing the saw in a wide arc, its rusted but still formidable teeth tearing a ragged line along its face. It lets out a high-pitched bark and throws itself up the far bank and half way up the slope before it slows, turns, and stands there regarding him.

He holds the bow-shaped handle of the saw in both hands in front of him, blade out. The adrenalin in his system is a rage he's never felt before, his blood become magma, and he wants to yell at the Red Rex, scream back at it a lifetime of noise kept mute under passivity and self-doubt.

The Red Rex watches as he backs away. It seems more gaunt, unraveled, than in the spring, but he knows too well the terrible pull of desperation and will not underestimate it. At last, perhaps sensing he is out of reach, the Red Rex stretches its legs one by one, then turns and scuttles away.

He stares after it until it is gone from sight. Somewhere, he dropped his vial. It doesn't matter.

The mossums warned him.

Physically shaking, it is that revelation, more even than the danger, that overwhelms him. At the porch steps he turns, seeing the mossums again with new eyes, through the blur of tears of wonder and fear. Then his stomach lurches viciously; on the far hillside, the Red Rex has returned.

He runs inside and slams the door, throwing a lock he never imagined had any purpose. Outside, the Red Rex howls, a terrible mocking sound, and he goes to the window and stares out, hands gripping the sill until his knuckles are white.

It lopes down the hillside again toward the river, picks up a mossum in its jaws and devours it.

"No," he says, not realizing he has spoken out loud until his own voice startles him.

He abandons the window, anger making him careen around the room looking for anything he can use. He will not, cannot, just watch; too much of his life has been wasted in inaction, watching fate plunder his life unchallenged.

Grabbing his saw, he runs outside and pulls the fishing net out of the shed. It should be enough to entangle the Red Rex, but not hold it indefinitely. And then what? The idea of killing it is abhorrent, even under such circumstances. If only he had some way to drive it off the island, back where it came . . .

He drops the net on the porch and goes back into the house. From the cupboard he pulls a dozen of the red rocket tubes, dumping their contents on the floor. He scoops up the inactive electronic control cylinders and the roll of sticky-tape from his desk.

On the porch, he watches the Red Rex as he wraps the mechanisms with tape and strings them as quickly as he can in the net. When done, he hauls out the bicycle. There are now several broken mounds of crushed and gutted mossums around the Red Rex, and the rest have moved away from it, forming clusters with the smallest mossums in their center.

He straddles the bicycle, leaning it so he still has one foot on the ground, and balances the saw atop the handlebars. He takes his pen out of his pocket and jabs it into the tiny hole in the base of one of the rocket cylinders taped to the net. It lights up, trying to connect to and launch a rocket that isn't there. One by one, he activates the rest and then drapes the net over his shoulder, wrapping his hands around both handlebar and saw handle together. Barely has he begun to roll when he hears the distant humming of the nochers over the rumble of his tires down the path.

Picking up speed, he aims for the bridge. The Red Rex has stood. If it is his increasing speed or memories of the saw that finally sinks in, he doesn't know, but it turns and runs.

He hits the bridge moving terrifyingly fast. What momentum he loses up the far shore isn't enough to give the Red Rex a lead, and by the time he crests the hill he is almost on top of it.

It stops and turns, its jaws opening wide. He expected this, has become nimble on the bike over the last few weeks, and he swerves, throwing the net as he passes. The creature lunges, catching the net nearly full in the face. Immediately it begins to roll and snap and snarl, tangling itself further.

He keeps going. He can hear the nochers coming, like an approaching storm, like the fury he released from inside himself when the net left his hands.

He crests the last hill before the long slow slope down to cliffs and sea. With a terrible whining cry, the Red Rex passes, two legs still tangled in the net, half-lost in the buzzing cloud of white fluff enveloping and chasing it. Tufts of dark red mix with the nochers as they pick it apart.

Remembering the damage to the mossum at the launch site, he feels sick.

The Red Rex plunges into the surf. It is only by the cloud of nochers still trying to follow that he can mark its progress out into deeper waters. When the nochers dissipate, he doesn't know if it's because the electronics have succumbed to the salt water, or the Red Rex has succumbed to the sea, but somehow he knows—is absolutely certain—that it will not return.

It is a long ride back to the cottage, and even though the sun is still well above the horizon, he climbs into his bed and pulls the blankets up until he feels as if he is drowning in them. He does not toss and turn, does not think of home, does not think of the dead, does not sleep.

For once, he *acted*. He was not the observer of life, but one of the living.

When the first tentative light kisses his window, he gives up and gets out of bed, padding in his bare feet across the still-dark floor in the gray monotones of first

dawn into the living room.

There is a sound, familiar and unexpected, and he jumps, staring at the Underwood. The small mossum he'd left on his papers overnight is still there, and in the waxing light he sees, just barely, the small tendrils that disappear back into its rounded shape.

The keys are jammed.

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He sets the mossum down on the floor near the water saucer. Going to the window, he looks out at the alien landscape that has become suddenly, utterly home. The cottage is surrounded by a ring of mossums in the rising light. Startled, he realizes that, for the first time in his life—the sole human being on an entire planet—he also does not feel alone.

Full morning brings a parachute from the Project.

Our drones detected the Red Rex attack at the river as it began, but we were unable to put a craft out to reach you before you had already resolved the situation, the letter says. It was never the intention of the Project to put you in danger. We have no explanation for the mass movement of mossums to the cottage. Limited as we are by both philosophy and circumstance to non-invasive, non-technological methods, we had hoped that a creative, intuitive person might be able to discern the nature of the mossums in a way we have not. Whether or not you choose to terminate our agreement and leave Ekyye, we would greatly appreciate any insights you are willing to share with us.

He still has a few rockets left, but no sense of urgency. He makes himself a cup of tea and sits at the typewriter, feeling the breezes off the ocean sweeping in through the window and around him before he sets to composing a reply.

I am fine here, Davin writes. The nature of the mossums is: they are both stone and life, ghost and muse, solitude and company, unknowable and dear. In short: they are as we: poems.

He rolls that up and sticks it in the red tube. Taking another sip of tea, he looks down at the mossum on the floor where it has found a first, thin streak of daylight.

"You should see *my* early drafts," he tells it, then picks up a fresh piece of paper to begin.