

A surreal landscape featuring a large, glowing orange sun in the upper right. A bare, dark tree stands on the left, its branches reaching towards the sun. The foreground is a body of water reflecting the sun and the tree, with small white stars scattered throughout. The overall mood is dreamlike and ethereal.

*At the End  
of All  
Things*

PLANISPHERE Q



# At the End of All Things

Planisphere Quarterly  
Issue 9

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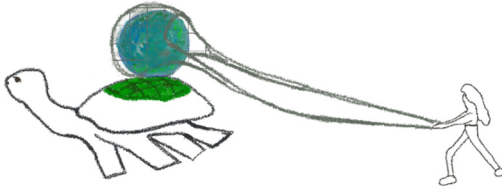
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## Table of Contents

<b>EDITOR'S NOTE.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>A LOVE LETTER WRITTEN AT THE HEAT DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Aimee Ogden</i>	
<b>PERIMETER DANCE.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Robert MacAnthony</i>	
<b>CONTRIBUTORS.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>STAFF.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>EDITOR.....</b>	<b>25</b>





## Editor's Note

The Ganesha mudra is a hand gesture of meditation when you're seeking the removal of obstacles, one I've set my intention on during my yoga practice. Change never comes easy. Transformation, a form of death, rightly analogized, permeates throughout life, its intensification ebbing and flowing like the high tide at noon. Men and money are my greatest fears, both centered around loss. Is the law of attraction an immutable force? Certainly, it seems that way. Those barriers—those obstacles—are torn down, painfully. Spirit loves but the universe is indifferent, so be careful what you wish for because you might get it, overstated but not untrue. I see Ganesha sitting over me, comforting me: "I know this is difficult."

I love my life, who I am, my friends and family. I am grateful for both the good and the bad experiences. *I see myself*. I think that's what is needed first before anyone else can see you, before you can remove any obstacles. I choose to give myself the grace to be human, to be afraid,

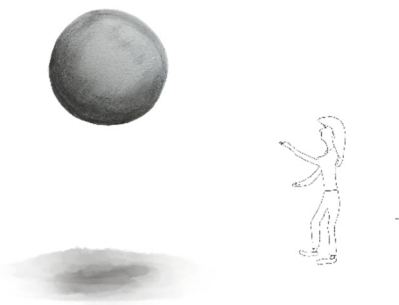
## Planisphere Q

scarred, hurt, angry, loud, annoying, childish, insecure, but also to love fiercely and freely.

This is the last issue of Planisphere Q for right now, and I'm not sure if I'll re-open the journal, but I'd like to keep the possibility of more issues open. I'm pleased to present two wonderfully written stories by Aimee Ogden and Robert MacAnthony. The first work is *A Love Letter at the Heat Death of the Universe* by Aimee Ogden, an 854-word story originally published in *Strange Horizons* December 5, 2022. The second work of fiction is *Perimeter Dance* by Robert MacAnthony, a 2,900-word story.







## A Love Letter Written at the Heat Death of the Universe

*Aimee Ogden*

We found you, and you alone, in a universe that had forgotten to die.

Or rather, a universe for whom death had been set just out of reach. When my people grew aware of our universe's impending mortality, we developed slipspace travel, to pass through the shining soap-bubble boundary of another realm without breaking it. Your people created zero-tau fields, on a scale we had never dreamed possible. Entire galaxies, even superclusters, within which time had totally ceased to exist—an impossible feat, the astrophysics committee insisted, except that you had somehow done it: hidden your universe's own corpus from itself until, at the end of its life, it

lacked the mass to return to the singularity that had birthed it. I will never get an answer from you, but I can't help but ask: why?

And atop one of those zero-tau envelopes rested your little pod, like a blister on a boil. We detected no other such survivors; we did not know whether you were chosen to be the last of your kind, or whether you endured alone as an accident of fate. A lonely existence, in either case.

To study you, we slipped a smaller zero-tau field of our own inside your larger one and extracted your pod in a continued stasis. We could drop the field only for microseconds, long enough for our instruments to capture observational slivers, of your anatomy, your technology. You are so little like us: so few appendages, such a rigid internal support system! And yet so much like us too, with what we believe to be an intricate and interconnected sensorium. If you woke, would you hear the high-pitched hum of the slipspace drive, or perhaps even feel its vibrations through the ship's biolaminate? Would you recognize me as another sentient being, and if you tried to communicate, how would you do it?

Unlike you, the information storage device from your pod can be woken without fear of destroying it. Not that this is a simple process! My siblings on the information processing committee and I studied it for several cycles before we could fabricate a connection that would allow transfer of your data to an isolated ganglion of our ship's computers. Having the data, of course, does not

mean understanding it. Even unencrypted, the sounds—music? speech?—are a cacophony; the written script is indecipherable. Are these ideograms? Syllabaries? Most puzzling of all are the two-dimensional images: some that show beings who might be your conspecifics, others with similar but puzzlingly different body plans. I think your sensorium must possess some cross-dimensional perception that we lack, cutting across time itself, able to open a window to your past simply by perceiving its visual representation. How wonderful, and how sad. No wonder your people, who must have lived so much in their own histories, chose to lock their universe in stasis rather than surrender it to the unknowable future.

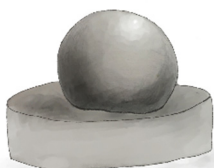
As far as we can tell, you as an individual are unrepresented in any of these stored images. If your voice spoke to us out of these recordings, we would never recognize it. We determined quickly that you were unsuited to the conditions of life required by our universe of origin and our universe of choice alike. We cannot wake you, meet you, know you; not without destroying you. Nor do we even know for certain if anything in you remains to awaken. Whatever intent you had, in preserving these things, it is lost with you. How I wish I could ask you! I like to imagine that, if our roles were reversed, you would burn with a similar curiosity.

Ignorant as we are of your customs, the xenocultural committee decided we should restore the data storage device and its mysteries to your pod, and return you and it together to your own

universe. The information processing committee objected, but we were overruled by the majority of our extended brethren. The data, they said, had been entrusted to you to bear alone, in the silent endless tomb of your universe. It was never intended for us.

As the members of the information processing committee are the only ones who understand how to access your data stick, however, its contents have been—I confess—somewhat altered. I will bear your songs and stories with me, and you in turn will bear this letter. Though it is almost certain that neither of us will ever understand exactly what it is we carry.

I lack your species' ability to transcend time's arrow and live in this past of yours; these things do not yet mean to me what they would have meant to you. Perhaps they never will. Yet even now, to me, they mean more than nothing. When you return to your universe in the last held breath before its death, your people are born anew in mine. Whatever else I come to understand, whatever else I do not: I see that you loved them, and I see that I will learn to do the same here. In their absence, and in yours.



## Perimeter Dance

*Robert MacAnthony*

“A gift consists not of what is given, but in the intention of the giver.” —Doshan

That was always the question with Temera—her intent.

“Shh,” she said, covering my eyes with her hand. Her fingers were cool and smelled of the flowers she’d picked from our garden. “I want you to see through my eyes. I want you to feel.”

Then, because Temera was there at the start, so was I.

§

In the years since Temera, I've traveled far, mostly in the ever-expanding habitable zone that centers on Cloudfall and spreads like a shadow across the planet we call Cyrus. Sometimes, I go beyond the Fringe, into the lands of the Gholi, pushing the limits of the handful of days the human body can survive in the non-standard atmosphere and frigid native temperatures.

Wherever I travel, Temera's parting words lay heavy on me. I can still hear the timbre of her voice, see the shape of her mouth as she formed the syllables:

“Remember.”

§

A week's ride north of Cloudfall there's a place called Albas. It's more an optimistic cluster of buildings than a town, though the remnants of buildings long-since dismantled and the existence of a library show it was once more than that. It once sat at the very edge of the Fringe, attracting scientists and serving as a final stop for merchants seeking trade with the Gholi. Now, the Fringe is another hard week's ride to the north and the only thing keeping Albas going is its sandstone quarry.

I follow the noise of music and conversation to a squat building hunched alongside the road. The sounds hardly register—where people gather there is food, and I am interested only in the smoke-and-meat smell of the place. My stomach growls.

I'm not looking for anyone. Haven't been looking for years, not in any real sense. As failure mounted upon failure since Temera left, I felt it was all a charade. I couldn't commit to it anymore, but I couldn't quite give it up.

I exchange coin for food and water and search the dim common room for a table, twisting between patrons and chairs to a spot near the rear door. As I sit, my gaze finally falls on the performers.

I drop my mug, clay splintering and water splashing my feet.

“Remember.”

§

“This is the epicenter,” Temera had said. She was there in my mind, showing me her experiences of years past in that uncanny way of hers. It was as real as the waking world to me—the colors vibrant, sounds clear. The cool crispness of the thin air invigorated me.

We were on Cloudfall, that broad plateau of stone atop the highest peak within the Fringe. There were others, too. Tall, like Temera, with eyes that had seen more years than reflected in their smooth faces. Tremendous pillars of glass and stone extended from the plateau at sharp angles, each thick enough that it would take ten people to join hands around it. The pillars hummed, casting vibrations through the stone beneath my feet and shaking my teeth. A familiar shimmer just where the

pillars disappeared into the wispy clouds told me exactly what this was.

“The Fringe.” My voice was flat. That expanding canopy of warmth and clear air sprang from these cyclopean structures.

There were implications.

Temera chuckled, not unkindly. “You didn’t believe it was the gods, surely?”

I’d never believe those childhood tales of gods partial to humanity enlarging the lands hospitable to us while ever dwindling those inhabitable by the faithless Gholi. But to see such artificiality and human ingenuity at work, as the cause of something so far beyond my comprehension, was a kick to the chest.

“This is the day we turned it on,” Temera said, guiding me through the memory. “We watched the boundary move down the mountainside to its initial limit. From there, the expansion started. Maintaining these has been the work of centuries.”

Centuries. My mind slid past that and what it implied about Temera, fixing instead on the practical.

“You’re killing them? I mean...we are? Humans are?”

“Unintentionally,” Temera said. “We built this to carve out a habitable space for ourselves while leaving most of the world to its indigenous inhabitants—the plants and animals you find in Gholi lands and beyond.”

She told me, then, how they...we...had come from the stars to seek a life on Cyrus but found it



unable to sustain us. The tremendous pillars humming around me were the solution—a way to transform the thin air, unsafe water, and inedible plants, to turn Cyrus into the kind of place we'd come from. Before she finished I was sitting, my head aching as I cradled it in my hands. The shock of having my understanding of the world turned on its head rocked me, but it was more than that. Everything I believed about myself and my people also crumbled to the ground.

We were invaders?

“Most of us left Cloudfall to make lives in the world,” Temera continued. “Or at least as much of the world as the Fringe made safe. Centuries passed and the area within the Fringe was transformed. But the knowledge of how to control the pillars was lost. Those few of us who remain were never instructed in it.”

“Why show this to me?” I asked.

“Only a few of us remain. We do what little we can to maintain the pillars, to keep them operating and preserve human life on this world. But though our bodies were altered to give us long lives, we do not live forever.” She favored me with a smile. “I care for you. I’m trusting you with something important.”

So many questions. About her, her age and the long years of her life, the machines thrumming around us. And speaking of trust.... But I thought I loved her then and said only: “You can’t stop the expansion?”

Temera shook her head. “There may be those who can stop it, who can remember, but not any of us who are left from those days.”

More puzzles. “What do you mean, remember?”

And she began to dance.

§

The dancer at the center of the common room in Albas moves perfectly though rhythm and gesture as the musicians’ melodies rise and fall. The sound transforms from a jaunty tune typical of such places to something sad and mournful. I recognize the style of the dance immediately, though it has been long since I’ve seen it. I weep as a kitchen boy mutters and cleans up the remnants of my water mug.

After the performance, I find the dancer.

He’s called Herrel, he’s seventeen and he’s danced that way his whole life. When music plays, it need only reach a certain rhythm and he is swept away by the power of it, each movement emerging without conscious thought. It’s all I need to know.

I order more food and talk as Herrel eats. I tell him all I’d learned those many years before, in those shared visions of Cloudfall.

Herrel grasps at fragments of my story, trying to pull them into a cohesive whole. “What do you mean, a kind of memory?” he asks, frowning as he takes another bite. “How is that possible?”

It's hard to explain something I barely comprehend myself. "It's...think of your eyes. They're blue. From your mother? These memories are like that, only they're much older than either your mother or your father."

"And they tell me how to dance?"

"They tell you how to dance."

§

I'd thought Temera was joking but her eyes were flints and her lips lacked the tell-tale twitch they got when she was being funny. She took my hand and led me down a spiraling corridor into the heart of Cloudfall. We emerged into a high room walled in glass. On the glass, colorful shapes and symbols glowed and blinked, though I couldn't see how they were put there. I stood in the center of the room, slowly turning, taking in the wonder of the inexplicable place. Its existence caused me to consider Temera's story more seriously.

"You can put knowledge into a person so that it passes down through generations?"

"Not me," Temera said. "That art has been lost, like so much else. But there were those who could do it. They engineered the genes of a select few to encode very specific enzymes. These enzymes passed from parent to child and produced RNA molecules that carried the necessary information. They..."

I waved my hand for her to stop. The explanation, the words—they meant nothing to me.

They only increased the gulf of time and knowledge that now lay between us. I couldn't see how what she told me was possible but I didn't understand enough to argue.

“A complex code is needed to operate the pillars. It's something only a select few knew back then, something too dangerous to share with everyone. Those original few are long dead.”

I hadn't made the connection yet. “Then all hope was lost with them?” I pictured the Fringe continuing to expand until all native life on Cyrus was lost.

Temera shook her head. “Not all hope.”

She danced. Her movements carried her around the wide room, her gestures impacting the glowing panels, changing their colors and rhythms.

It was beautiful, but it was the wrong dance and so it accomplished nothing.

§

I have been two weeks in Albas, talking to Herrel whenever his other duties allow, teaching him. Hoping to convince him. He has come to believe me, at least in part—something I find remarkable. His memories of the dance help.

“The word she used for you was ‘failsafe,’” I tell him, speaking of Temera. “One of your ancestors was receptive to the changes made to their body, incorporated the knowledge into themselves instead of rejecting it. This same knowledge went to their children. Most rejected it—‘reversion’ she

called it—but it held true for a small number. Time passed and Cloudfall was forgotten as anything other than the high peak at the center of the Fringe. We forgot what it really was. But some memories remained, passed down person to person, parent to child.”

“It’s hard to believe,” Herrel says.

I shrug my agreement. “Your dance. How long have you known it?”

“Since I was a child.”

“Who taught it to you? Your parents? Another child, perhaps? A teacher?”

Herrel hesitates. Then: “I truly can’t say. I don’t remember being taught. I’ve...it feels like I’ve always known it. When I was little, I tried teaching it to other kids. They could learn most of the movements but had a hard time with the rhythm. It never flowed for any of them, not like it did for me. I’ve always thought it was something I made up.”

“The dance is in your blood. Not made up by you but put there by others. It’s part of you in a way it can’t be for others.”

As he comes to believe me, he also comes to see the consequences. We humans were set to destroy another sentient race, however inadvertently. Not only that—to wipe out countless plant and animal species that existed nowhere but on Cyrus.

Herrel is shaken.

Human relations with the Gholi have never been close, being limited to trade with groups of Gholi closest to the Fringe. As the Fringe expands, things grow worse. Some Gholi see humans as

invaders, as a threat. Herrel understands how right they are.

He also understands: “I have the power to stop the expansion. If what you’re saying is true, I can make the world safe for humans and Gholi. It’s...” He puts his head in his hands. “It’s a lot to bear.”

I can’t imagine the weight he feels. “It’s also a wonderful thing, Herrel. Do not weep.”

The next morning, he leaves Albas with me.

§

Cloudfall rises like an outstretched hand, its radius of giant fingers reaching for the heavens. It has dominated our vision for two days as we rode, first easily across flat ground and then with more effort as we sloped upward. It’s summer and the way to the summit, to the heart of Cloudfall is free of snow and though the air is cold it is not unbearable.

Herrel does not complain, though he must be as sore as I by the time we finally cross into the shadow of the pillars. Our spirits rise as we near the plateau, near the place where Herrel can help.

Herrel’s eyes widen as we cross the plateau. It looks the same as in the memory Temera shared with me. Stone and glass and a dizzying magnitude. The familiar thrum. I press my tongue against the inside of my teeth to stop the vibration.

We dismount and continue a few paces on foot. I call out, my voice thin as the mountain air,

and then call again, louder. Temera and three men, companions from our vision, emerge from the corridor leading to the room of glass and light below. My heart catches. She is much as I remember, though I am much older. My mind flashes to drinking wine in our garden, the sunlight across her naked body as I rise from bed, the sound of her laughter when something amused her. Hers is a face I have loved, though I see little emotion in it.

“You’ve found someone?” She has always been direct.

“I believe so. I saw him dance. It was much the same as what you showed me, though the movements were different.”

Temera’s shoulders sag and she suddenly looks as though her years have caught her. “So much time. You’re only the third to bring anyone to us and the last was a decade ago.”

Unease stirs my gut, faint and ill-defined.

“There can’t be many left,” says one of the men next to her. He is of a height with Temera and could pass for her brother.

“Not many at all,” Temera says. She steps toward Herrel and puts a hand on his shoulder. He’s tense and she says: “It’s OK. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Herrel flicks a glance at me and starts to follow her.

“Shouldn’t I...?”

Temera hands Herrel off to one of the men, who speaks softly to the boy and leads him toward

the corridor. She turns to me, palm up. “He’ll be fine.”

I step toward her, clasping her palm in my hands, lowering it. A thought crystallizes. “Three others? But then why is the boundary still expanding?”

Temera presses her lips together and I continue: “What do you want with him, truly?”

When she hesitates, I start to move past her. Her two remaining companions are in my way. I stop, more than a little fear now building, and turn back to the woman I’ve misunderstood so badly.

“Please,” Temera says, “for the sake of what we had, don’t push this. The boy will be fine, you have my word.”

“What do you want with him?” I repeat, anger edging my voice. The two men have moved nearer. Temera’s face is lined with sadness but there is resolve in her eyes.

“Try to understand,” she says. “None of us is safe while the memory of how to control the pillars survives. Think of the land within the Fringe as it stands now—a fraction of the surface of this world. Think of a thousand years from now, as our population doubles again and again. How will humans live? Overcrowding. Famine. Disease. That is the fate of humanity if we stop the Fringe.”

For a moment, I’m speechless. Intent. That was always the question with Temera. And now I understand.

I feel hands on my shoulder. Firm, insistent.



“What’s going to happen to him?” I ask, my mouth dry. “Will you kill him like you’ll kill the Gholi and everything else that can’t live inside the Fringe.”

“I told you he’ll be fine. You have my word. We have something that will suppress the genes that teach him the dance. He needs an injection every few weeks...”

Every few weeks? I bolt for the corridor but the men are ready for me. Their weight bears me down, scraping my face against the rough stone of the plateau. When they roll me over I see Temera through watery eyes. She is on one knee beside me.

“Please don’t make this harder on either of us than it has to be, she says. “The boy will be safe here. We will provide for him, educate him. Accept that he is beyond your reach now.”

I struggle futilely, I weep, and in the end I ride down the mountain alone.

§

Now, two weeks of travel northward is reflected in every ache of my muscle and bone. The Fringe is a translucent shimmer before me. I know when I ride through I’ll find the air cold and thin, difficult to breathe.

I’ve pushed the limits beyond the Fringe before, but now I’ll find out exactly how long I can push them, both for myself and my mount. I’ll find the Gholi, and maybe they’ll kill me on sight.

But maybe they won’t.

I'll tell them what's coming. I'll tell them of  
the slightest hope that knowledge of the dance still  
survives.

I'll tell them to remember.

## Planisphere Q

## Contributors

**Aimee Ogden** is an American werewolf in the Netherlands. After twenty years in Wisconsin, it was finally time to trade in fried cheese curds for bitterballen and bami goreng. Her debut novella *Sun-Daughters, Sea-Daughters*, a Nebula finalist, arrived from Tor.com in February 2021. *Local Star*, an unrelated novella, also arrived via Interstellar Flight Press in April 2021. Her next book, *Emergent Properties*, is forthcoming from Tor.com in 2023. Aimee is the co-editor of *Translunar Travelers Lounge*, a speculative fiction magazine devoted to fun, optimistic stories. When she's not anchored to her computer, she can be found snuggled up with her two nine-year-old burgeoning readers, biking around town, or begging the Duolingo owl to explain why exactly the word 'om' goes THERE in any given Dutch sentence.

**Robert MacAnthony** is a writer, editor, and lawyer with a lifelong love of science fiction, fantasy, and horror fiction. He lives in California and when he's not working, he can be found along the many beaches of California's central coast or enjoying a glass of red in wine country. His short story "That Ol' Dagon Dark" appeared on the Pseudopod podcast.

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## Editor

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Cyn graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara with a degree in physics. She is a yogi who loves spending time with her family, making art, and is an avid player of table top board games, including role playing games like Dungeons and Dragons. She is a full member of the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) and writes in various genres. Please visit Cynthia's websites at [www.cynbermudez.com](http://www.cynbermudez.com) and [www.thedarkgalaxy.com](http://www.thedarkgalaxy.com) for more information.

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