

The Metamorphosis

By Megan Mikhail

It's midnight in Nirashgi, and the world is beginning to unravel. At the crucial moment the clock tower draws a deep breath into its rounded belly. Pulleys and levers and chimes all tense, wrenched out of a habitual lethargy as the hands align over the face, pulling up straight toward the sky. The sound of the first bell pealing splits the air with a wrenching, tearing sound, and from a league away the ocean is stirred from its slumber. The men and women of the city draw in one more breath, then lay still as dolls in their bedrooms, and dining rooms, and parlors. The silence would be stifling if there was anyone around to hear it.

By the third chime, the air is quivering, sparking with an energy of change. At the fifth the waters groan and swell beyond their shores, extending creeping tendrils up toward the darkest alleys at the city's edge. A ninth peal, and they rise like a blanket to smother the cobblestone streets. By the time the 11th bell rings out, the sea has conquered the city, and the walls of certainty begin to crumble away into dust.

The waters boil green and red and purple along with their daytime grayish blue, and everything the ocean touches is transformed into its opposite. The uniform walls of the business district melt and twist as the buildings gain an assortment of eyes and ears and teeth. The fountain in front of the capitol building chokes, and suddenly a pale yellow light is streaming from its mouth in place of the usual water. The traffic lights flash frantically, faster and faster until they sprout wheels and wings, and the cars in the streets stand up on their tailpipes with the windshields all aflame; industrial



Tim Zeltner

Christmas trees complete with four-wheel drive.

The 12th strike hits the air with a fiery, thundering crash, and the people themselves begin to transform. A boy in his bed stretches like rubber, until his head is as long as

his legs, which double over themselves like taffy where they hit the wall. His mother sprouts a second head from the skin above her ear, and then a third and a fourth, each a slight variation on the form and color of the original. The dog lying asleep downstairs, who has until this moment only dreamed of being ferociously large, is suddenly granted his wish. A tendril of slobber drips from his open mouth, flooding the kitchen as his head lifts the ceiling from its rafters.

New creatures stir with awareness beneath the earth: foreign, ancient things that shed their twin covers of dust and namelessness to breathe in the night air. Most of them are formless—a blob of fleshy head on top of a colorful, checked torso—but a few sprout the weedy arms of insects and prowl away from the fantastic madness of the sea. They venture to those places still cloaked in shadow, off on nameless deeds that signal empty beds in the morning.

In the heart of the city, the central business of the night is under way. Two red-winged raccoons have pulled down the door of a music store nearby, and there are instruments running wild in the streets: woozy, blue-toned saxophones and cobby, sure-footed trumpets. They sing their anthems proudly as they wobble from lamppost to street sign in an attempt to stay upright. Bursts of music surge forth and take on a life of their own—changing from sound to smell to vision with a flickering restlessness while the denizens of Nirashgi waltz and stomp their feet. It's not long before the cobblestones themselves are stirred from their slumber. They rush back and forth underfoot, tossing the people into the air and catching them again with the ease of an expert performer.

For a while it seems that Time himself has abandoned his usual stoic sense of duty, and the night has become truly boundless. But the hours pass, and slowly, almost imperceptibly, the first hint of gray creeps into the horizon.

The festivities take on a note of desperation as the first rays of light puncture the black cloak of sky. Two stout, rainbow-skinned primates dissolve at the glancing touch of a sunbeam. Colors pale, and sounds are muted. The ocean, suddenly diminished in the light of day, pulls a rapid retreat toward its former boundaries. The walls straighten their stance, and the streets sink back into their earthen tombs. Everywhere things collapse back into the earth that formed them, or lose their brazen glamour and fade into normalcy.

It's dawn in Nirashgi, and the world is unraveling once more.



Take Me Away Contest

Judge's Comments

This is a vision of transformation—the nightly transformation of dream, maybe? Starting at midnight, crazy things happen, told in fast, accurate, vivid images, with strong verbs and startling nouns, used with a sure hand and a light touch. The climax, with its red-winged raccoons and cobby, sure-footed trumpets and cobblestones that toss people into the air and catch them again, fades quickly and melts away into daylight. A strong, imaginative use of the very short story, making the limitations of the format into strength.

—Ursula K. Le Guin

Winner

Megan Mikhail, 14, is a ninth grader at the Durham Academy in Chapel Hill, N.C. When she was asked what “Metamorphosis” means to her, Megan said,

“The thing that strikes me most is that no one in the



daytime world of Nirashgi will ever realize that it exists. There's something very eerie about that. It makes me wonder how much of my world I will never truly ‘see’ for what it is.”

Kudos

to our Senior Fiction runner-up:

Andi Malsheski, 14, from Katy, Texas.

Read her story at readandwriting.com on April 13, 2007.

Your Turn

So much can happen between midnight and dawn. Write a very short story inspired by the theme of change or metamorphosis. Begin it with the words “It’s midnight in . . .” and end it with the words “It’s dawn in . . .”

WRITE ABOUT IT.