

# Featured Poet: David Bowles

## Silentium Universi

### *Jo*

Seven billion years ago  
the Eldest vanished,  
withdrawing from space and time.

Eons later, proud Keepers,  
galaxy harnessed,  
probed hyperspace, found others.

### *Ha*

Struggles ensued till Eldest  
shared tragic, lone survival.

Awestruck Keepers, reverent,  
built vast passageways  
to navigate hyperspace.

Contact with ancients constrained,  
Keepers spread through the cosmos.

Steering sentience from death,  
they elevated  
species to optimal life.

Millions of galaxies saved,  
the Keepers joined the Eldest.

Elevated races spread,  
furthering their hallowed work.

Builders reached the Milky Way,  
but their tunnels woke  
some primordial, twisted thing.

Whether Eldest gone insane  
or wicked Keeper, it raged,

shattering gateways and ships,  
slaughtering trillions,  
shrugging off every attack.

Stirred, powerful Keepers  
sealed the mad fiend inside.

### *Kyū*

Interdicted galaxy,  
sentience sprawling  
toward species-wide suicide.

Not a whisper to be heard,  
humans stand alone,  
at the mercy of the beast.

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## the shiver of startling and dreadful things

broad the cosmos, and dark, with matter  
and light flung about frenetic, tethered  
to time and space, shimmering through  
multiple dimensions, whirling and evolving  
and coming undone to adhere once more.

yet nowhere are there monsters: evil and  
anxiety and despair do not inhere in any  
corner of all this vastness of universe:  
until consciousness arises to reflect the world:  
sentient minds that snarl into crazed mimics  
of the natural: people that cobble together  
wrathful gods and demons and eldritch hells  
out of inexplicable nightmares: fiends that  
claw their way out of our brains to populate  
the virtual sphere in which we learn to live.

so madness is born and spreads its bleak  
and gnarled fingers through the hollow  
interstices of the real: who knows how  
many millions of stars have been snuffed  
by dungeoned consciousnesses that prise  
at the lid of forever, driven to self-loathing  
by the shiver of startling and dreadful things?

## Bundle

We stood together,  
looking down at the bundle of cloth  
we had found in the strange chamber  
at the heart of the hidden pyramid.  
“No mummies here,” our professor joked,  
prodding the artifact  
with an arrogant finger.  
“Aztec nobles burned their dead,  
bundled up the ashes  
and fragments of bones.”

There was nervous laughter—  
graduate students quoted Hammer films  
or mimed Karloff,  
lunging and lumbering.  
Tension dispelled, we moved  
to begin our respective research tasks.

But then the bundle twitched,  
ashes billowing in a nauseous cloud,  
and slipping from its jade pedestal,  
it began  
to drag  
itself  
along.

“Oh, shit!” the professor screamed.  
“From Book Five of the *Florentine Codex!*  
The *tlacanexquimilli*, Bag of Burnt Bones—  
Run for your goddamned lives!”

And we did. We ran.  
But I remembered as our steps echoed—  
flight brought bad luck,  
illness, death.  
Courage, though...  
My heart fluttering  
like some mythic hummingbird,  
I returned to the chamber,  
bent to seize the bag in my trembling hands,  
pressing it to my chest  
though it squirmed  
and moaned.

“Who—who are you?”  
I stuttered in broken Nahuatl.  
“You must speak,  
Or I shall not let you go!”

The voice creaked and groaned.  
“Release me.  
I shall give you your heart’s desire.  
I shall give you the spine of a maguay.”

Trembling, I shook my head.  
“No. You know what I want.”  
The voice was weaker, fainter.  
“Two spines, then. Three.”

“Give me what I want or be damned!”  
The bundle went slack in my grip.  
“Very well,” came the rough whisper.  
“Your master’s knowledge,  
his position,  
his acclaim—  
all yours.”

As I placed the bag  
back on its pedestal of jade,  
I grinned, already imagining myself  
behind the podium  
before the adoring, fearful mass  
of students.



*Quetzalcoatl Mural, Acapulco*  
Diego Rivera

*A Mexican-American author from deep South Texas, David Bowles is an assistant professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Recipient of awards from the American Library Association, Texas Institute of Letters, and Texas Associated Press, he has written a dozen or so books, including Flower, Song, Dance: Aztec and Mayan Poetry (2014 Soeurette Diehl Fraser Award for Best Translation), the Pura Belpré Honor Book*

*The Smoking Mirror, and the forthcoming Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky: Mexican Myths. His work has also appeared in multiple anthologies and venues such as Journal of Children’s Literature, Rattle, Strange Horizons, Apex Magazine, Nightmare, Asymptote, Translation Review, Metamorphoses, Huizache, BorderSenses, and Concho River Review.*

