

# CUT LOOSE THE BONDS OF FLESH AND BONE

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The protagonist of this tale was previously seen exploring "The Edge of the Map" (June 2006), but this story's action takes place much closer to home. The tale's inspiration stems from a comment made by a fellow member of Ian's online writing group Codex [www.codexwriters.com](http://www.codexwriters.com). The story has mutated in unexpected directions, however, and bears little resemblance to that original conversation.

In the most expensive nursing home in Scotland, squeezed between the bed and the pastel walls and the racks of brain-imaging equipment, Susanna Munro slumped with fatigue in the visitors' chair as she waited for her mother to die.

"Don't slouch!" said her mother, as if Susanna were forty years younger. "You make my neck ache just to look at you. I've told you enough times, you should do the Alexander Technique. And put a board under your bed, it'll do wonders for your spine—"

Susanna knew she needed her spine stiffening, but not only in the way Granny thought. She hadn't yet said what she'd been bottling up throughout the deathbed vigil. Even now, Susanna's mother—who had become Granny in family parlance after the birth of Susanna's own children—still kept rasping out instructions as fast as her ravaged lungs could suck in the air to speak with.

"—Or there's yoga," Granny continued after a bout of phlegmy coughing. "That'll teach you posture. I used to do yoga—I could still do the splits when I was sixty. I could have been a dancer. So could you. You were always showing off when you were a girl. I remember in the garden, you were hiding and I couldn't see you, and you said 'Up here!' and then you

jumped right out of the tree with your arms waving. You could have broken that spine, and then you wouldn't be slouching now, would you? But I was always there. Aye, do you remember that garden in Ecclefechan? Apples and plum trees, we had. I wonder if there's any of that jam left? I'll teach you how to make it; I know you're not much of a cook, but even you can manage a pot of jam—"

Granny's eyes clouded for a moment. Her breath sputtered, and a speck of drool trickled onto the pillow. She scratched feebly at the metal mesh that crisscrossed her head, the black wires tightly compressing her white hair as though marking out a grid for some advanced version of tic-tac-toe. You could play moles and warts, thought Susanna. Cysts and scars. Life and death.

Just as Susanna gathered herself to speak, the intercom chimed. "Mrs. Raeburn, it's time for your evening session with the Sensory Insertion Module. Would you like the technician to attend?"

Granny twitched as if jolted back into life. "Oh yes, I need to practice, don't I? I'll start now—send him up later." The com clicked off, and she laughed hoarsely. "It's just as well I could always pass exams. You have to study for everything nowadays, even death." She pulled her arm out from under the paisley duvet, then gave her shriveled fingers a disappointed glare. "Don't just sit there, Susanna, plug me in."

Susanna reached for the SIM cord, and briskly inserted it into the socket behind her mother's left ear. As she bent over Granny's body, she smelled the ancient decaying flesh that the pine-scented air-conditioner tried so hard to mask. It was the stench of mortal sickness, the sign that this time—unlike so many other times when Granny had feigned illness to keep her daughter close—Susanna's mother would never get up from that bed. Not physically, anyway.

Granny closed her eyes. Only the readouts on the SIM console moved, showing data-transfer stats. To reduce the shock of "transition" (as death was invariably called in the brochures), the nursing home's residents spent hours every day with a data-feed into their brain, simulating the post-transition experience of existing as an upload inside the secure servers of Athanatic Solutions Ltd.

"It's getting easier," said Granny, in a louder voice as though she felt more distant and had a subconscious need to shout. "I can see you through the security camera. Give me a wave, dear!"

Half-heartedly, Susanna raised her hand. "Can you hear me?" "Of course I can. Eh, your hair doesn't look so good from up here. Have you tried getting a perm and dying it back to red? You used to have such bonny hair—it's a shame to let yourself go. Men have roving eyes, and that husband of yours . . . I wouldn't trust him further than I could spit a kitten."

"I'll go back home then, shall I?" said Susanna tartly. "While I'm here at your bedside, who knows what he could be up to?"

"Ah, stop mithering. You won't be here much longer. I'll not last another week. You could be back home tomorrow—and I'll be with you. In spirit, if not in body. Now, let's see if I can find your house. . . ."

Granny's eyelids twitched as she delved through vidlinks from the

September 2008

nanocams that blanketed the world: originally introduced as an anti-terrorism measure, the nanocams had become so convenient for the uploaded generation that they'd been dubbed the Eyes of the Dead.

"There it is!" said Granny. "Looks like you've been neglecting your garden. I can see weeds in the borders—you have to pull them up whenever you walk past. Keep on top of them, or they'll get out of hand. And all your tomatoes are parched, just little green lumps. You should rig up an electric sprinkler. Then when I'm installed on your house network, I can water the tomatoes every day and give them exactly what they need."

The prospect made Susanna seethe. "You won't want to bother doing that. After all, you won't be eating the tomatoes."

"Not at first. But technology improves; they'll give me all the upgrades. If an upload can see, why can't it taste? It's just different data. Oh look—your bairns are coming out. They're running around the lawn, and they've only just had their tea. You've got to let it settle!" she yelled, forgetting that the children couldn't hear her. "Ach, you need me to babysit for you. If you're going to keep gallivanting across the globe, you need someone minding the home front."

"I have a husband to do that," snapped Susanna. She left unsaid that she'd made a career in journalism precisely to avoid becoming an over-stifling mother to her children.

"Then where is he?" said Granny. "Inside watching football on TV? Off with some tart somewhere? Your youngest is only six—she could break her leg and he wouldn't even notice!"

"The eldest is eleven and she knows how to call someone if anything happens. Which it won't. Stop fretting! And look at me while I'm talking to you," added Susanna, throwing back a line that her mother had shouted countless times over the years.

Granny opened her eyes, and blinked furiously as she struggled to reconcile conflicting images from her data-feed and her physical senses. "Fretting, eh? So I'm not supposed to care about my own grandchildren? I can't imagine why you'd rather they break their leg than be properly looked after."

Susanna breathed deeply, attempting to defuse her anger. This kind of argument would erupt every day if she allowed Granny's electronic ghost into her house. She mustn't let that happen. But how could she refuse her mother on her deathbed? How could she break a lifetime's habit of Granny getting her own way?

A man in a black-and-silver suit entered the room and hurried to the bed. "Mrs. Raeburn, such a pleasure to see you again. I was monitoring the SIM from downstairs—you're doing wonderfully well!" The Athanatic technicians always told Granny that she was doing wonderfully well; no doubt it formed part of the premium-rate transition service. Susanna tried not to resent the loss of her inheritance, but in her weaker moments she couldn't help thinking of other uses for all the money her mother had paid to be virtualized.

Granny began questioning the technician about the data-feed, and Susanna took the opportunity to slip away for a few minutes. She didn't like leaving Granny alone—if her mother died with no one beside her, Susan-

na would never hear the last of it. The uploaded personality would add it to the long list of grievances and throw it in her face every time they argued over what time the kids should be sent to bed.

Longing for some fresh air after the vigil in Granny's stuffy room, Susanna headed outside into the neatly maintained gardens, full of yew hedges and neoclassical statues. Decades as a journalist had filled her head with miscellaneous facts—she remembered that the yew was a symbol of immortality. The evening breeze carried the scent of roses from the formal flowerbeds. Flapping her hand to ward off midges, Susanna paced across the lawns and past a gurgling fountain, until she arrived at a stone archway with a motto incised across the span:

*Cut loose the bonds of flesh and bone  
To find the realm thy soul doth own*

Susanna's writerly instincts rebelled against the pseudo-archaic language, coined by Athanatic's marketing department less than a decade ago; her finger twitched on an imaginary *Delete* key as she passed under the arch and entered the necropolis beyond.

Obelisks and tombstones and mausoleums lay crammed together in a hotchpotch of garish styles, each competing to look grander and more expensive than the next. Animated displays showed dead men's triumphs, and post-transition holograms told tales of their lifetime achievements. In the far corner, a tinny thud leaked through the sound-baffle around a goth nightclub held in the crypt of someone who felt that death made him all the more fashionable a DJ. A gaggle of teenagers in white pancaked make-up lounged on gravestones drinking cider, ignoring the holograms who tried to impart their wisdom. No lichen splotted the gravestones; no ivy shrouded the freshly chiseled monuments.

Somewhere below Susanna's feet, a secure vault contained the infrastructure of the electronic afterlife. Supercooled computers stored the encoded personalities of the deceased, connected to their mausoleums and holograms through triply redundant cables. Uploads could maintain a local presence, but the vault's servers also accessed the Net and hence the whole world. The brochures elided delicately over the security aspects, alluding to protective firewalls and backups—since, of course, the Athanatic residents were a magnet for hackers. Many of the first generation of uploads had been zombified into human spambots touting baldness cures to distressed relatives who only wanted to ask Great-Uncle Wayne where he'd hidden the keys to the safe.

Apart from the giggling teenagers attending the goth disco, not many people visited the memorial garden. After all, every cenotaph had its own email address, its own telephone number. Anyone wanting to contact the dead could simply dial them up on the Net. Some of the deceased passed their time offering psychic readings, spirit-guide services, and the like. Others wrote blogs, memoirs, or the novel they'd always planned to get round to. Susanna resented those who set themselves up as journalists, leveraging a lifetime's expertise into endless punditry and pedantry. It was already hard enough being a freelance writer, without having to compete against dead columnists who could extrude wordage with no need to eat or sleep or soothe children's squabbles or attend sick relatives' deathbeds.

Susanna checked her messages. No offers of work had come in. She sent a quick note to her husband and eldest daughter to tell them she'd probably stay at the nursing home tonight. Then she took a final look around the necropolis, trying to spot a tasteful style of monument that would suit Granny's personality . . . and trying to find the words that would persuade Granny to stay here with her fellow ghosts.

She imagined Granny telling those teenage girls, "I hope you don't walk upstairs on the bus wearing those short skirts." No one would listen to her. Who cared to be hectored by the dead, other than family? How could she tell her mother that her family didn't want her? Susanna, whose whole career was built upon words, couldn't think what to say.

"Where've you been?" asked her mother when Susanna returned. "I could have passed away, and you wouldn't even have noticed. I won't be here much longer; the least you can do is hold my hand while it's still warm."

Beside the bed, an Emo-Scan glowed the purple of deep indignation. Granny's helmet of wires recorded the myriad signals of neurons firing within the skull, building up a history of thought-patterns for the upload's personality algorithms. To aid the process, Granny took a daily dose of stimulants, ensuring that she could think and talk coherently in the pre-transition period.

"I went down to the memorials," said Susanna. "Have you decided what style you want?"

Feebly, Granny shook her head. "I'm not having one of those mausoleums. That stuff's obsolete. Why have a bloody great monument cluttering up the place? Why have a gravestone at all? You only need a marker to remember those that are gone. But I won't be gone. I'll still be with you. Look!"

A hologram appeared of a young woman with freckles and sharp cheekbones. At first, Susanna didn't recognize the figure, who looked so different from the aged, shrunken occupant of the bed.

Granny smiled. "The best thing about death is that after you die, you can be beautiful again. I can project any hologram I like. Which do you think is best? This is me when I was nineteen. I was so slim! My boyfriend used to joke about me, said I had to run around in the shower to get wet. Aye, I was a bonny lass—I turned a few heads in my time. After I had you, of course, I put some weight on." The hologram changed: the woman growing older, her red hair now tied back. "This was taken after I married, before he left me. You were sick on that dress. You were always making yourself sick—you were sick in a wedding once. Everyone stared at me, when it was you puking! By 'eck, we could take you anywhere twice—second time to apologize."

Granny cycled through a few more holograms, all virtualized from old photos. "The Exogram has voice-projection as well. So when I'm installed in your house, it's just like I'm really there. Then I can look after the bairns whenever you want to run off after one of those stories of yours."

"I don't travel so much nowadays," said Susanna quietly. The ubiquitous nanocams had reduced the need for journalists to travel to see what was happening elsewhere.

"But you go out of an evening, don't you? Theater and all that."

"That's not the point." Realizing that there'd be no better time, that she must get it out however she could, Susanna blurted the rejection she'd bottled up for so long. "I'm not having that hologram in my house." She tried to sound assertive, but in her own ears her voice sounded like a childish whine.

"I can change the picture. Look, here's another version." The hologram became a cartoon cat with Granny's eyes. The sinister figure looked like the villain in a horror anime. "Kids love cartoons," said Granny. "I won't just be a babysitter, I'll be a friend to them."

"It's not the hologram," said Susanna, determined not to get sidetracked. "I'm not having you in my house at all."

"Don't be silly," said Granny. "Where else would I go?"

"The memorial garden. Or anywhere. But not my home." Now that she'd finally spoken, Susanna's resentment poured out. "I'm not having you looming at the kitchen table every day criticizing the cooking, or trying to send the kids to bed at eight o'clock when they're not tired, or floating round all the ceilings checking for dust. . . ."

Susanna felt her cheeks getting red. She hated family confrontations, because she knew how long the poison lingered. As a journalist, she had put hard questions to government ministers, accused executives of corruption, and chased wrongdoing fearlessly. But you filed a story and moved on. You didn't have your subjects haranguing you for months on end, wearing you down. You didn't have to live with the fallout for years—or, in a world of post-death uploads, forever.

"Well, I never thought I'd see the day," said Granny, her eyes blazing. "I can't imagine what's got into you. I suppose it's the shock. I know it's hard for you to see me like this, when I used to be so strong, when I brought you up with my own hands and looked after you all those years. Now it's the other way round—now I need someone to care about me, someone to look after me and give me a home. I won't even have a body, so it's not like I'll get in your way. You won't have to change my nappies, or wipe up my puke. You won't need to feed me, wash my clothes, take me to school, and watch me playing so I don't get hurt. All I'll need is some space in a corner. Is that really so hard?" Her voice cracked. "I didn't know it was so much to ask, just to be with my family in the cold dark world after death."

A single tear rolled down Granny's wrinkled cheek. Susanna glared at the tear with loathing. It represented all the emotional manipulation she'd endured throughout her life. *Don't give in to this*, she told herself. *Stand firm. You should have stood firm years ago.* Thinking of her own children gave her the strength to resist. It was too late for Susanna to have a normal childhood, but she wouldn't let Granny's ghost blight the lives of Michelle, Toby, and Vanessa.

As Susanna stayed silent, Granny struggled to lift her head from the pillow. More tears leaked across the craggy, sallow flesh. "It's a lonely world without your own flesh and blood. If I don't have family, what do I have? Are you abandoning me?" Her voice quavered.

"I'm not abandoning you," said Susanna. "I'm here, aren't I? We just need a bit of distance, that's all. I'm not a child any more—I don't need

daily tellings off. You can stay in the memorial garden, and we'll see each other on the phone." She wondered how long that would work, with Granny calling her every five minutes. After all, she'd have nothing else to do. But call-screening was a wonderful thing.

"Ah, the duty phone call," said Granny savagely, "when whatever I say, you always have that same scowl on your face as when you wouldn't eat your greens. I'm not trying to poison you!"

"I know," Susanna said, trying to ride out the backlash without weakening.

"I cared for you, I brought you up when your father walked out on us." Granny's voice softened to the loving tone that Susanna remembered from childhood, when her mother read bedtime stories, played silly games, soothed snuffles and scrapes. "I only ever wanted the best for you."

Reluctantly, Susanna acknowledged the truth of that. "I know." No matter how overbearing, her mother always meant well. She wanted Susanna to live in a perfect world, and tried too hard to impose it.

"Aye, we've had our problems, but we can work it out. It'll be a new start, a chance to make things right. I won't be the same mother you had before. I'll be dead! It's a heck of a change. You know what they call it in the brochure? An awfully big adventure. Can't we start the adventure together?" Granny's voice became huskier throughout this speech, which terminated as a pleading whisper.

Susanna instinctively suspected Granny of hamming it up. But maybe that mindset, that ingrained rebellion—"obstreperous child!"—was part of the problem. Defiance evoked her mother's controlling protectiveness, which then incited Susanna's revolt, for another loop round the endless futile cycle that had swallowed so many years in bickering and bitterness. Yet Granny's mortal illness wasn't histrionic. The old back-and-forth would soon end, one way or another.

Would it be too harsh to deny Granny's uploaded personality a home, without even giving her a chance to change? Susanna wavered. Perhaps they could break the cycle and start again. Granny might not be her old domineering self when bodiless and dead. And Susanna could get holographic projectors with an external on/off switch only accessible to flesh-and-blood hands. . . .

"Maybe we can give it a go," she said. "Just to see how we get along."

"Of course we can," said Granny briskly. "It'll be fine—don't fash yourself. Now, you'll need to read the set-up guide in the brochure. I already ordered the Exogram 5000, and it'll be delivered to your house next week. There's a dedicated comlink to my electronic brain, and all the projection equipment is in a self-contained unit with its own power-supply. I'm not having people switching me on and off like a radio." She paused and wheezed for breath before continuing. "The substations go on each floor of the house, and the remote units cover the garden. It has multi-presence so I can babysit anywhere simultaneously. You'll need to patch me into the house network, so I can make myself useful by switching things off when you're asleep and whatnot. We need to save energy, don't we? And I'll have a relay from the burglar alarm to alert me if anyone tries to break in—"

"I can see you've been planning this," said Susanna, suppressing a familiar irritation. It was typical that Granny had already assumed her consent and arranged everything.

"Aye, and what else would I be doing? This isn't a holiday camp, is it?" Granny paused, momentarily losing the thread of the conversation, but recovered herself. "I'll need a list of your children's friends. I can get their classmates from school records. Then we'll do a bit of research, watch the nanocams, make sure they're associating with the right sort of people. It's never too early to stop them falling in with a bad crowd. I know they're young, but it won't be long before they're offered drink and drugs—not if we don't do anything about it. It's hard to break children's friendships when they're established, but kids can't make friends with people they don't see, can they?"

Susanna knew this all too well. She frowned, recalling the times in her childhood when she'd been told that so-and-so had moved away, or was ill, or didn't want to see her.

"Don't look so resentful," Granny said. "It was for your own good. You didn't grow up an alkie or an addict, did you? There's plenty of people your age who never left the tenements, never had the prospects I raised you for."

"And have you already picked out who your grandchildren are going to marry?" said Susanna. In her twenties, remembering what had happened with "unsuitable" childhood friends, she had simply refused to tell her mother anything about her love life. It was easier then, having left home. She'd become a journalist so she could escape—chase stories across the globe, and shake off the smothering influence of her mother. She once wrote a column on the linguistic coincidence that "mother" was so close to "smother."

"Ah, that might be beyond me. You made your own bed there, didn't you, dear? He's lasted longer than I thought, I'll say that." Granny smiled. "I'm so glad we've patched things up. I feel much better now—I didn't want to die with bad blood between us." Beside her, the brain imager's displays blinked in a slower rhythm, as if Granny's final agitation had been soothed.

Susanna didn't feel that they'd patched things up. As so often, she felt browbeaten into submission. And now that she'd agreed to everything her mother wanted, Granny would die to make sure she didn't have a chance to change her mind.

A soft buzzing snore came from the bed. Susanna reached forward and rested her hand on Granny's arm. Under the cotton nightgown, the flesh felt soft as an overripe pear, the bone as thin and brittle as dry spaghetti. Susanna remembered that same arm throwing Frisbees for her to catch . . . deadheading roses, ironing blouses, hammering in tent-pegs . . . hugging her, pointing at her, slapping her . . . always working, moving, writing a shopping list, filling in a crossword, stirring batter for chocolate cake. Now the arm lay still. Tears welled up in Susanna's eyes, and she raised her own arm to wipe them away.

If Granny became a hologram, how could she play with her grandchildren? How could she throw a ball, make tea, carry the coats and bags? How could she be there for them?

Ah, but the Athanatic brochure had answers for all these questions.

Holograms could play hide and seek, could tell stories, could pretend to be pets or ghosts or monsters. They could watch TV with children, help them navigate the Net, and ensure they didn't find porn or violence or anything unsuitable. Holograms could oversee a household and be constantly on call for emergencies—so said the FAQ. But knowing Granny, Susanna wondered who would be on call for whom.

She stood up and stretched. A sudden hunger struck her; she'd barely eaten all day. Looking at her mother's sleeping form, she felt safe in going to grab a quick meal.

The canteen was always open, more for the benefit of visitors than for bedridden residents. While she selected salad and yogurt, it occurred to Susanna that her next encounter with Athanatic Solutions might not be as a visitor, but as a "pre-transition guest." The upload process would inevitably become more affordable, even commonplace. Would she want it for herself? Her mother would surely be keen to induct her: with Granny as the family patriarch, there'd be vacancies for junior attendants, generation after generation.

Susanna shivered, imagining an electronic eternity in her mother's embrace. But she wasn't on her deathbed yet; she shouldn't worry about her own upload while she still had Granny's to deal with. Soon she'd need to arrange things at home and talk to her husband, who would hardly welcome this new addition to the household. She'd have to give him a hologram-free zone—where Susanna could join him to get a little peace.

Her phone rang. A man's voice said, "Mrs. Munro? I'm afraid your mother. . . you'd best get here quickly if you can."

The sunset's rays illuminated whirling dust motes in the air. For a moment, the floating specks seemed to freeze—everything froze—and the just-eaten food turned to lead in her stomach. Susanna swallowed hard.

A cold analytical part of her brain said, *You knew this was coming. It's not like it's a shock.* Yet Susanna's affronted emotions said, *I was only gone ten minutes. How can she have died in ten minutes?* Irrationally she felt it should have taken longer, that no one should be able to slip away in the gap between one moment and the next.

When she reached her mother's room and saw the two doctors, she knew from their postures that she'd arrived too late. They stood by the bed, respectful yet relaxed, their work—such as it was—already over. On the brain-imaging machine, all the lights had dimmed, save for one red glow. There would be no attempt to resuscitate; there was no point in delaying the transition that Granny had signed up for. Indeed, only legal conservatism—tiresome statutes against murder—prevented the residents being conveniently euthanized to smooth the process.

As a journalist, Susanna had often witnessed death and its aftermath. She should have been inured to it. Yet now, at her mother's passing, the scene flickered in her mind with stroboscopic vividness, a series of silent snapshots like an ancient photo album. The doctors turned, spoke to her—she did not hear them—then left the room. Another man entered, carrying a clipboard. From his black-and-silver uniform, she recognized him as an Athanatic employee. He said something, then held out the clipboard. She stared at him, noticing that his name-badge projected a tiny

hologram with the words "Noel Bullinger" in front of a silver yew tree. A speck of dirt on the badge clouded the letter G in the hologram.

His hand touched her shoulder. "Mrs. Munro? I'm so sorry to disturb you at such a difficult time—but it's important that you sign this now. Your mother's brain will start to decay very soon. The quicker we can start Stage Two, the better."

Stage Two—the dissection. They were going to slice open her mother's skull, remove the brain, and perform what the brochure delicately described as a "physical scan," recording the final state of every neuron and synapse, every thought and memory. The process destroyed the brain, which was why the uploading procedure could only be performed after death.

"As next of kin," he said, "you have to formally authorize us to implement the transition."

"No," whispered Susanna.

"I'm afraid the law requires us to obtain your signature. Believe me, I'd rather not have to ask. But—" Again he proffered the clipboard, which held a release form and a cheap blue pen.

"No," Susanna said. "I'm not going to sign."

He paused, and touched her arm again as if he'd been told in some customer-training seminar that this would help bring dazed relatives out of shock. Distractedly, she wondered if he would keep manhandling all the way down from her shoulder to her fingers in search of a button that he could press.

He spoke in short simple sentences, addressing her like a child. "This is what your mother wanted. It's why she came here. We explained all this at the induction. She would want you to sign."

*Yes, and Granny always gets what she wants.* "Not any more!" cried Susanna. She wrenched the form off the clipboard and tore it up, throwing the pieces on the floor. "I'm not signing." Susanna wanted to run out of the hideous pastel room, before her mother's corpse lurched from the bed and hugged her in an icy grip from which she'd never escape. But in a more rational corner of her mind, she knew she had to stay, to make sure that the technicians didn't decide to skip the legal niceties and proceed anyway. The regulations demanding post-death family authorization dated back to the early days of the upload technology, when the Net seethed with scare stories, but the legislation was now little more than a formality—unless she enforced it.

Bullinger stared at her as if unable to comprehend Susanna's refusal. At last he said, "Is this about the money? Mrs. Raeburn already paid for the transition and the first two hundred years of post-transition maintenance. The fee is non-refundable."

"Then you don't care, do you? Keep the money and get out!"

He stalked away, his jaw clenched as though restraining an unprofessional retort. With stiff politeness, he turned and said, "There's a short window before the brain decays too far to scan accurately. I can see you're distraught, so I'll leave you alone to think about it. I'll come back in fifteen minutes with another copy of the release form, in case you've changed your mind."

September 2008

The door slid shut, and a hush fell. Susanna gazed at her mother's body. It looked crumpled, worn-out, the sour expression not at all peaceful. The thin lips appeared to have a lot more left to say. *Susanna! Don't just stand there like cheese at thruppence. You heard the man—my brain's decaying by the minute. Sign that form, and hop to it!*

The remembered voice rang out clearly in her head, the intonation familiar from decades of commands and complaints. Susanna didn't need to resurrect her mother to know what she would say in any given situation.

Yet was this just childish stubbornness? How would Susanna feel when her own turn came? She imagined herself on the bed, her children crowding round. What would they say? *You were never there for us—why should we bring you back now?* Susanna had been careful to give her children space, to love from a distance and allow them freedom. But, remembering Toby's tears before she left on that last trip to Africa, she realized they didn't know what she was reacting against. She could bring back her mother, show her grandchildren what ever-present nannying was really like. . . .

No. Granny was dead, and Susanna didn't need an overbearing ghost in the house. She could raise her children herself, and at least her mistakes would be her own.

*You spiteful girl,* said Granny's voice in her head. *I suppose you think you can get a great newspaper column out of this. Maybe even a documentary, "How I Unplugged My Mother." You only ever think of yourself—*

*I stand up for myself,* Susanna mentally retorted. *Finally.* If she had a sliver of ice in her heart, she knew where she'd inherited it.

She grasped the bedsheet and shrouded it over her mother's face. "Goodbye," Susanna said. Then she waited for the last dial on the brain-imaging equipment to fade from red into darkness. ○

## THE GHOSTS OF CHRONOPOLIS

In Chronopolis,  
city of changing light  
upon the squares,  
leaves are scattershot  
in shifting patterns  
across the pavements.

There are no clocks  
for the ticking.

For each of us  
home to this dimension  
and its relative time,

the passage of hours  
remains subjective,  
honed or stretched from  
one perception to the next.

Those who leave Chronopolis,  
city of light and shadow  
upon the pavements,  
never return.

Except in the dreams  
of those still created.  
Except as sheer specters  
haunting the rooms  
of their ruined lives.

You can hear their  
diminished apparitions  
scrabbling through  
the streets of Chronopolis,  
city of stone and sand,  
light and ablation.

You can sense their  
ghostly shades falling  
like desiccated leaves  
across the spectrum  
of the achromatic dusk  
as it sheds illumination.

You can almost see them  
in the dark, fading sparks  
that could be no more  
than the expiring rods  
and cones of your vision.

—Bruce Boston