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The Fountain's Reflection
Christopher J. Levinson

To know what is right and not to do it is the worst kind of cowardice.
— *Confucius*

"We're crazy to be doing this," Michael said as the three friends stood before the wooden fence that separated the uninhabited Wheaton property from the neighbourhood.

The fence was covered by wild grasses and moss. What they could see of the property itself had been similarly overrun in the years since Beverly Wheaton, the last technomage, had died. The house was abandoned. People still feared it, and the memory of the people who had lived there long ago.

"Of course we are." Emily paused from clearing away an area of the fence to look at him, brushing strands of her long hair away from her face. "But that's the idea, isn't it, one last adventure?"

"It doesn't feel right."

"C'mon," James said, "even you must feel it. The rush inside, the excitement."

"I'm just worried it's more than we can handle."

James scoffed. "Sometimes taking risks makes you feel alive."

"Acceptable risks," Emily corrected. "Just think about the *wonders* we might find inside. It'd be fascinating to find more of mage culture. Their works -"

James sighed. "God. She's actually here to *learn*."

She scowled at him before turning back to Michael. Her expression softened. He'd been through a lot and she didn't want to make it any worse. "But we don't have to go," she said softly. "Maybe you're right and this wasn't such a good idea. We don't need some last act to connect our friendship."

"No. I need to do this."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Life changes so quickly. I want to remember this time forever."

Emily nodded slowly, returning to the fence, hands pulling again at the covering. Then Michael was beside her, and James, the three working together to find a way inside.

For many minutes they remained like that and it reminded Emily of the past. As children they had been inseparable and were always exploring their boundaries, from old train-yards to rocky cliffs and caves. Those had been some of the most enjoyable

and carefree times of their lives. Now it was different. Next year Emily and Michael would start university, and James would soon begin a plumbing apprenticeship. They were growing up. They wanted one to share one last experience, something that would remind them of their youth.

For Michael, though, it was particularly important. When he was fourteen his brother had died. Left caring for his single mother, he accepted his responsibilities before he had been ready, and he'd never really had the time to grieve. He had lived the last of his formative years through them and he wanted to cling to those memories as they were all he had left. Emily wanted to remember those brief moments of happiness and love as well, but not if it meant costing him more pain.

Yet for this moment it was as if nothing had changed. They worked together and all the memories flooded back, urging them on to the promise of the unknown lying beyond.

Finally an area of fence was cleared. It had rotted over many years and James pushed it aside easily. They slid through the space one at a time, letting it fall back into place behind them, and stood on the abandoned property.

In many ways it was like moving through to another world. The expanse was dominated by conifers and wild grasses, while the walls of the building were snaked with vines that spread to cover vast areas of the ground.

A cluster of vines reacted to their presence, organic tendrils reaching for them. When they hit at them they retreated in pain. They were like Venus flytraps on a larger and more cunning scale.

Emily's mind clicked over, analysing the scene.

Nothing of the mage-world was natural. Technomages had used technology to give the appearance of magic, but they were actually scientists skilled in observing human behaviour. They saw the effect of magic, moments of wonder, on the human psyche and replicated it.

They spent their entire lives giving children joy.

But the mages had never been trusted. Society treated them as outcasts, loners, and a mage's life was solitary. Beverly Wheaton had used her knowledge to create something of meaning for her, a legacy - this garden that no-one had ever seen.

Emily imagined how this place must have been when Beverly cared for it; hundreds of plants bred with changes on the cellular level that made them more attractive and truly *alive*, flowerbeds awash with colour and emotion, and perhaps technological wonders amidst them too that had made a tiny rainbow stay above the garden forever, and holograms of birds and butterflies so life always teemed here.

"Look at this place," James whispered. "She really was a freak."

"She was brilliant," Michael said. "She had no way of knowing, understanding, the power she held here."

"Isn't that the story of Frankenstein?" James said, shaking his head. "With power

comes responsibility."

"Yes. And they didn't have that."

"I think it's sad," Emily said. "She never saw other's here. That's what she wanted here. She created humanity here, beauty, but never got to show it to another soul."

They paused. Something seemed to move up ahead and caught their attention, accompanied by a faint rustling sound. Emily moved forward slowly, crossing the ground of living vines.

A moment later she saw a form half-blended into the mossy wall opposite. Its body was of leaves and grass, but it was solid. It moved constantly, shifting.

Emily extended a hand. "You can come out. We won't hurt you."

The creature came forward slowly. It had the lower body of a horse and the torso of a man, and its hooves made strange slapping noises on the ground. It was a faun made of worldly materials, but it was *alive*, breathing, incredibly beautiful. Emily had the distinct feeling she had stepped through the wardrobe with Lucy and was now in fact standing in the land of Narnia, looking at Mr. Tumnus.

But this faun could not talk and its leaves rustled in the wind. It came to her, and allowed Emily to run her hand down its side. Curiously its body was warm and felt much more like flesh than she expected. It was real, she kept telling herself, *real*. The faun seemed to glow with pleasure with her touch and tilted its head to her, rubbing against her face. It'd been a long time since it had last seen a human, so very long it might not remember.

James and Michael joined her, but in the same moment more creatures appeared. From the shadows came a unicorn of lighter leaves, pure and beautiful as it moved without sound; a tall elf and an ugly goblin; a tiny fairy whose hair was made of flowers; and finally a phoenix soaring with its great plumage extended, sprinkling beauty from its wings.

"What are they?" asked James.

"Her children," said Emily, still stroking the faun admiringly. "The children of her mind. The mages weren't always reckless. They created great beauty. They made life here too."

"This isn't possible," said James.

"No, but we're seeing it," said Emily. "And I think I know what they were, once. Sculptures. You know how some people trim their hedges into shapes? She made them come alive. Maybe they were the purpose of the vines and other experiments, to find a way to bring her children to life."

"She spent her life alone. These were probably the closest things she had to friends," Michael said.

He offered his hand to the elf. The elf studied him for a moment, making an effort to sniff it, then did the same, thrusting out its hand. Michael took it and taught the elf

to shake. The elf smiled.

Emily patted the faun once more, then watched as the creatures returned to their lives in this place. They seemed to be playing their own game, chasing each other. They really were children, innocent children who did not understand the world around them. But these children would never be able to grow up.

Michael had moved to the centre of the garden where a series of stone statues had caught his interest. It was a planetarium. Each of the sculptures represented an astral body, and they were capable of moving, simulating their orbit of the sun.

A large part of mage culture had been astrology. It sounded strange that two opposites, science and intuition, science and *faith*, could exist alongside each other. But mage ways had been based upon human behaviour that was never logical, and in the end they were stargazers, always looking to their heavens. It was what made their lost society so compelling.

The sun statue had been formed as a water fountain. Water trickled down from the pool at its centre, collecting at the base, and the entire sculpture was made to appear like a man, a demigod, bent over and holding the sun on his shoulders.

Emily and James joined Michael, all three finding themselves inexplicably drawn to the fountain. On some level they sensed great power in it, a power they could feel echoing in their very core.

"I wonder what it reflects," said Michael. "More than your image. The past, the present..."

"Or the person you are," replied Emily. "Or want to be."

"Should we look?" asked James. "It wants us to. I feel it."

Emily nodded slowly and stepped forward first, placing her hands on the edge and tilting her face to the water. The water began to shift, rippling although she hadn't touched it.

Now she saw herself, but it wasn't as if in a reflection: there was movement around her. She was in a different place, a library. People were moving past her. She was reading and she didn't see them, didn't bother to look up from her world of words — lost in all she could ever want for a lifetime of knowledge.

The reflection aged, maturing into a fine woman; but still she never emerged, consumed in her learning. Behind her were older versions of Michael and James, and she didn't know they were there. It seemed they were forever beyond her reach.

A window opened in the image. Again Emily saw herself. Here she was dancing and laughing, going to a movie, taking long walks. Here she *lived*. Lovers brought passion to her life, and in time her husband opened her to much more — to how to love. And throughout were Michael and James, sharing her joys, sorrows. Then that window closed. Emily continued to age, continued to read; continued to be lost. Her friends faded into the background without her noticing; perhaps without her caring.

In this life she had found the knowledge she had always sought, but had lost

everything else of what it meant to be alive.

She saw herself grow old, alone, unfulfilled in so many ways.

Emily backed away, shaken. The fountain had shown her current path in life. It had shown the person she was and warned that it might not be who she wanted to be.

Her whole life had been spent learning because it gave her the power to dream. But she'd never realised how it dominated her experiences, even as it had led her here. The fountain had shown her that now and perhaps it still wasn't too late to turn away.

They each took a turn looking into the fountain. James went next and for him, the future was different. He saw himself gaining experience through his apprenticeship before starting his own company years later. He became successful and lived a comfortable life, and after twenty years hosted a webnet program on DIY plumbing, becoming a minor celebrity. The fountain showed his desires, and his greed, in all he wanted; the fountain reflected them in his success.

Then Michael approached. The reflection here, in this instance, showed Michael's heart. It revealed to him the life that might have been had his brother lived. Instead of the crash he saw Ben grow into the person he had never had the chance to be, into a good-looking young man, good at sport, his smile reflected in his eyes. Ben became interested in music and formed a band when he was fourteen with friends. They played in pubs and RSLs, but it was always about the music. Michael was there to see all of them. They were close and Ben was Michael's best man at his wedding, a friend and uncle to his children. Ben had two children of his own, two boys and a girl. Michael saw himself twenty years older, playing with them, catching them in the air as Ben and his wife Penny watched, smiling.

Before the image had finished Michael had broken the contact and dropped to the ground, sobbing. It wasn't just one life lost for him anymore, but an entire future, a family.

Emily knelt to him, listening. "It was so real, so *goddamned* real. Why?"

James was drawn back to the fountain, unable to move away. "I have to see it again," he murmured. "It's my life, *mine*."

Emily swallowed, looking at Michael as his hurt bled from a dream of a false life. There was a dark power to this fountain, and for the first time it scared her.

Its purpose was to reflect what a person saw inside themselves. For Emily it had awoken her to her obsession. With James it showed the arrogance and greed within him, and now he needed to relive the feeling — for him it was *as* addictive as any drug. And for Michael it showed only the pain and the sense of loss he had never reconciled.

This fountain of the mages held the power to destroy lives just as surely as it could liberate them.

She left Michael and picked up a brick where it had fallen from the Wheaton house. She began beating the fountain, smashing it as she tried to stop the flow of water.

James stared at her. "What're you doing? Stop. For God's sakes, *stop*."

"Can't you see what it's doing to you?"

"What? I've never felt more alive."

"It's enough to destroy a life. One life too many."

"I don't understand."

She paused, anger filling her voice. "Look at him, James, *look at him*. That's what this thing can do. It's enough to drive a person insane."

He looked at Michael for the first time. "Oh god. I didn't know," he said. Then, more quietly: "How couldn't I have known?"

Emily started again with her brick and James began to help her. When she was satisfied, together they strained to push the fountain over, using all of their weight as leverage until finally it toppled. With a resounding crack it hit the ground and split down the centre, water running away.

"If this is what we found out here," she said, surveying the remains, "I'd hate to think what might be inside."

She turned to see Michael gathering himself beside them, slightly hunched over. He looked around, shaking his head sadly. "Let's go."

Emily nodded and they moved back the way they came. "At least the memory of those creatures will stay with us," she said.

"Some things can be too beautiful," Michael said quietly. "Some beauty is only a mask for what lies beneath it."

He slipped under the fence and they followed.

They had come here for an adventure, Emily knew, and though they had not found all they'd hoped, they had bonded and learnt something about themselves. She herself knew now the importance of all she had to lose. And perhaps Michael could face his grief at last.

In some ways, already, it felt as if they were part of a larger world.

They moved away. Somewhere behind them the creatures of grass lowed, sad to be alone once more.

About the Author

Christopher J. Levinson is nineteen and has been writing for three years. His novella *Too Much of Heaven* resulted in his being named one of sciencefiction.com's first featured young writers (Spring 2001). With positive feedback from many including Greg Bear, people like Mike Moorcock, Zoran Zivkovik and Luis Rodrigues say he's "got what it takes". He lives in Sydney.