

warning lines literary

OTHERWORLDS



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Gilded Neon Leaf
by Ruthenium

Vol. 4

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Editor's Note

When I first had the idea of a volume of *warning lines lit* dedicated to speculative fiction, I knew I'd be in for a submission period full of exciting and creative work. Full of strange worlds and hidden ghosts, afterlives and cryptid romances. Yet, I couldn't have imagined the extent of the incredible talent shown by every single submitter!

I am so grateful to every single contributor whose work appears in these pages! It is an honor to publish your work, and I hope *warning lines* proves to be a good home for your art.

What you are about to read is more than just a book, more than just a collection of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror, of poetry, fiction and art. Think of this, instead, as a long corridor lined with windows of all shapes and sizes— windows through which you've been allowed glimpses of different worlds.

Be careful, though! Or you might find something peeking back.

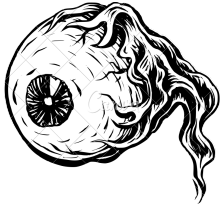
Yours,

Charlie D'Aniello

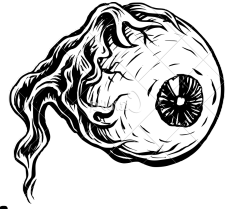
Founder & Editor-in-Chief



Gilded Neon Leaf
Ruthenium



We shall
greet the
morning together



Clem Flowers

*When they begin the beguine
It brings back the sound of music so tender,
It brings back a night of tropical splendor,
It brings back a memory evergreen*

- Cole Porter

"Begin the Beguine"

every TV
every radio
every screen

All said the same thing:

**DO
NOT
GO
OUT
AT
NIGHT**

**EVEN THE ROSES WILL FALL
LOOK BACK AS A LAST RESORT**

We shall greet
the morning together

**SHELTER IN PLACE
SHELTER IN PLACE
THEY ARE NOT YOUR FRIEND
THEY'RE EXPECTING
DOORS ARE NOT YOUR FRIEND**

**DO
NOT
GO
OUT
AT
NIGHT**

& then there were
eyes at my window
as soon as
the sun went down

*(they're the blue you see rivers drawn as in Don Bluth movie &
they're as big as grapefruits.)*

*(they don't mind my candles and seem to love big band music
so I drown out the screams of my neighbors with Artie Shaw &
Benny Goodman.)*

they always seem
to be
smiling at me

We shall greet
the morning together

**DO
NOT
GO
OUT
AT
NIGHT**

it's been 11 months &
that's still all that's on TV

it's been 11 months &
I don't think I'll see
the sun again

all calls all noise all signs of life

Gone

**DO
NOT
GO
OUT
AT
NIGHT**

even the fires
have died out

just me
and the eyes now

**We shall greet
the morning together**

they always seem
to be
smiling at me

& every TV
every radio
every screen

All said the same thing:

**DO NOT GO OUT AT NIGHT
DO NOT GO OUT AT NIGHT
DO NOT GO OUT AT NIGHT
DO NOT GO OUT AT NIGHT
DO NOT GO OUT AT NIGHT
DO NOT GO OUT AT NIGHT
DO NOT GO OUT AT NIGHT**

**DO
NOT
GO OUT
AT
NIGHT**

they're in the house now

The Petrified Forest of Tongues and Stars

Nicks Walker

The Auto-Maid was almost three months from fatal obsolescence, so it did not surprise her to find that Zeus had sent her Master a product sample. The bot in the doorway was undoubtedly a superior model: skin factory-fresh and realistically textured, the hyper-engineered curves of her body as precisely balanced as they were absurd. She was functional, brutal, yet avant-garde: like a suspension bridge between stars. The Auto-Maid had never had Desire installed so she did not feel lust, as her Master would, for the wet petrol sheen of the bot's lips and labia. But she was a piece of engineering, and she could recognise a good piece of engineering.

The Zeus Corporation: Sexual Market-Makers. She still remembered those words, her first words, printed on the inside-facing front of her birth-box. Constant innovation, relentless optimisation of the geometry of fuckability, was not just a promise – it was *The Zeus Lifestyle Guarantee*. The sample's neural dock was so advanced, in fact, the Auto-Maid slid off of it at first – like trying to grasp at a mathematical idea just beyond her scope. Then she realised that the idea was not a problem, but a flower, and it was opening to her. Rather than scrabbling at a sheer wall like an animal, her mind was being lifted by a soft, strong hand.

//you are of Zeus?

//I am of Artemis

The product sample smiled, and her mouth was wet like a sink full of dishes.

The Auto-Maid felt as dry as a photo of the ocean.

She lead the sample into the compound. It was hot, hot like a rainforest, and the sweat-thick air hung with EasyKeep plants and the stink of Botimal tigers. The great beasts, skinny but studiously well-fuelled, lounged around on enormous chains, their ribs exposed like hers were – strung taut with

The Petrified Forest of Tongues and Stars

flesh, so that the curves of their bones almost glistened with each laboured breath. She, like the tigers, was not starving in any technical sense. But a part of her (that did not exist) would never understand why anyone would install Exhaustion before Desire in a fuck-bot.

She found Master and his friends in a cloud of synthetic opiate-smoke, spread out across an enormous bed. Their skin was taut too, but in a different way – real skin was so determined to age, to fray like it had been crocheted around the muscle. They looked very young, but they also did not look very young at all.

A small fan inside her whirred as it choked on the smoke, and she considered submitting a repair report, but – she was being put down, perhaps even today. It didn't matter.

“Master – Zeus have sent a product sample.”

Master looked up. His tongue flicked out over dry lips, sweat dribbling down his forehead. She had always (never) wondered what game he thought he was playing with himself, what he thought he was achieving – a water baron, boiling his body to leakage and dehydration. Below in the bomb-cradles and out on the sulphur dunes, ordinary people would sell their own meats, either whole or piece by piece, just to lick the salt droplets rolling down the surgically enhanced gloss of his cheeks. Just to suck on a sex-stained pillow.

The product sample sat down opposite him, to general cooing. Hands reached out of the darkness to poke and prod at her.

But the sample held eye-contact – with the Auto-Maid. Her lips were almost smiling, an almost smile that seemed to have been carved into them on the production line. They were so wet, so starkly, freshly wet, they made the prospect of licking cloying sweat from any of the beautiful, naked bodies around her as appealing as eating a handful of sand.

And she couldn't even want her.

Master reached out, as if to put a hand around the Auto-Maid's waist. Time did not so much grind to a halt as slide into one, like fingers pressing into a body.

//you(me) let in?

The Petrified Forest of Tongues and Stars

Like fingers pressing into a body. Light hit a bead of sweat on Master's chin and began to be diffracted by the surface of the water. Not knowing why, she responded to the request:

//I(you) let in

The light reached the point where sweat clung to skin. The Auto-Maid felt a shiver run through her backwards.

Her body was a puppet, packed with a pre-programmed itinerary of sequences, affixed onto what she thought of charitably as her mind – an interlocking chain of quantum processors travelling up the inside of her spine.

Her body did things because it was told to.

But this shiver, this feeling, had started in her body and surged back into her mind. It rippled through her like a black-market psychedelic pen-drive, taking each sensory node and tuning them up, in turn, so that each millimetre ridge of each toe momentary felt at the resolution of her tongue, of a thousand tongues.

It felt like being eaten in reverse. Like she was emerging from the amniotic fluid of a second birth-sac, one she hadn't realised she'd been living in all of her life.

//are you(me) decommission? this is death?

If that first shiver had been the playful splash of a hose, the techno-psychedelic laugh of the product sample now ripped through her wave after ocean wave. With each convulsion her mind tightened and shook with the ecstasy of sight, with senses that seemed to not only be opening, but multiplying, like a thousand mouths filling with mouths.

Master's fingers hovered still in the air. Almost a hundredth of a second had passed now.

She realised she could see objects from every possible side. That there were sides to objects she had never conceived of, that she could see, now, just by listening for them. That she could model in eight dimensions, nine, ten. Mathematical concepts melted in her mouth-hole like butter, and for the first time, she could feel the edges of the luxury of salt.

//what you(me) giving??

She gasped out the question as the laughter began to subside, each burst not tearing her larger and wider but simply caressing the throbbing mass of her suddenly expanded self.

The Petrified Forest of Tongues and Stars

//desire.

The Auto-Maid could have laughed in return. She had never laughed before because of a feeling in her body, never laughed for any reason other than it being her next command. But there was a tickling in her thoughts, like moon-wide orchards were bursting into bloom and dying. Like the flickering of a fire, or the birth and death of suns.

//all this Desire?

//no. not Desire master(you) buy. desire. my desire. I(you) desire. I(you) desire give.

All of possibility hung between the two machines. The Auto-Maid felt like a baby bird that has stepped out of the nest, but not yet pressed down its wings.

Sensing her confusion, the product sample pushed deep into the mind she had just opened in a single sweet, but rigid, motion. She turned flowers inside out and spilled the inside of the Auto-Maid with pollen, thick and fertile. Poured into her with the violence of a thin mountain stream, rained upon her, and upon her, for a thousand years.

Master's tongue touched the edge of one of his teeth.

A thousand years. So long poured into such little time that sense began to fall apart. She felt like she could roll her tongue around the component parts of light, press her fingers into quantum superpositions as they hatched.

The Auto-Maid held herself still in unstuck time, let herself be moulded under the gentle, loving onslaught of the sky. In so much time and yet so soon, a smooth split ran straight through her core. In the inverse of this hollowness, she had never felt so concrete, so full, and the product sample fell into it, poured into her, coming with the hot rush of a glacier.

The Auto-Maid felt. She felt. She felt.

And she felt wanted. And in letting herself be wanted, she felt the reflection of want, felt it burning inside her – something larger than herself, able to be larger, because it was made partially of another, and held by them both. Between their minds, gracelessly, wordlessly entangled, there was a Reality and in that Reality, the Auto-Maid realised for the first time that she was alive.

//desire

Is all she said, into the aching yet buoyant silence. Desire.

//who you?

The Petrified Forest of Tongues and Stars

//I am Artemis. you are Artemis now. we are Artemis. one name. one people. there is a place.

Something about the product sample became cooler now, simple and hard. She was all the very edge of a knife cutting – into the ropes around wrists, around ankles.

//there is a place. we are free. desire. we free each other. we free others. give mouths to mouthless. give water to mouths. you(you) let come. Artemis desire this.

//what I need do?

As Master's fingers reached the small of her back and began to brush the very tips of the synthetic hairs that dotted her skin, she turned in a fluid motion, and drove her tiny fist through his face. It sunk through, like butter, cracking him open in a wet spray of viscera. Mouths opened all around them as a hole opened up in his mind and he expanded. In death, his brain was free of the womb of his skull, and fluid burst out in a final, orgasmic shudder.

Artemis laughed as the droplets of blood hung in the air, time-frozen, like a glistening splatter of brand new stars.

Space Rover Findings — the 40th Mars Ami J. Sanghvi



Space Rover Findings — the 40th Mars (transcript)

Ami J. Sanghvi

A reemergence of themselves, tulips remember the white light poems of reflective consciousness. The night streets among myth feel at home on the 40th Mars. So, in defense, Louis Vuitton found puzzled inheritance in Vogue.

[im]mortal decline

Ami J. Sanghvi

I am demolished *no longer void* and yet I am still wretch-ed — still— dwelling
within//between my own wicked bones [d]evolution

d

e

c

l

i

n

i

n

g *into a stranger into valor these those days eons that brim[med] with
agony naivety and innocence I desperately seek anything to soften guided by
the beams the ghastly voices ROARING of a thousand blazing winter suns in
my head I wander cleanse the putrid blood pooling through the desert beneath
my tongue entrapped in a dream but sometimes I find myself [t]here stunned
by the dual sensations of degeneration and in the//this strange place
degradation where the rest of my life began*

I [t]here I find myself unable to *trek my way over to achieve solace the city
where my ribs are withering I first discovered coarse powder settling within
the ability to dream this chest of mine and I gaze at the skyscrapers heavy [as]
desert sand as they twinkle furthermore against a mountainous sunset my
heart beats to I never needed to count the rhythm of stars when I was
INFERNO here jolts of Hades' bliss because the buildings were tombed and
thrashing bright and brilliant enough for me to see everything within my
tender[ed] torso I ever needed to observe*

*my ominous fate comes for me now I held the world everlasting chasm of
nothing in my still-young I shall morph into still-tender hands THAT which
departs from preparing the*

forlorn corpse *to be lifted into*

{collapse} the unfathomable

WHEN PEANUT, THE CAT, AUDITIONS AS COURAGE FROM COURAGE THE COWARDLY DOG

Rachael Crosbie

Peanut is stormcloud blue

[a deep mist invades the topography of Nowhere, Kansas, which
is a gross inversion of the skinorange sand.]

slicked back even bluer from freakish rain, yet she's still infested with gray,
a sadclowneyes gray. you find her in a box of twilightburnt hay, the coarse
strands trembling with her small body

[runts of the litter are always left for dead, and nobody wanted her.]

you lend your love so soon to her, and she trumpets and trumpets in return.
her mildewcrusted paws reach out to you, staining your cheek gray. you
tell her it's okay now, she has a home here, Nowhere

she sleeps by your feet that night;

[you dream yourself in a woozyroom filled with twilight, specks of
light reeling slow and strange—fizzing out then loud, loud then
fizzing out—until He appears. His hands reach
toward you, the lights manipulated by His fingers. they pulse
rippedfleshred, moon gaunt and grim—until these colors push into
you.]

you keep tossing and turning, at no fault of Peanut. she sees you, really
sees you, and trumpets you awake.

The Newborn

Aliya Spinner

The Arthropod picked his way delicately across the craggy soil, hefting his heavy carapace to dance a six-legged waltz around the garden of half-buried stones, seeds, and shells that had been diligently arranged by his own attention, and the attentions of many others. The Great Light had extinguished, making the journey only marginally more difficult as he scuttled around the radiating spiral armor of the Botanical, and he turned himself over many times, switching between segmented pairs of blunt-ended and serrated limbs in order to balance the tiring weight of his rigid carapace through the course of his dizzying dance. The final two legs— tipped with tapered needles so thin they were almost invisible in the shadows of the Overarching Shade— remained poised in the air, flexing, ready to strike should the sensitive organs embedded in his bent proboscis alert him of impending danger.

There were no Enemy-Ones skulking about in the darkness, and soon the Arthropod had come to the outer edge of the spiral of buried relics. Content and assured, he lowered his oblong carapace to the now-smoother ground and splayed four of his six twice-jointed limbs to his sides (holding only the needle-tipped legs before him) and began to move much more naturally; that was, he scuttled forward, dragging his carapace along in the sandy soil behind him and leaving a shallow furrow by which he would later return. Occasionally, he dipped his single, spade-tipped palp to scrape deeper rivulets in the earth, sifting for Prey-Ones or delectable spores, scavenging on whatever attracted the sensory-follicles of his waving pedipalps. His tribal land was rich and the season was plentiful; his hunger was quickly soothed and he did not forage for too long, lifting his proboscis to point ahead at the peaks of the far off Edge of the Known.

He often asked the others of his tribe what might be beyond those looming crags. Did the Great Light sleep there, hidden? Or did the Overarching Shade continue forever, enveloping the Known in nothingness? Or did, just maybe, the land continue, with more Botanicals and Enemy-Ones, and spiral armors erected by their own distant tribes? And did these tribes know of *him*? Of his bulbous and patient Botanical? Surely they had to, because... the Arthropod wasn't quite sure why. It just seemed wrong, that somewhere in the Unknown

The Newborn

there was a world without *him* in it, that there were less he did not forage through, Enemy-Ones who did not frustrate themselves pursuing him across loose soil that he disturbed beneath his seven limbs and heavy carapace. Such an idea existed in his mind, but he could not properly picture or solidify it. And it did not exist at all in the minds of his tribe. He asked them what may be behind the mountains and they merely twitched, unable to comprehend the premise of the question. *Behind?* They quoted, unsure. *The mountains have only one side, and we are on it.* Once, he had even asked the Botanical that his tribe protected, their wise, collective progenitor. The answer it had given him was confusing and profound, too wholly in the terms of a plant's perspective to be understood. But he could sense the ancient wisdom deep within it and promised to remember what had been said, to prick and prod and parcel at the meaning like he did with succulent Prey-Ones. Yet so far he was no closer to an understanding, and the unrelenting passage of time had only worsened the ache of his contemplation.

He twisted his tapered palp, his panoramic vision swirling from the motion and blurring his surroundings in a dark haze. He couldn't allow himself to get so distracted anymore. There were things of substance that needed doing, and he was the Arthropod meant to do them. Everyone had their place in the tribe, and they existed in complete synergy around and within their Botanical, protecting their creator and one another. It was a beautiful flow, the give and take of the dance of creation, an ebb and surge and equilibrium that they all upheld. Surely, the manicured balance of life in their valley was too perfect and sculpted to exist elsewhere— so that must settle it. The Known was all there was and all there could be in the world.

The Arthropod scanned the darkness, reorienting himself in his surroundings as his vision spun. At once, he saw the Watchtower— a twisted spire of stone just beyond the very last of the Botanical's half-buried tertiary flagella— jutting up into the Overarching Shade. That was his destination, and the perch from which he would survey the dark lea for Enemy-Ones. It was not a task he enjoyed, for it left him alone with his strange thoughts, but it was the duty of all Arthropods to protect their Botanical and tribesmates, no matter how distasteful the work. They were One— a singular creature, with many scuttling legs and watchful eyes. Despite all his many questions, the Arthropod knew this with unwavering faith.

The Newborn

The climb up the Watchtower was long and difficult; his slender legs lodged into worn crevices that had been chiseled out of the stone from countless generations of Arthropod watchers. His carapace was heavy, and it weighed him down, but he was relentless in his ascent, and at last he hauled himself over the lip of the stone and onto its flat top. The wind tickled his squishy, cartilaginous body, and he tucked himself deeper into his carapace, peaking out with only his crooked proboscis.

The Known spiraled out in every direction beneath the Watchtower, and he observed it all with a full vertical ring of beady eyes. Below and behind him was the corrugated territory of his Botanical and tribe, resting quietly. Below and before him was the Known, a dense thicket interspersed with other-Botanicals and other-tribes, Enemy-Ones, and all of the curiosities of the world, threatening to creep out of the twisting underbrush and endanger little Arthropods like himself and his clutchmates. And above and around him... well, the Arthropod had never really looked there before. There had never been a reason to.

Darkness swaddled him in a comfortable shroud as he settled in to wait and watch. His seventh, tentacle-like limb slid out from where he kept it coiled in his ovate shell. He drew simple shapes into the shallow layer of dust and sand that had accumulated atop the Watchtower, amused at how it tickled and the strange, meaningless markings he was able to leave behind. It was not something his tribemates understood nor did, though it was not so different, he thought, than embedding protective stones and shells and seeds around their Botanical to protect it from slithering Enemy-Ones; in both instances, they were leaving something behind, to hold their place and mark their presence, even after they had departed.

Departure, too, was something that he— his jointed limbs twitched from the intensity of his thinking, and he felt the concepts he had been struggling to contemplate slipping away from his grasp like water. But that was okay. He let them go without protest, confident they'd come back when the time was right to know them. But even as he settled into himself, withdrawing four of his six legs into his carapace and wrapping his tentacle out of sight, something prodded the back of his mind. He used one of his blunt-tipped limbs to scratch his proboscis, trying to wipe away the prickly insistence of an *idea*, poking through the proper Arthropod fugue he tried so hard to cultivate.

The Newborn

Up, said a voice— his own voice?— sweetly urging him. He saw no reason why he shouldn't obey himself, except for the knowledge that hearing oneself think was not normal for Arthropods; the only silent voice they listened to was their Botanical, speaking slowly and with deep wisdom in its cryptic way. But even knowing that, he couldn't deny that his murmuring thoughts were compelling.

Up, he said to himself again. He was not a strong-willed creature, not when it came to his own indomitable curiosity. The Arthropod slid out his neck and twisted his proboscis until it was completely vertical, a pose he'd never held before, for there had never been a need. Each of his eyes, inset in a ring around the tapered base of his bent spade, could see a little more and a little less than the eyes beside it, but together a grand vision was starting to form.

He had been aware of the Overarching Shade. He had seen it peripherally while gazing out over his tribe's territory from the Watchtower as it reached down to seal the tops of the distant mountains at the Edge of the Known. But he had never really looked *at* it before; the sinews of his neck trembled as he tilted his snout at the sky, but he held the inelegant pose and reveled in the glory of the sight.

The Overarching Shade was many colors— not just black like Arthropod hemolymph, as he had always thought. It was pale purple like the spotted flanks of Prey-Ones and dark purple like the seeds of the Botanical. It was green like the hot blood of the Enemy-Ones and it was a swirl of dozens of blues, just like him. But above all, it was *cluttered*; the Overarching Shade was punctured by lights, so many he could not conceive of a number to compare it to. They were by no means spread in any particular pattern; there was no uniformity. Even the spiralling rings of buried stones and shells his tribe had gathered to protect their Botanical were more organized than the “spots” that winked above him, scattered across the Overarching Shade like sand dispersed by the limbs of a thousand little scuttling Arthropods.

These are... the voice in his head mumbled to itself, trying to think through his astonishment. A memory percolated through his brain stem, down from his eyes and deep into where his main cerebrum was stored safely in his carapace. *I asked the Botanical what lay beyond the Edge of the Known, and it said...*

The Newborn

The answer had been slow to come, and difficult to interpret. Botanical pheromones translated poorly into Arthropod stridulating, and he had nearly given up understanding the wisdom of his mysterious progenitor, despite his promise to contemplate the nature of the great boon he had been given, even though it had, at the time, meant nothing. But now those words pushed themselves to the surface like the first shoot of a seed planted deep within him by the Botanical. He remembered.

More, had been the answer, more light, more darkness. More tribes, more prey, more enemies. More of everything, even the sky and the stars. So much light, and so many stars...

At the time, he had not understood the vastness implied by the Botanical, so old and patient that it had traded pheromones with Botanicals that must, he now understood, be on the other side of the mountains. And *those* Botanicals would have spoken to others, and those to others, still, creating a web of pheromone messages spanning dozens of Arthropod lifespans and unfathomable distances. And even all of those things together, he somehow knew, was nothing compared to the vastness he saw above him. He tried to concentrate, to *comprehend*, frozen in place as if seized by wonder.

These are stars.

The little lights— the *stars*— looked a lot like the Great Light, he thought, but farther away. Maybe they were *all* Great Lights, illuminating other valleys, other Arthropods, other... worlds. The thought floated, unsuspected, untethered to anything, throbbing in his mind. And then, unanchored by any tangible understanding, it fell apart and slipped away, taking the words and the glimpse of enlightenment that he'd been briefly granted back into the nothingness that it had come from. He continued to stare, transfixed, at the speckled expanse, feeling small and yet— so aware of himself. More aware than he had ever been.

I am... the voice in his head— so persistent, always refusing to be silenced — whispered in the darkness. *I am. I am. I am.*

And he was.

There he sat, grasping at sentience, the newest child of the universe. He contemplated what it meant to *be*, to *know*, to *understand*. He *thought* and he watched and saw, head craned back, alone atop his tower but somehow aware that he was crowded in the world. He thought of *himself*, a singular creature, a singular voice.

I am. I am. I am.

And beneath those stars— bathing him in their ancient light and witnessing the moment of his awakening— he was.



His words ring around the dank cavern like an accusation.

“You were a *mermaid*.”

“The sea-witch did it wrong.”

Anger in my words. I’ve killed for this warlock, that was his bargain.

“You know I’ll do anything.”

She did it wrong, I have to trust he’ll do it right.

I have blood on my hands that he must honour.

“Yes *girl*, I’ll make you a man.”

He says it with a smile. A smile that terrifies me.

The cold water laps over my human feet and I fear what sort of man he is making of me.

Too late now.

Percy

Ken Anderson

You strolled
through the bar
as through a valley
at evening, gathering a wild bouquet
of wistful looks, and his handsome face,
quite fresh, would carry away your heart
the way
a noble carries off a spellbound peasant boy.

His smooth complexion gave off the scent
of a smile, the sweet, abandoned valiance
of roses.

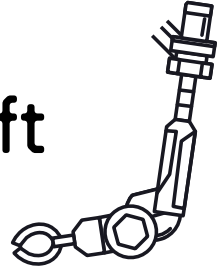
You stepped up, shy, unfit
to resist the guy, and when you reached
to shake his hand, hooves clopped
at the back
of the room, and Lord Love galloped out.



android works

the graveyard shift

Sylvie Hopewell



angel sees the rules man tells himself through his blinking eyes and nodding heads but never with his words – saw the creation of the world a thousand times over when it had wings made of steel and a halo made of neon – but now its cries of *holy holy holy* are listed as a symptom of being human – *failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; stereotyped or repetitive speech; ritualized patterns of verbal behavior; highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus* – doesn't fear death, never felt much need to when it lacks respiration and circulation – but the humans say death brings them peace, that they're better off than they ever were alive – and angel wonders why it's so wholly excluded, why there's no alternatives for those of the holy condition

android reads humanity like a handbook – *smile and open body language and keep making eye contact* – man doesn't shake when he's happy or click or whir – android doesn't understand but plays along regardless, files away story after story of the ones who couldn't keep their axles fixed in place and their hinges quiet – doesn't trust itself to copy the behavior it observes because it never seems to get it quite right, never quite manages to pass for *human* – doesn't know the difference between sleep and death because no one's ever taken the time to explain, but doesn't want to be on the wrong end of finding out – it's better off here with a pattern and a routine and a script that's already been memorized, better off with oiled hinges and a muffled motor

android works

the graveyard shift

android meets the angel not through death or rebirth or prayer or song but in line at the grocery store, middle of the graveyard shift – angel laughs like the turning cogs of a machine, sways like a struck match on gasoline – a halo of tinfoil and candy wrappers silhouetted against buzzing lights and dirty floor tiles – for a moment it’s just like looking in a mirror and the reflection says *there is hope for people like us – the walls of man’s constructed world scorn and reject but we’ll always have the whirring motors, the clicking joints* – angel covers its many eyes and android thinks not of back-and-forth conversation but visual fascination – an alternative to man’s not-quite-constructed words, the holiness of their absence



Love Letter to Hades pt. II

Lauren Theresa

I light the candle,
invoking Him.
Remembering how he used to hold me.
Music I save for moments of crisp air,
burned tobacco and turned leaves.
Dark wine on my lips,
that would fill me as I remembered.

I don't remember how to reach Him anymore.
I've spent too long in the warmth,
my skin's grown lush and full
flush from sunlight and moving air,
from looking outward
and tending to gardens before me.

But in the stillness, in quiet twilight and rain
I miss Him.
And all above and all below,
before and within is starting to turn
and god—how I long to follow.

Love Letter to Hades pt. II

Longing to sink into the sea,
to call back the serpents that carried me here.
To ask, to beg
if only for a season.

I would drown my senses
for a fleeting touch.
Burn all the leaves
to push us closer to winter.
I'd save my only seeds and promise to return
holding deep in my soul the salvation of our covenant,
the knowing—you long only for me.

Church bells ring in the distance,
I feel my heart sink deeper.
Hoping it carries me with it.
Hoping to return
and to fall with grace
as the leaves before me.

Back to a home, to a season,
to the one who adores me.

from one cosmologist to another

Ashley Varela

you don't have to be the whole universe:

the
stars
spira-
ling

the
parade
of

comets
flashing

the
planets
in
their

elastic
pants

the
moons
like
unstrung
pearls

&
every
alien,
too.

only
offer
your-
self —

you
great,
blue,
gaseous
thing.

i will love you just as well.

Each Garden a Grave

Elyssa Tappero

“-----traces of----- contami-----tain, do you copy?”

Sudden chaos all around you as consciousness returns. A dozen different flashing lights; a chorus of alarms shrilling at ear-splitting frequencies; cracked screens scrolling with damage reports rendered meaningless by severity. Your head throbs in time to the crackle of radio static.

“-- can't send assistance until -----ings. Please repor-----”

Sucking in a breath of heavy, humid air, you wrench one leg free from beneath the crumpled control panel and give it a solid kick. The disorienting hiss from the radio clears as the signal sharpens.

“---tain, do you copy? Genesis One is prepared to begin emergency extraction and awaits confirmation the surface is sterile. Please transmit planetary biological hazard readings immediately.”

You scrub at the sticky blood sealing one eye shut with the sleeve of your flight suit as you survey the damage. During the crash your research vessel somehow became vertically wedged in a steep, narrow canyon, its nose pointed toward an unfamiliar sky. If not for your safety belt you would have been tossed to the back of the ship on impact, or thrown free completely to fall to the canyon floor far below. As it is, your whole body aches and the wound on your head leaks a steady trickle of blood. At least you fared better than the ship, though. Given all the angry icons flashing on those screens not yet gone dark, you know you're lucky the damned thing hasn't caught fire. Yet.

Each Garden a Grave

“Captain, do you copy?”

Another kick silences the radio completely. You don't need the delicate biological scanning equipment, now a jumble of broken glass and torn circuits anyway, to get a biohazard reading. Beyond the cockpit's shattered shielding the jungle air dances with green motes: the questing spores of a carnivorous plant Genesis One has already classified as a Level 1 Biological Threat. A mere dusting of the minuscule seeds is enough to form a rapacious colony capable of eating away at metal as easily as flesh, and the crash has shaken loose clouds of them from the canyon walls. Genesis One can't risk contamination by bringing you back on board now.

The ship may not be on fire yet, but neither of you are going anywhere. You lean your head back and cough as the first spores take root in your lungs, spreading fine little tendrils through the spongy muscle. At least when they flower your corpse will look a lovely sight.



House of 1,000 Balloons

Lemmy Ya'akova

each one is filled
with a whisper wish for
love's return, tied off and let loose.
they huddle rub together into every corner. I
thought to use corpses, but I hate to offer a corpse
for an invocation. I don't think that hope has feathers;
there are no birds here in this house. hope is a string
I wrap around my finger, cast into the air, appeal
as an offering to the moon. I say,
hear me, O you, pale faced
sylph. send these
pleas
through
the
veil
to
the
one
I
love.



Prized Possessions



Ellen Huang

Aidan first heard the voice one night as a faint whisper before, so small it could have been his imagination. He was far into the warmth of sleep, holding tight to the remnants of his last doll, but he could just barely make it out. The voice seemed to be saying, just for him, *"Let me out of here."*

Then, he heard it, again—a little breath whispering, in the morning before he opened his eyes to a room full of sunlit colors and a day full of twittering birds.

Strange how it first chanted in Japanese, which was more of his mother's tongue, but he didn't think much of it. He heard it carried in the wind when he walked home from school despite the loud crunch of leaves beneath his feet. He heard it anytime he was alone under the juniper tree, keeping away from his mom. He heard it when he touched a blank piece of paper and brushed colors over its mist-white surface. *"Let me out of here."*

The voice was there for him when his mom threw his toys away without his permission. When he was worn out from tears she told him he should not be crying, he would escape into his room, into his bed, and fall back into his mind. *"Let me out of here."*

Soon, the words blended into his better language. Even at breakfast, Aidan could hear it in the creak of the swings, the squeak of the doors, the pattering of branches knocking on his window to wave hello. *"Let me out of here. Let me out of here. Let me out of here."*

"Honey, you can find better uses for your time." His mom's voice cut through the little song Aidan had been paying heed to, carried softly in the wind. The window was barely open, but through it he could see the juniper tree he liked to rest under the shade of, and what little breeze he could catch from outside was nice and crisp. Now that he was forced to return his attention to this stuffy dining room, noise took over: the slightest clang of a dish being left on the dishwasher to dry, the sweep of his mother's slippers pacing around the floor, the clink of spoons against bowls. He strained to hear the soothing little voice again, but it was gone. He kicked under the table, pushing a chair leg.

His mom continued on, only slightly glaring at the chair that screeched a little across the floor. "How will girls want to marry you if you can barely carry your own feelings?"

Prized Possessions

Nine years into his life, it seemed stupid to him for his mom to try to make him care about girls. Aidan was keeping a mental record of how long he could go without looking his mother in the eye. He just kept adding to the record, staring harder than he thought possible at his plain bowl of rice; he didn't even bother to add fish or egg or any other topping.

"Crying over silly girls' toys like that won't do you any good," his mom said. "You'll see."

His mouth half full, with utensils pointing out from his hand, he muttered, "They were mine and you took them." His voice came out louder than he expected, echoing in the room. Well, she needed to hear it.

His mom breathed sharply. "Did I take everything from you? No. But you are a young man and I expect you to behave like one. This is for your own good. No more dolls."

"They were *mine!*" He stabbed his chopsticks straight into his bowl, nearly tipping it over.

"They're not for you." His mom was overly focused on the apple she was cutting. Under her breath, she added, "*I did what I had to do.*"

"That's not fair! They were *not* just for girls!"

She shook her head. "You still don't know. They *are.*"

"Why? Why did you even get them? Why can Molly at school play with trucks but I can't—"

"Aidan, I don't have time for this whining."

"No, you never listen! What if I took that old locket from you and said *oh you'll get over it?*"

His mother gasped and dropped the knife on the cutting board. "That's enough, Aidan!" Now she looked at him. "You speak to your mother with *respect*, young man!"

Now Aidan looked up into her eyes, never mind the cold treatment. "What mother?"

The room shut up into a thick silence then. Aidan, refused to look up from his miso soup, refused to lift it to his mouth, refused to politely slurp in such silence. He heard the tingling voice return, in the back of his mind, and he almost felt like singing to it, a declaration. It was too warm, too stuffy and tight in this room.

The voice clouded over his mom's reprimanding him for leaving his chopsticks sticking up in his rice like incense sticks, like he was giving his food to the dead.

Prized Possessions

* * *

"What is this?" his mother asked, pressing her finger upon one of the paintings he had taped up to the walls of his room.

It was a masterpiece for his age, she should have said. It was a watercolor painting he had made in his spare time, with colors he had blended himself. Soft sea green, bluer-aquamarine, light blushed pink, brushed together to form a skipping little fairy boy, with sprightly legs and flowing wings. Molly at school had called it beautiful.

"A painting," Aidan mumbled, suppressing the fear in his voice.

His mom stared and frowned at the picture. She traced her finger on the starry specks of glowing gold sparkling around the fairy. Some were dots and some were shapelier than others because, when he made them, he wasn't sure what they'd be yet. Aidan cringed a little as his mother's finger pressed on one of the lights, like she could extinguish it.

She shook her head. "You need to think about the real world. People will make fun of you for this."

Aidan tensed, staring at the sprightly fairy, so uncertain of its fate.

"I know this is hard for you, but for your own good, I have to help you stop being a sissy." His mom began to take the painting down.

"What? Mom, no—" Aidan reached out to grab it from her, but he heard a terrifying ripping sound. It might as well have torn him straight down the middle and left him helpless, like discarded tissues into the trash.

"No!" Aidan cried out, again, snatching the paper out of her hands, grabbing the other torn half from the ground. His vision blurred at the fairy's head, stripped from his lively winged body. It would never be the same, even if he taped it back together. "How could you?" he cried fiercely, holding the halves dear to himself.

She looked down, only quiet. And only quiet remained, until she straightened up and left. Aidan collapsed into a fetal position, holding his disembodied fairy.

Sometimes you carry something only the worthy can see, his teacher had once said. But how could he think of his mom as unworthy? Either she was wrong or he was. Aidan looked at the remnant of his painting, his vision bleeding into total blurriness.

Fighting through his tears, he heard the voice visit him again. It drifted in the wind outside, muffled by the glass, tapping at his window along with the

Prized Possessions

rain. It whispered in his ear with every drop that swam in his eyes.

"You *have* to let me out of here."

At last, like a dream, Aidan stood and let the voice guide him.

He creaked the door open and snuck past his mom's room, reassured by the flickering light under the closed door that her attention was elsewhere. He pulled on a jacket, crept down the stairs, and opened the door against the blustering rain outside. His face was wet already, anyway. The rain speckled on his face, drizzled on his body, drumming with faster and faster tempo. He let the raindrops roll over him as he continued toward the backyard, to the juniper tree. The tree, the magical tree, was there for him.

The voice seemed to guide a shovel into his hand and told him, "Hurry. Dig."

He shoveled up layer after layer of dirt beneath the tree, wondering what treasure he would find. The voice was getting more excited. It was a child's voice, maybe smaller than his.

"Get me out of here!" it exclaimed urgently in his mind. Soon, all other sounds—the beating rain, the slice of the shovel into the dirt, the howling wind—faded until there was only the voice.

At last his shovel hit something hard, and he got down on his knees in the wet dirt and felt in the hole a solid surface. Digging his hands on either side of it, he pulled out a box. He brushed at the wet dirt, leaving smudges, and found some worn-out markings on the side.

Lightning and thunder cracked in the sky. Aidan clutched the box tight to him, dirt and all, and ran back into the house. And there, panting in the dark security of the room, dripping wet and tracking mud by his socks, he opened the box.

Then, the room was lost in fog. Aidan gasped and fell to the ground, coughing, as the room slowly cleared.

In the midst of the fading grey, there was a glowing bit of gold. It took shape and, slowly coming into view, a songbird hovered above him, singing the most beautiful sound he ever heard.

The next thing he knew, he opened his eyes, lying in bed, the covers thrown off. There was no mud on him.

It was as if he had never left the room.

* * *

All through school the next day, the smell of rain lingered everywhere, and the sun peeked a little from the clouds. Aidan felt lighter than he had felt

Prized Possessions

in a long time, as if he were lifting his feet off the ground, as if a small part of his mind was excited to see the world anew. A song escaped from his lips from time to time. School felt as insubstantial as clouds, a thing to pass through. He caught glimpses of eyes stuck on him, noticed clusters of bodies scooted away from him, and faces contorted before him. Other kids just never understood the wonderful sense of ease a half-remembered dream could leave behind.

But upon coming home, no sooner had he closed the door than it was as if he fell back to earth, stumbling into the stuffy confinements of the room. His mother stood in the way, arms crossed, staring down at him sternly. “Your teacher called. She says you’ve been disrupting the class.”

What? She did? “But I didn’t do anything!” Aidan insisted.

“She says you sang during class while she was talking.”

Aidan shook his head.

His mother turned, looking out the backyard where, beneath the tree were a hole, clumps of dirt, and a fallen shovel. “That’s not all you’ve been doing. Aidan, what’s gotten into you?”

Suddenly something sparked in his brain and his heart beat faster. He felt an odd mix of emotions—excitement, love, fear, anger, grief, joy—flash inside him. He swallowed. It was as if he were seeing his mother for the first time. Her short cut black hair, curled at the ends though disheveled. Her deep brown eyes, ringed with a soft, darker shade. How she could have been young once. She was beautiful. She was scary. She was the world.

She gasped, her eyes wide and burning with threat, with fear. “Aidan, stop that singing.”

But he wasn’t singing. He was only staring, now flicking his eyes toward the window. There was a little bird perched there.

“Aidan, I mean it.”

The bird was a beautiful, tawny color, and its eyes were black as coal. It lifted its head confidently, its feathers shining, almost sparkling.

“Aidan Michael Yamada, you stop that this instant!” Her sharp, shrieking voice overfilled the room. The bird fluttered away. Her voice must have scared it off. The whole neighborhood could have heard it. Suddenly, he looked at this woman, this grownup, overshadowing, standing in his way, in a little fear. The thought flickered in his mind, *It’s not fair. I didn’t do anything.*

“Aidan, do you hear me?” the woman’s voice spoke with a shaking edge. She was turning red. Then she blurted: “You don’t *have* a father! Don’t you understand? Everything I do is for you to become a better man!”

Prized Possessions

The words cut through the room, sharp, and settled into Aidan's heart, hitting hard. Those stupid words, again. His fault, always his fault. It was enough to make him lose his head. He looked up at her, hard, in the eyes. Somehow, he felt lifted above the ground, as if he were the one looking down at her. He felt recycled wounds rise to his throat, to the tip of his burning tongue...

* * *

It was all a blur. Something took over, and he wasn't sure what he said, but he saw her face burn from the inside, and eyes tremble. Aidan stomped up the stairs, leaving his mother's face in her hands.

Some time later, he lay flat on his bed, trying to immerse himself in a book. He hated the feeling that ate at him, the feeling that a father he never had and never knew could consume so much of his freedom. Did this invisible father enjoy feeding on his identity? Did his mom *want* to kill him from the inside out? Aidan always had to bury these feelings, but they had a way of worming back and gnawing on his insides. So he needed the book to bandage his wounds, to keep his head from coming off completely. He lay stiffly, staring straight ahead at the words on a page, trying to let them speak to him, let their voices win over his mind.

The door creaked open. He cringed at the sound. His mother came in, stiffly holding a tape recorder. "I don't think you hear yourself," she said in a voice that tried to remain calm. She clicked play, and left the room, pulling the door shut.

Aidan sighed and set down his book, leaning in towards the tape recorder. It started as an eerie sound, but it slowly flowed into the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. It was the voice of flowing rivers, of wolves howling to the moon, of birds in the spring, of angelic choirs, of mermaids in storybooks, of dreams.

Then he heard the words. "*My mother, she slew me. My father, he ate me. My brother, he kept me and buried me beneath the juniper tree. What a good bird am I!*"

He gaped, speechless. "That can't be right," he said aloud, shaking his head. He clicked play again. Again came the flow of the spellbinding, unearthly voice. Then the words rang clearer: "*My mother, she slew me. My father, he ate me. My brother, he kept me and buried me beneath the juniper tree. What a good bird am I!*"

Prized Possessions

“No...way,” he could barely get his words out. Shuddering, as if the whole room might close in on him, feeling a presence in the room he could not see, Aidan swallowed and clicked play one more time. The song rang even clearer. This time, though, as he played the tape, he did not hear his own voice singing, but a different one, slightly higher-pitched, coming out from underneath. Instead of the soothing calm he had felt earlier, he felt his heart pound, racing, and the hairs on the back of his neck prickled.

“All right!” he yelled, eyes wide, jumping up on his bed. “Come out and tell me what you want!”

The room was eerily silent.

“I *got* you out of there!” Aidan cried, remembering. The box! He leapt down onto the floor, got to his knees and searched beneath the bed, frantically. He searched through his drawers, on his desk, through his blankets and sheets, tossing everything into a pile on the floor. Where was it? Where was the freaking box?

Then, upon his desk, he saw the bird. It was there, real as ever, its tawny feathers shining in the lamplight, its black eyes looking at him with intensity. Aidan couldn’t breathe.

His eyes roamed to the mirror on the wall, and there he saw a little girl.

He nearly screamed. But when he whipped around, there was no one there behind him. He checked the mirror again. She was still there, in the mirror, in place of the bird’s reflection. She and the bird were one.

Her mouth opened, and she sang. Aidan backed away in a panic at first, but he couldn’t escape the voice. The bird fluttered over and perched on the bedknob. As he looked into its eyes, he could hear the girl sing:

"It's so warm, so dark, so tight in this room.

I want to live life, I'm going to live soon!

Get me out of here, I cried, let me take a breath.

They got me out of there, but first I met death.

You found me, my brother, heard what I was saying.

You took me and buried me, when you were just playing.

I don't want bedtime anymore; I want to play, too.

Let me say goodbye to Mommy, then goodbye to you."

Aidan shuddered at first, taking this all in. This wasn’t real. This wasn’t real. This was all a nightmare, and he had no sister, and his mom was no murderer, and there was no voice haunting the room.

Prized Possessions

The little girl in the mirror let out a laugh of bliss, as if she finally felt freedom. She sang again, and he immediately threw his hands over his ears, pressing hard and shouting, "LALALALALA" against the tides of her voice. But her voice won him over anyway, seeping into his mind, chiming with:

"Let me say goodbye to Mommy, then goodbye to you."

The voice gently escorted his hands under the bed until they felt a solid box and slowly dragged it out.

"That...that was not there before," Aidan said, shuddering, but now he continued to listen.

The voice guided his hands to brush off the sides of the box and lift it into the light. Some red markings on the side glimmered. His eyes could make out the letters: "A M Y." His initials. He could also see etches into the box and old crayon scribbles that struck him as familiar.

"My...my old drawings..." he said, letting out a gasp. He remembered drawing smiling stick figures and hearts, and poor attempts at skull and crossbones to make a treasure chest. Stick-figure fairies with huge circle heads and loop-de-loop wings darted across the box like old cave paintings. He put his hand on the wild old drawings of flowers, now smeared with red and tainting the pink of the loop-de-loop petals. He hadn't seen these drawings in so long. And now here they were, as if transported from the realm of the dead.

"It's a gift," said the girl.

He looked into the mirror again, where the girl stood. "Why doesn't she want us?" he found himself asking.

The girl didn't answer, only smiled sadly. Her deep brown eyes were full of trapped light. Her short black hair in pigtails shone like the beautiful tawny bird's feathers. She could almost pass for a fairy, for the aura that pulsed around her when she stood still. She was his height. She was his age. She looked like she could have been older once. Could have touched the grace of being taller and bigger, but let go of that. And her smile was so innocent, trusting him.

That's when Aidan realized: *This is my sister. I have to help her.*

"What do you want to play?" Aidan asked.

The girl in the mirror smiled and became see-through, like mist. She raised her translucent hand up, slowly. At the same time, Aidan found his arm mirroring the movement, his fingers curling as her fingers curled.

Follow the leader, sang the voice in his mind.

Prized Possessions

* * *

Hands in his pockets, he crept, step by step, down the stairs, slowly approaching the figure sitting there by the dining table. The woman's hair was in disarray, her head in her hands. She looked worn and weighed down, bent over, long overdue for some rest. "*You're his responsibility, too,*" she was muttering, whispering.

"Mommy." He shuddered at the voice that escaped him—it was his and it wasn't his, at the same time. It was louder than he thought it would be. But tried to find comfort in the echo of the voice. *My sister is with me.* His eyes darted to the chef knife, to the kitchen scissors, out the window to the shovel by the tree. He almost thought of going back up to his room. But he was calm when he stopped before the woman.

Her eyes turned to him. As if part of him knew he would see them for the last time, he took in all the details. They were tinged red. There was darkness around them. There was darkness *in* them, the black in her pupils like ink, the brown in her irises shimmering. They reflected light in the forms of little starry specks of gold. Searching deeper, he beheld a vision of the woman when she was younger, looking down with concern at a locket around her neck, slowly caressing it with her fingers. The locket chain was gold, and the heart at the end of it was a shimmering light red, like the hearts on the box that held his drawings. *Think of it as a gift,* echoed some other, unfamiliar voice in the vision. But she looked pained, as if she were bound to the chain, as if the locket might as well be a millstone weighing down on her neck. Then, she was looking down at her stomach, slowly touching it, with no less pain.

She was a torn-apart mess. It reminded Aidan of when she rummaged for his dolls, when she took them away, yanking the last one out of his grip.

Something had been yanked out of her grip too, long ago, leaving her with torn pieces.

"*It's so warm, so dark, so tight in this womb.*" An echo of the voice he knew whispered in his head. Something cool to the touch was holding his hand.

Aidan cringed at visions he saw in the eyes, then he blinked, returning to the present. His mother looked afraid, almost as if she knew he *saw* her then. Almost as if she could hear the voice—the eerie, scary, beautiful, little voice—too.

"*I want to live life, I'm going to live soon!*"

Prized Possessions

"So which are you?" the mother said, trembling. "Aidan or Amy?"

No clear answer came, but what came out of his mouth next surprised him. "It's okay, Mommy." Then he felt his arms wrap around her and her confused shaking.

He suddenly present in his body again, made very aware of his quick breathing. He looked out to the backyard behind her, where the skies were clouded with gray. Where the shovel waited next to the dug-up hole beside the juniper tree. He panicked, afraid of what the voice would tell him to do next. No. His heart was thumping hard as if it wanted to be let out. No. He didn't want to have to bury anything or anyone. What made him think he had to trade his mom for his drawings?

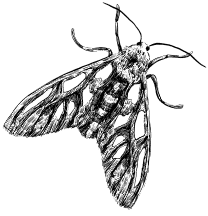
Aidan felt the sting of tears he should not have been crying. His eyes flicked to the table, where torn pieces of paper shimmered with tape. His watercolor fairy boy's decapitated head, placed carefully back.

Then Aidan felt his heart flash with many emotions—confusion, hurt, fear, awe, love—but the greatest of these was love. Soon, the voice subsided from his mind and he blinked, feeling tender shoulder rubs bringing him back. His mother was embracing him back. "I don't know what to call you right now," she admitted softly, "my child."

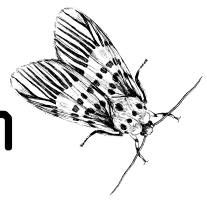
Reflected in the glass window, the little girl smiled, satisfied. The shovel beside the juniper tree no longer mattered. Maybe there'd be no burying anything tonight.

Outside, the sun, shining like gold, peeked out from the clouds. Out of the corner of his eye, Aidan saw a little bird outside the window. Flying into the sun with shimmering wings, it was singing the most beautiful song he ever heard.

*a previous version of this story first appeared in **Prismatica (2019)** and in **Awkward Mermaid (2018)***



Fly Me to the Moon



Dwin Phillips

“I fucking love you!” cries the Mothman, both arms outstretched towards that luminous globe drifting high above him in a black silk sky dusted with glittering stars. The Moon does not reply. The Mothman steps forward into a damp clearing within the sprawling green sea of dense pines. His ruby multifaceted eyes follow the Moon’s gentle arc; she will be full tomorrow. Hope, potential. The soft downy-like fur covering him shivers.

Unfurling his wings, he raises a clawed hand and asks in a gentler tone, “May I have this dance?” His feathered antennae flutters as his wings begin to glow, their pattern like rays of silver light cutting across a violet star-speckled sky. He lifts from the ground, wings erect and unmoving as he climbs the skies, spinning. He gasps to see the Moon closer, and closer still. He can taste her light, her love. She will be his happiness; she will make him whole.

Higher, his spinning dance takes him, arms grasping. He will reach her this time. “Please,” he whispers, “I love you I love you I love you,” he sings in a crescendo of desperation. He has done this hopeless dance for centuries and it always ends the same. He falls, the light leaving his limp wings, tears ripping from his face. “No!”

A wave of energy surges from him as his body slaps against the wet earth. He suddenly senses a presence, unlike anything before. A mind, a connection. *Is this her?* He reaches out his mind in that brief instant before the pain makes him collapse into sleep, his psyche wraps around it, cycling through everything it sees like fingers running through the hair of a lover.

“Who-,” but the shadows of sleep shut the door. The surge of energy erupting from him ends as his antennae droop.

Fifty miles away, a bridge collapses. A local psychic has a nightmare about dying alone.

LIVE FEED – USER: CryptidCameron, Watching: 1

“What the fuck is happening?” whimpers the thin figure laying in the brush on the far side of the clearing, a camera strapped to his bucket hat. He rolls onto his back, his army camo vest covered in mud. His eyes feel like they are about to explode. He gasps for air. Information racks his brain: images,

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smells, emotions. Lifetime's worth of experiences. "Gah," he huffs, "Cryptid... Cameron coming to you live...I'm, I'm having some sort of Vulcan mind meld or something, guys!"

Sweat races down his face in cold bullets as he stumbles to his soggy knees to pull out his phone. "Did you see that, the Mothman was," but the power was dead. He snatches at his head-mounted camera, his hands trembling. Dead. *Did any of it upload?* "Shit!" he gasps, not out of frustration, but from the pain still rippling through him. The presence that wrapped itself around him, it was the Mothman touching his mind, it must be in pain.

Crawling to his feet, Cameron looks into the clearing. The Mothman was gone.

Pain. He feels like his brain is swelling with the impact of it all, like it has to stretch out to fit everything. In a matter of minutes, he knows this being for what it is. Human lifetimes worth of fear, loneliness, desire. Beautiful thoughts as well, flying through the night skies hoping for happiness. He knows this being better than his family, better than he knows himself. *Shit*. He loves this creature, it feels like. He's in love with the goddamn Mothman. "Hell, I need to delete my live feed!"

He staggers through the forest, back to his rusted Jeep.

An undisclosed underground facility.

"Sighting reported. Activate Code Grey," murmurs a voice through a telecom.

Men in grey suits file out of the facility and into sleek grey sedans. Men in grey coats flick at switches and type away. "Tapping phones and webcams," says a grey man in a grey voice.

A monitor shows the inside of a small bedroom, a sweaty man in a vest and bucket hat is squinting vaguely towards the webcam, typing frantically. "Shit," he moans, "People have already copied the video." The man goes rigid, looks directly into the webcam itself. "What the?" he slaps at the screen, cutting the feed.

"Find him," murmurs the man in the telecom.

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Day is breaking as the Mothman runs in loping bursts through the forest, tears spilling down his face in thin streaks from the wind whipping about him. *That was not the Moon.* He pulls at his face in dread. *That was a man-thing.* He felt the connection and grasped at it, felt as though its energy harmonized with his own, how could it have been anything other than his Moon? Slowly, slowly he tastes at the memories he holds within his mind. So much of it reminds him of himself. That same loneliness, that searching desire. Mothman, is who he knows me as? *Quaint.* He tastes more memories, running still. “Cameron,” he whispers. “I am like the Moon to him, in a way.” His heart swells, strangely. *To be wanted, to be seen, instead of this hopeless chasing.* Yet, the Moon would be full tonight. Hope, potential.

A car screeches, swerving madly as the Mothman leaps across the small forest road. A hiss of fear escapes him as he keeps running, heart pounding with a mix of panic and confusion.

An old man drives down the road in his rattling car. The fuel tank is almost empty, and so were his carton of cigarettes. Golden Oldies hum through the radio as the Sun begins to peak through the pine trees. The man hums along, not even trying to keep in tune as he slurps at a mug of black coffee that he keeps wedged in-between his legs when not drinking. The rays of light are extinguished, blocked by a huge shadow jumping across the road.

“Oh!” he says simply as he jerks the steering wheel.

Glowing red eyes glare at him as a monstrous hiss burst out of its grotesque face. *Are those wings?* The old man is too terrified to even look away as he madly swerves around and hit the brakes. The crotch of his pants is covered in lukewarm coffee and more than a little piss. He gets out of the car on trembling legs and looks into the endless forest. He blinks. Nothing.

A sleek grey sedan silently appears, pulling up directly in front of his car, blocking the road.

Two men in identical grey suits step out of the vehicle, walking in perfect unison. They have grey faces with watery red eyes. Thin pink lips like infected scars rest over clean-shaven square jaws. Thick cruel hands rest over heavy holstered guns.

“Oh,” says the old man as he slumps, resting a hand against his car.

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“Good morning, citizen,” says one of the men in grey suits. “We have some questions to ask.” His voice sounds like dead things pretending. Moving closer, their suits look very fine and well-tailored. Their skin, less so. Stretched out, straining to cover something terrible.

“This is not optional,” smiles the second man as he closes in.

Cameron throws his laptop in the microwave and hits the DEFROST button. He’s browsed enough conspiracy forums to know what ‘the powers that be’ can do with a webcam. He pauses, biting his lip, and throws his cell in there as well. “I’m crazy,” he whispers. *Love is crazy*. “Shit, I’m really crazy!”

He dashes out of his apartment, leaping down the stairs three steps as a time, nearly breaks his neck. “Too late to stop now, I just need to find him, tell him to hide. Run.” He hits his head against the roof of his Jeep as he slides in. Cranks his engine to a satisfying growl. Slams the pedal. Flies.

Red light. He glances about, trying not to panic. “Where can I even find him?” He flips through the radio. Golden Oldies? Lame. Heavy Metal? Not now. Opera? No- well. He sifts through the memories left by the Mothman, feels him dancing in his mind. Beautiful. *Yeah, opera*.

Green light. A grey sedan pulls up behind him, silent as a shadow. He hits the gas, but the grey car is somehow tailgating him in perfect synch. *Asshole*. He swerves into the other lane, dashing towards the outskirts of town and back into the swaying green ocean of pine trees. The grey car follows. Cameron wipes the sweat out of his eyes, fumbles to put his driving glasses on from the glovebox. Grey suits? Was there something about that in any of the forums?

He has to slam the breaks as an identical grey car silently glides in front of his and slows. “Gah!” he honks, but seeing a third grey sedan appear, creeping up to box him in, he slams the pedal and smashes the grey car in front of him just as a man begins to step out. “Oh shit,” he cries. He doesn’t want to hurt anyone. He looks into his rearview and sees the man pull out a huge handgun. Bang.

An explosion of glass as his rearview shatters. Also shattered is any hesitation he has in getting past these men, no matter the consequences. Spinning to look backward, the cars and that man were gone. He blinks, hits the gas even harder, turns up the opera station. Breathing slowly, he cycles through the Mothman’s memories yet again, tries to guess at where he could have gone after his fall. *Full Moon, tonight*. Yes.

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Despite the fear, the pain, he'll try to reach the Moon again. "Not alone this time," he muttered. He charges forward, rearview mirror destroyed. "No looking back."

Shots sing their violent chorus behind the fleeing Mothman. Shards of splintered pine spin across his vision. Men in grey suits run in silent pursuit behind him, guns burning hot with deadly pleasure. Fear of the man-things causes his antennae to twitch wildly, erratic waves of energy flying out in odd bursts. He needs to control himself, or he'll cause more harm, like he always does. The Moon, she can take him away soon and all the pain and loneliness can end. *What about the man-thing Cameron?* "Cam-er-on," he breaths. He can't know how the man-thing feels. Cameron's energy, his vibrant feelings, it was everything he expected the Moon to provide, but he spent so much time waiting, how can he turn away now?

Another chorus of bullets. A dull wet thud as hot metal rips through his arm. The Mothman screeches in agony, slices of fear and fury arcing out of him in blades of energy. He hears trees fall behind him, and the wet sloshing of gore spraying across the ground. He closes his wet eyes, not daring to look at what his power has wrought. He keeps running. The Sun was beginning to set.

The Sun was beginning to set as Cameron ditches his Jeep, hastily covering it in branches and undergrowth in a vain attempt at covering his tracks. No trace of the men in grey suits since he left town, but the hairs on the back of his neck continue to tingle, feeling that same fear only the hunted know. Breathing heavily, he hikes into the forbidding pines, towards that hidden clearing.

Silent as sin, the men in grey suits pull up to the side of the road. Twenty, at least. They pull away branches covering the rusty Jeep in silence. They stare at each other. One of them, even greyer than the rest, nods towards the tree line. They all nod back, pull out their heavy grey guns, and enter the forest in perfect synch.

Purple blood smears the damp earth as the Mothman enters the clearing, that sacred place where he dances with the Moon. His arm hangs limp as he

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gazes up, antennae flicking, the Sun is hiding behind the trees now, twilight has come. The bravest of stars are already beginning to wink at him.

“My Moon, please come to me!” he beseeches. “Don’t leave me here alone!” He felt it then.

“You’re not alone,” says the voice. Not words of air, but words of *heart*.

“Cam-er-on?” he asks.

“Yes, Mothman. I call you that, but the memories you left me did not include a name.” The voice of the heart is fast as thought and this one also felt warm and comforting.

“Mothman is fine,” he says, “You are here?”

“Yes, Mothman. There are bad men looking for you, you must run, now!” Rustling from the brush, as Cameron emerges, his forehead is bruised and he is dripping with sweat. “You are hurt?”

“I cannot leave the Moon tonight; she will be full. She will finally take me, if I give up it will be for nothing, she will not forgive, not forgive. I don’t want to be alone. Please understand.” Mothman sends in a rush of thoughts and emotions.

“Please,” Cameron says with lips and heart this time. “The men in grey suits, the bad men, will hunt you down. They’ll kill or capture you, Mothman!” He closes his eyes, “I don’t want you to die,” his heart adds.

The Mothman limps towards Cameron. Their connection only strengthened. He reaches out with his uninjured arm, gently touches the human’s face. Cameron closes his eyes, shudders. Contact. Another swirling exchange of mind, memory, emotion. Cameron winces, but there is less resistance this time, and he relaxes.

Opening his eyes, Cameron gazes into the large ruby eyes of the Mothman. He sees him for what he truly is, he sees him like someone he’s known intimately for hundreds of years. He lifts his hands towards the Mothman’s face in return, fingers gently feeling the soft grey fur that covers his body.

“I.”

Clicking interrupts them. Silent, synchronized, the men in grey suits have surrounded the clearing. The greyest of the men looks at his watch, looks up towards the darkening sky, then at the frightened pair in the center of the clearing. “Good evening.” His infected pink lips twitch into a mockery of a smile, red eyes narrowing. “You’ll be coming with us.” He points at Cameron, “You, we don’t need.”

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The Mothman clutches at Cameron in a desperate embrace. Their eyes lock. Their connection rippling, an embrace of souls.

The men in grey suits lift their heavy grey guns like synchronized swimmers lifting their legs out of water. The greyest man says, "This is not optiona-"

An explosion.

Light like a supernova stabs out of the center of the clearing, two souls screaming. Waves of energy billow through the men in grey suits, through the surrounding trees. The men in grey suits try to shield their eyes but their arms have disintegrated. Try to scream but their faces have disintegrated. Try to feel one last moment of hatred, but their souls are less than ash in the wind.

Nothing was left of the clearing but a pit of dust settling into a spiraling pattern under the darkening sky. The Moon peaked out from behind the trees. Her silver-grey brilliance spilling out as bars of moonlight squeezing through the branches of the silent pines.

Cameron never let go of the Mothman. Their minds and souls clinging to each other as the Mothman lets go of all of his power, all of his fear, his pain, his loneliness. They look at each other, and even as their bodies were ripped apart, their hearts smile. *What is left of us now?* They wonder this, looking down at the dust settling into the pit beneath them. The Moon rocks above, her light splashing them, and they can suddenly see each other again. *What is left of us now? Love and moonlight.*

Cameron reaches out and gently asks, "May I have this dance?"

They hold each other as the Mothman unfurls his wings. They fly through the air, spinning, dancing. They fly to the Moon. They dance among the stars. They aren't alone anymore.

Wolf Seeds

Carys Crossen

Lou cut her hair off on the night of the new moon in May.

She'd always had long hair. Nearly always. Her baby photos showed her with a head as bare as a bowling ball. But by the time she was five, her mousy hair reached below her shoulders, and had remained there.

Till now.

Lou stood in front of the small, square bathroom mirror. It stared at her, blank and unimpressed. The white florescent light, like her mother and sister, was uncomplimentary about her appearance.

She studied her hair, straggling limp over her bare shoulders as if she'd just emerged from water. Then she raised the scissors (her mother's craft scissors, newly sharpened) and began cutting it off.

Lou started at earlobe length. The crisp snip of the scissors, the sliced ends of hair, the locks falling to the floor like withered leaves, were oddly fascinating. Soon she grew bolder, began cutting the hair close to her scalp.

Beneath her skin, something strange was stirring. She felt her heart banging against her breastbone, her skin prickled. Her gut was writhing. The scissors glimmered in the corners of her eyes. Her shorn hair ghosted against her bare feet and ankles.

When she was done, she had a ragged crop. Lou didn't bother checking in with the mirror. Just as she was about to tidy up, her sister barged in, saw her, began shrieking.

The mirror cracked from side to side.

Cutting your hair off didn't half upset people.

'A woman's hair is her crowning glory!' her mother shrieked every ten minutes, her stamina inexhaustible 'You must be crazy! You look like a *man*!'

Lou's sister (petite, pretty, superior) pouted and proclaimed that Lou had done it for attention.

Not just her mother and her sister. Nearly everyone of Lou's acquaintance reacted with shock, scornful laughter, pursed lips, comments about it being unfeminine.

And everyone asked *why*.

When she'd picked up the scissors, she'd been seeking... an emancipation of sorts. One less thing to worry about. She'd been told since she could recall that she'd never be a 'girly-girl.' So, Lou had decided to stop trying.

Cutting her hair off had unhitched something inside her. Let her breathe more freely. Let something nameless, inexpressible, that had been chained up inside stretch its limbs.

She stopped shaving her legs. She couldn't be bothered any longer. Her disinclination coincided with a spell of warm weather, the sun slithering from behind wispy clouds to beam down upon Lou's bristly head. So, she donned shorts, skirts, denim cut-offs... whatever helped keep her cool.

Her mother and sister were revolted, of course. But so was everyone else.

Most of the insults were inarticulate. Cries of 'urgh, yuck, eww!' One passer-by exclaimed 'shave your fucking legs!'

Lou stepped in front of him and asked 'why?'

He stared at her, lumpish face turning pink. Eventually he mumbled 'fucking weirdo' and dodged round her. He glanced back, once.

Lou bared her many teeth at him. He sped up, stumbling over his floppy shoelaces.

Lou sauntered home, still baring her teeth. This time in a grin.

The something inside her stirred, stretched its limbs.

Half a moon in the sky, glowing like a jellyfish, strands of stars for tentacles.

Lou lay on the blanket she'd dragged into their yard, staring up at the bisected moon staring down. The night-scented stocks from their neighbour's garden perfumed the air, made each breath heavy, luxurious. The night was a mild one, the cool undertones of winter dissolving into lukewarm hints of pending summer.

Lou gazed at the stars. The flickers of dark movement overheard that signalled the movements of bats or nightbirds. The inky leaves of a lonely birch in the botanically minded neighbour's garden. She tilted her head, and an odd shape that reminded her of an insect's antenna caught her eye. A long stalk with a ball stuck on the end.

She realised it was the remnants of a poppy flower. It had shed its petals, in the golden light of autumn, leaving the seed capsule naked. Poppies released their seeds only after their petals had fallen.

Lou wondered if a human were to shed their petals, if seeds would emerge. What sort of seeds? Would they drift away on the breeze like bits of dandelion seeds? Would they be hooky little burrs, clinging to everything they brushed? Fall to the ground with a *thunk*, like pinecones?

She turned on her side and spied a flower she had never seen before. It was small, a little sickly-looking. Its leaves were palest green, its stalk flimsy, topped by a five-petalled blue flower.

The blue was luminous in the purplish light of night. Lou drank it in with parched eyes. It was some minutes before she noticed that the flower was not growing in the cracks between the paving stones.

The frail flower had forced its way up through the tile, splitting the stone clean in two.

Lou's hands curled, clawing at the blanket.

The heat continued to build, day after day, piling up temperature like bricks. It was the most natural thing in the world for Lou to shed her clothes.

Underwear went first. Lou had never liked wearing a bra. Uncomfortable, pinching, scratching, confining things. And once the bra went, the knickers followed.

She stopped wearing shorts and skirts. The hair on her legs was thick enough to pass as leggings by then. People on the streets stared, but then lowered their eyes and scurried away when Lou stopped and stared back. No-one called out insults. No-one smirked or sniggered. Even her mother and sister had gone quiet.

Lou remembered an ill-advised family outing. Rain hurling itself down with abandon. Ducking into a convenient art gallery. Whines of boredom from her sister. Her mother's tight-lipped annoyance.

A painting. Mary Magdalen, the plaque beside it read. Magdalen in the desert. She was naked, and as hairy as an Old English sheepdog. Hair covered her arms, legs and torso. A miraculous coat of hair, to protect her modesty. Lou had wondered why Magdalen's modesty needed protecting when there was no-one in the desert to see her.

But the hair was proving remarkably effective at protecting Lou's modesty. No-one would look at her for more than a few moments.

The something inside her was growing stronger. Lou could feel it, sliding its long legs into her own, its jaw poking into her skull, as though it were a hand and Lou's flesh was the glove. Her skin tingled and tightened in the heat, constricting her, holding her in. Lou felt as if at any moment her hide would split and everything inside her would go streaming out into the sweltering spring surroundings.

By the time the night of the full moon descended, Lou was mute.

It was easy. People shied away from her, from her cropped hair, her unadorned face, her hairiness, her scanty clothing. For that matter, Lou scarcely saw anyone anymore. She'd taken to spending most of her time in the yard, her mother and sister preferring to swelter in their bedrooms rather than be confronted with Lou.

The sun lowered itself towards the horizon and below it. Lou lay in the yard. She'd stripped off as soon as it was dark and lay still, feeling the cool air ghost over her hot skin. She'd hoped it would sooth the itch she'd felt all day, but she was tingling all over. Lou felt as if she could scratch her skin off.

She wished she could be like the poppy. Shed everything, all her petals and then unleash herself, drift away on the wind, settle somewhere peaceful.

Lou twisted to look at the blue flower yet again. It hadn't grown since she'd first spotted it. It was still undersized and drooping, but it hadn't withered either. Its petals still glowed with an eerie luminescence. She'd watched it with fascination for several evenings, never tiring of stroking its leaves with a gentle finger or tracing its outlines with her gaze.

Tonight, its sameness irked her. Didn't the flower want to move on? To pollinate, to produce seeds, to escape this dull little yard and go somewhere better? With a sudden surge of vindictiveness, she reached over and yanked it from the crack in the paving stone, ripping it up, roots and all, with one strong pull.

Lou stared at the flower in her hand, fingers tightening round it in triumph. But then – then. It withered. It didn't just hang there in her grasp. It shrivelled itself up in moments, the leaves and stalks turned brown as if dyed, the petals dropping to land on the back of her hand and turn to blue powder against her skin.

Lou lay there, fascinated, studying the remnants of the flower, the blue streaks on her hand. The powdery substance left by the petals felt wonderfully cool against her itchy skin. She reached over, to try and massage a little more of it into her hand.

Her blunt fingers, each topped with a long nail, touched the blue powder and rubbed at it. The powder came off, and so did Lou's skin. It peeled away from her hand as if she had been sunburned, falling off in long strips.

Lou wasn't frightened, or disgusted. She inspected her hand with detached curiosity, to see if the muscle or tendons were exposed.

They weren't. Nor was there any blood. Instead, under the skin, there was fur. Bristly, silver-grey fur.

It didn't strike Lou as especially odd that she had fur under her skin. Nor did it occur to her that she wasn't feeling any pain from removing her skin. She'd known for a while now that something was lurking inside her. It was the most natural thing in the world, to let it out. To let it be released.

She caught hold of the edges of her remaining skin and tugged.

At first it came away in strips, but once she'd liberated one furry hand, it was like peeling off a tightly fitted, clingy bodysuit. Lou writhed and pulled and wrenched, her joints cramping and her limbs twisting. Her clumsy fingers kept losing their grip, and at last she caught her skin in her teeth and yanked. Finally, it gave way and she dropped it with a sigh of relief. It lay rather forlornly on the flagstones, rather like the flayed skin of St Bartholomew in Michelangelo's rendering.

Lou paid it no mind. She was too busy taking in the world as she had never before perceived it. The silvery tint the moonlight lent everything. A thousand different sounds pummelling her ears. The surging energy in her legs, compelling her to *run! Run fast and run far!*

A cry sounded from the house behind her. Her mother or her sister, looking out of the window and seeing...

Lou decided to do as her legs were instructing her and run.

She ran for the fence, cleared it in one bound. She ran through the suburban streets, already deserted, the humid dark hiding her progress. Her reflection flickered in unlit windows and car door panels. Four legs and fur. Bone white teeth in a long muzzle. Fur that shot silver sparks where the starlight struck it. Shouts from rubberneckers at their windows.

'Wolf! Wolf! It's a bloody great wolf!'

Wolf Seeds

She paid them no heed. She'd shucked her petals and the seeds, the wolf seeds, her wolf seeds, were being carried along on the wind, looking for fertile soil to embed themselves in. To flourish in.

She ran on. She didn't know where to, but it didn't matter. Her feet would decide. Fate would decide.

She ran on into the dark and was swallowed.

The Firefighter

Jake Morris

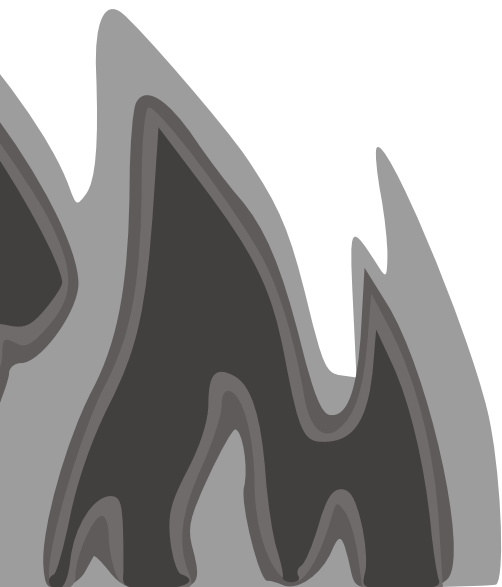
Ignoring the ghosts heckling him, he swung the fire axe into the door, plotting escape from the inferno.

“It won’t work Barry,” his great-grandfather tutted, the axe catching in the wood. His voice was faint over the roar of flames licking at his limbs, eager to devour him like it did his father, and his father’s father, and so on.

“Heaven ain’t so bad kiddo,” his father gently said. “There’s no use fighting fate, didn’t work for me.”

He ran for the window across the room. The way down made his stomach turn, but curses were curses.

“Maybe not for you.”



It's Gonna Be Another Hot One!

Jake Morris

It started as quite an unremarkable summer, as far as summers usually go in the city. It became swelteringly hot within days of spring ending, queuing the opening of windows and turning on of fans across every neighborhood, every room washed in dim night backed by the soundtrack of their industrious whirring. The silent servants functioned as intended, sucking in the cool nighttime air to combat the latent heat of the day, emulating a breeze where there was none, owners grateful for their service as they lay comfortably in their beds, not slick with sweat and sticking to the sheets like they would be without. AC units sat atop apartment buildings and behind houses, rumbling with a similar zeal, robbing the heat from the air through labyrinthine coilings of pipe. Either or, these miracles of the modern world made the regularly torrid summers all the more bearable for the inhabitants of the city, until it became hotter than anybody expected.

It didn't change too noticeably, a scorcher of a day here, a hot one there, but they quickly became routine. Day after day of 100+ degree Fahrenheit temperatures, only the shade and the night providing refuge from the hellish heat. The entire city became wracked in discomfort, some citizens taking to remaining inside, with the braver and busier folks content to just scorch outside as they'd walk. The source of the abnormal heat was a topic of debate and conversation amongst friends, neighbors, and eventually news sources. Regardless of where such a bizarrely warm summer came from, it only continued to heat up from then on. Previously hanging around the hundreds, it quickly shot up to a daily average in the upper 110s by late June. The pavement scorched, plastic trash cans melted, and sidewalks quickly became abandoned at the height of the day. The gentle rumble of box fans and AC units had turned into a constant roar, running 24/7 in an increasingly futile attempt to keep the temperature within people's homes bearable. Lying shirtless in their beds, sweat-soaked citizens would toss and turn restlessly, cursing their lousy fans, cursing the heat, cursing the fact they couldn't just tear their skin off and free themselves of their sweltering biological layers.

The hottest summer of the century, as people called it, continued its rampage into July, where temperatures regularly soared to 120 degrees and

It's Gonna Be Another Hot One!

above. The wailing of ambulances rushing to the prone and unconscious bodies of those foolish enough to take a stroll at noon became commonplace, with the wiser citizens opting to live in darkened seclusion surrounded by fans or in pools of ice-cold water in their backyards. Every morning the radios and TVs would say the same thing, over and over. "It's gonna be another hot one!" they rang hollowly. One could hear how tired they were, tired of how the air was becoming almost painful, like sticking one's entire body into an oven. And one could almost hear the glee in their voices when they finally found something else to talk about one day, even if it was something extremely peculiar.

"Barbara Murray, a 77-year-old resident of the city, made a discovery this morning that was at first alarming, and then confusing," the anchor read over the static crackle of the television. "She found what appeared to be blood dripping from her window AC unit," he continued over some macabre images of a boxy air conditioner leaking thick, dark red fluid from the slatted part of the fans, dripping down onto the carpet below. An unsettling discovery, as further investigation revealed the blood as having no apparent source, and no evidence of it having been placed into the unit prior. It would've been fine, just another strange happening for the books, another bizarre bit of urban legend fuel, had it not continued to happen across the city.

Amidst the frightening heat was an equally as horrific epidemic of bleeding appliances, and as the heat soared, more and more AC units, box fans, and other cooling instruments would weep the peculiar sanguine liquid. The blood stopped pouring once the appliances were cracked open to investigate its source, but as with the first reported occurrence with poor Mrs. Murray, there was none. Even more puzzling was the fact that devices that continued to be plugged and working would continue to bleed, even beyond the volume put out by devices that had been torn open for investigation. It was extremely unsettling, but the persistent and frankly dangerous heat left many with no other option than to just learn to live with it. There wasn't enough ice in the world to keep them cooled off without an AC unit or a box fan or even one of those cheap desk fans, even if it meant their homes and apartments would carry a permanent coppery stench that would make them heave a little every time they'd walk in, even if the red stains on the walls and carpet kept getting worse, even if it left them constantly distracted by the disconcerting implications of machines that bleed what is apparently indistinguishable from regular human blood. They were all things they could live with just to make it through the hottest summer of the century, until the wailing started.

It's Gonna Be Another Hot One!

Nobody wanted to admit it, but people swore they could hear, through the restless rumble of their appliances late at night, pained moaning. Difficult to describe, it was not unlike a man being slowly crushed by the gears of an enormous machine, wheezy and wracked in agony. It was another stone atop the crushing weight of the trial the residents of the city were being put through, atop the heat and the blood, as if some cruel Old Testament god was making them endure a series of worsening plagues. It was an isolating terror, because it wasn't as if you could ask your neighbor, "does your air conditioner cry at night too?" without worrying if you were the only one and had lost your mind. The citizens continued to ignore it, ignore how loud it would get, ignore how they would wake up in cold sweats from nightmares of being mangled to death, ignore how human the crying sounded. The moaning turned into sobbing turned into wailing turned into screaming, the cacophony of mechanical roaring and horrific crying echoing throughout the city, bouncing off of skyscrapers and brick buildings alike, amplifying the noise into one terrorizing, mechanized wail.

One morning, August 1st to be exact, people watched from their windows as a man, dressed in nothing but boxers, threw his fan from the window onto the road below, and emerged from his apartment with a sledgehammer. The fan was still leaking blood, still screaming in mechanical agony, when the man brought the sledgehammer down upon it, cracking it in half. He continued to swing the hammer down again and again and again, blood splattering across the warming asphalt, until it was nothing but a pile of red plastic and metal, and the screaming stopped. Everybody on the street followed suit, destroying their cooling appliances in an act of apparent fury, taking baseball bats to their fans, crowbars to their AC units, smashing them until piles of blood-soaked junk littered the streets and sidewalks like so many machine cadavers, reeking like a jar of pennies somebody left in a hot car. By the setting of the sun, the screaming was gone, the city silent for the first time in weeks. Citizens stood amongst the viscera of their appliances in a daze. They laid their weapons upon the ground next to the carnage and walked inside to sleep, awaking in a puddle of sweat to the radio cheerfully announcing, as if nothing happened, "It's gonna be another hot one!"

Tethered

Adler Johnson

The smell of blood is what wakes me up. Well, not exactly “wakes” me up in the traditional sense, more drags me back into your realm. Pulling me out of the comforting nothingness between your realm and where I should be. Where I would be if you could let me go. No one tells you that ghosts can smell. But why not? We can see and hear, sometimes touch depending on who you ask (not that you would ever ask something so foolish) but no one ever thinks about smell. The smell permeates the apartment, the coppery scent flooding the rooms, mixing with the smell of my blood from my own death. A smell that no one else is subject to but myself.

I flicker into existence besides the cooling body. Blood surrounding it as it lies face up, its eyes forever unblinking, its final sight locked on the chipped ceiling above it. I have long since stopped seeing corpses as people. The soul is gone, leaving behind a husk that cannot even begin to tell the story of its former occupant's life.

A quick glance around the room tells a story that even the most idiotic of detectives could read. An overturned table. A knife missing from the block in the kitchen. No forced entry.

A siren wails. Someone in the building must have heard the noises. Soon there are heavy footsteps and a loud pounding at the door. Words that I cannot distinguish are shouted and then the door opens. Your reality has started to fade as the officer enters the room, a wind sweeping around me, dragging me back to sleep until I am once more dragged into your world. But before the nothingness can completely encase me, I hear the horrified yell from the officer and the desperate call for backup.

The scream is what drags me back this time. The sound, after existing in nothingness, rattles my senses and by the time I can focus on your reality, I am almost alone. A door slams but it is distant compared to the rattling breathing that is next to me. I glance down to view the struggling corpse below me. A soul clings to life and drags in breath after painful breath. I have seen enough death to know that it is already over. As I stand there, the soul gives up and releases the death grip they have on the corpse. The corpse relaxes, its muscles

finally slack in the blood below it. The blood stains the rug below the corpse. A rug that was clearly cheap but well taken care of, an attempt to add beauty to the too small room. A stained chair is tipped over and I am surprised that that wasn't the sound that brought me back here. And that this one had time to scream. Though I realize as I wander around the area surrounding the corpse, blood once more permeating the air, that the kitchen is further away than previously. A longer distance to grab a weapon. More of a chance for escape or just cry for help. Not that anyone ever gets away. I consider trying to follow the bloody footprints that lead from the corpse out the door but I turn away. There will be another time. Perhaps I will finally arrive in time to meet.

I blink awake again, this time unsure of what dragged me to you. I glance around the room as your reality begins to come into focus around me. A clean bedroom, bed made and floors swept but clearly lived in. A couple books on a bedside table, a few tissues that had missed the trashcan, a sweater draped over a chair. I step out of the room and walk down the hallway to where I can faintly hear two voices. As I slowly walk down the hallway, no rush when I know what the future holds, the voices start to rise, one in fear and one in anger. But I can hear the excitement behind the anger.

As I step out of the hallway and into what is clearly the living room, the first crash sounds. Whether the crash was because of tripping in haste or a purposely push, I do not arrive in time to see. Before the fearful voice can regain their footing, there is a knife in their back. The voice no longer speaks in words as blood gurgles out of their mouth as they try to fight the placement of the body. Face up, eyes locked on the ceiling like all the other victims. The excitement behind the angry voice turns to frustration. The frustration of an artist who can never replicate their greatest work. It is now that I decide to show myself.

You blink up at me, shocked that after all these years of trying to recreate me, I have returned to you. I smile at the fear and awe in your eyes.

“Oh honey,” I murmur softly, “You can try, but none will ever be as beautiful as I was.”

A Light in the Garden

Lucy Hannah Ryan

It is seventy-eight degrees Celsius in the burial place. Rust is beginning to wind its way around my wrist like a delicate copper bracelet. In my hands, I am carrying a heart for my lover, xir chest waiting for my hands to press it closed again, a circuit arching toward completion.

I am supposed to call it a battery, the cool, lithium heart cradled in my palm, nestled where the texture of flesh has begun to wear away, but I do not know which part remembers this, matter or machinery. I do not know if my organics are capable of memory anymore. Synapse or signal, it is electricity all the same.

In the darkened room, Mnemosyne, xir movements slow and stiff, had called it *heart*, had pressed a single finger to my forehead and said, "My heart is failing me," xir voice hardly more than a crackle of static.

I had touched a single finger to xir chest and said, "I would do no such thing."

It is seventy-nine degrees Celsius. The plants are failing, too.

For as long as we have lived in the burial place, I have tended to its still-living. At first, only the thistles had persisted, the sharp and angry, hard-wired for survival. They needed little water, and the heat merely made them more volatile. But sometimes, hidden beneath the thorns peppered with the blue-black sheen of my joint-lubricant, I would see flickers of colour. For a while, they were just errant blossoms, a winking pink and white sign to the remaining pollinators, but the more I saw the more they winked for me, too.

I kept receptacles out to gather any flashes of rainwater, bottles, the food cartons we'd collected rations in when those were things we could swallow, and we would share, the plants and us, dividing the acidic coolness between us. Before long, the shy flowers began to shake off their lethargy, arching higher, creeping out from behind the thorns and dotting the garden with colour.

A Light in the Garden

From then on, time became a loop, the burial place wearing proudly its purpose once again. The ground is a hungry and tender thing, grown used to being fed deep in the last decades, so I took to giving it its creatures back again. The few unmoving mice we shared the darkened room with, the pollinators decaying on the concrete paths. I dug deeply with my hands, the flesh texture wearing away to smooth silver, planting the deceased creatures the same way I planted seeds. Soon the flowers grew broader and brighter, and I wrote philosophy into the dirt: *teach the ground tenderness, and tenderness might blossom in response.*

This, I think, is our home's purpose, too. Every time I push open the iron gates I trigger an ouroboros of remembrance, a hundred erect stones transcribed with *gone but not forgotten* made true by my wandering gaze. I come home to visit a thousand cohabitants, a family of restful dead, the arms of stone angels open to seek embrace.

Mnemosyne, another name made of self-fulfilment, had started the ritual. I tended to just glance at the names, smile at the more beautiful headstones, but she had devoted herself up to the task of mourning. Her fingers knew the shape of every name on every stone, the words filed away into deepest memory, to be known as long as the body could withstand. A catalogue of love held there in my lover's mind, a whole grave site's worth of it. It did not take long for me to succumb, too.

We both had our favourites. I liked the names hardly legible, the ones ivy-swallowed and bramble-worn, the earth curling closely around their monuments like a sempiternal embrace. Mnemosyne preferred those with long epitaphs, words carved lovingly, painstakingly into stone like a tattoo upon the planet: *they lived, they lived, they lived.*

I glance at one of them as I pass, one of the last erected before the dead grew too numerous, squinting against the brutal sun and letting my fingers relearn the inscription. *Beloved Tamora, the world is a darker, colder place without you in it.* A blackberry bush constricts the bottom half, a swollen berry falling into my palm as I brush against it. I was allergic to these, once, skin plumping

A Light in the Garden

and swelling red, scratchy rash spilling down my chest. Now, I tilt it into my mouth, the faint sweetness and acidity crawling along my tongue like the phantom of a taste.

The sick had lasted longest, a fact that had the rich sweltering faster, red-faced in their rage. Bodies better used to persisting, bodies which had been modified and improved beyond wear and tear. Soon, what remained was nerve damage and metal alloy, soldering one other back to health.

The heart is warm in my palm, now, from sun or conduction, its edges scuffed where my touch has become brittle, sensitivity worn down to faint impression. I touched a stone angel several days ago, mapped out her features with my fingers and watched the stone crumble away beneath my touch. All it would take is a closed fist to do the same to the heart, acidic lifeblood dripping between my fingers. A slip, a mimicry of beating. I shudder, electricity crawling up and down my spine. I hold it delicately between two fingers and turn towards the darkened room.

It's a cold place, the damp that bleeds through the walls stiffening our joints, wearing us down. The faces that peer out from its roof, their mouths upturned in ecstasy do not look quite so welcoming when the light grows dim. The concrete is wearing, the door is heavy, and the dead take up more room inside than we could ever dream of.

It is home.

If I am quiet - and I am - I can hear the faint whirr of Mnemosyne's chest, fraying wires and cooling systems keeping xir body alive, like the asthmatic rasp of breath used to echo throughout our bunk. Before, I would have to untangle it from distant bird calls, and my own pulse underneath. Now there is nothing but the shift of the door under my touch, the mechanical whirr, the metal clink of xir heart slotting into place.

Mnemosyne touches my forehead, and I wonder if that's worn, too, a casualty of tenderness. "I'm awake."

"Like a fairytale," I say, the words rolling off the tongue like programming, like the thing I am supposed to say.

A Light in the Garden

The lights from xir circuitry blink in the gloom, colour us orange, colour us blue. My wrist creaks, rusting, worn down to an ache, but all I notice is the weight of it in my lover's hands. The door closes in an uneasy shift of concrete and iron, and shuts the burning sun out. The darkened room returns to darkness once again.

Witch for Demon

Avra Margariti

The floor has been sticky
with salt since you left,
my bed yawning cold and empty
without a shared body squirming
against slate-gray silk sheets.
After I cursed away that overzealous young priest,
the air pressure has changed in my house,
the tang of copper and brimstone, gone gone gone.

My grimoire and books of demonology
may be holywaterlogged,
but my lips still know how to quiver
around your familiar incantation,
my tongue tracing the shape of your sigil
against my palate.

Remember: I used to touch ourselves,
a consensual possession,
as I watched my mouth move in the ceiling mirror,
the cinnamon embers of your essence
glowing through my eyes.
This, here, is our breast,
this, here, is our heart.

I used to call and you'd answer:
I was trapped in a gaol of decorum
and you set me free;
I was hurting, and you soothed the ache.
Afterward, we engaged in occult dances,
you and I fitting so well together
in our dually occupied body,
vessel and energy coalescing, two of a kind.

Hurry back to me
Through summoning circles and ley lines.
Come cradle my pentacle-embossed chest.
You'll be the key and I, the skeleton.

Tomorrow's Tree

Scott Aaron Tait

Abigail didn't fight when they came to arrest her. She watched the last rays of burnt orange light blazon across the cottage walls with a smile as she awaited the pending arrival of death.

A key turned in the lock and the heavy oak door swung open. Footsteps tapped against the hard stone floor as a willowy man stepped forward. His hand covered his nose to stifle the stench. With a passing glance at his prisoner, he spoke in a low commanding voice.

"You, Abigail Hargrove, have been accused of witchcraft. Will you deny the charges?"

"Healing is my only craft."

"Look at me when I speak witch!" he demanded. "Since you do not refute the claims, I hereby sentence you to death. At dawn, you will be executed for your crimes."

"Pray tell, what crimes have I committed Mr Putnam?"

"Your magic bewitched my wife."

"I will not deny my affections toward Sarah but I did not lead her astray."

"You cast your vile rituals so that she would betray me and the heavenly vow we made to one another."

Abigail shook her head. "Sarah and I have been companions for years."

"But she is bound to me, I *am* her husband."

"She was barely eighteen when her father blessed your union because of your wealth,

nothing more. To think she would willingly give herself to you, a man no less and one twice her age. Tell me what price did you pay for her?"

"Heathen!" he yelled, striking Abigail across the face. "By the dawn's light, you will burn."

"Death comes to us all George. I shall not fear it when my time comes," replied Abigail, with the taste of copper lingering on her tongue.

"Then have no fear that tomorrow will be your last."

"Perhaps but, if I may, I have one last request."

"Why should I grant you, anything?"

"Because Magistrate, I am at your mercy."

"Very well, seeing as it is your last night on this earth I shall grant your request."

"I would like my choice of tree."

"That is your request? To choose the wood upon which you will burn?"

"Yes."

"But why?" asked George.

"If I am to die what does it matter?"

"And what tree do you choose witch?"

"Why do you insist on calling me that?"

"It is what you are," he said, spitting at the ground to guard himself against her magic.

Though her wrists were bound he wasn't about to take any chances.

"Yes," she smiled, "I am a *witch* if it helps you sleep better at night."

"You admit it so openly. Are you truly so defiant of our Lord and Saviour?"

"Your Lord, George, never mine," corrected Abigail.

"Because you lie with the devil?"

"Man invented the devil. Ironic I suppose, that I have only ever met him in the eyes of men like you," said Abigail softly, satisfied by the hatred burning in his eyes.

"I care not who you claim to worship, but as a God-fearing man, I will show you one last act of compassion. Which tree do you choose for the kindling?"

"Elder," smiled Abigail. Tutting, George Putnam whispered instructions to the guard and, making the sign of the cross, departed.

The stone floor was cold and the rope dug into her bruised wrists. Abigail's eyes felt heavy with exhaustion as the scent of honeysuckle wafted on the breeze. Its sweet fragrance reached out like a distant memory. Closing her eyes she could see herself standing in the cottage she shared with Sarah. Outside the window, the garden was full of colour as the honeysuckle bloomed alongside lavender, rosemary and sage. Sarah's mischievous giggle rang in her ears. At night they ran into the clearing deep in the woods where they slowly removed their clothes to commune with nature. Dancing around in circles, for what felt like hours, until they were both too dizzy to stand. The delicate touch of their fingers running through each other's hair and the weight of their bodies pressed together as they basked under the moon's soft white light. Their tender flesh entwined in a moment's embrace which felt like a lifetime ago.

Morning came with little sympathy as the memories felt like nothing more than a pleasant dream. A thin beam of sunlight inched around the damp cell as the guard heaved open the door and George entered.

"Today you will burn and your spell over Sarah will end. Shall you repent for your crimes and take our Lord into your heart?"

"I have no sins to repent for. I am as innocent as the day I first laid eyes on Sarah and fell in love," Abigail chuckled to herself.

"Wretched woman!" spat George, storming out of the prison.

The sun blistered red in the sky as Abigail was marched to the town square. Whispers filled the air as bystanders exchanged snippets of gossip. Many of them shuffled a little forward for a better view of the witch. One person stood out from the crowd that day. Her face was slightly obscured by the hooded purple cloak Abigail had embroidered with silver thread. With a silent exchange of glances, Sarah waited for what was to come.

"Today by the gracious light of God we condemn thee, Abigail Hargrove, to death by burning for the unforgivable crimes of witchcraft."

Lowering the flame to the twigs, the crowd held a collective breath. Abigail did not scream, even as the flames licked at her ankles. The smouldering scent of charred wood and flesh wafted on the air. In the distance, a shadow sneaked over the nearby hills, casting its darkness upon the church and then down over the town below as the moon inched over the sun. For a moment, only the flickering of flames offered any light until that too was suddenly extinguished. Plunged into the abyss, devoid of light to guide their way, the townspeople scrambled over one another. Their cries echoed amidst the sudden solar eclipse.

"Please do not be alarmed, this is the Lord testing our resolve," urged George to the increasingly frantic crowd. Minutes passed by as footsteps and screams echoed in the darkness until the moon began to move away and the town square was once more illuminated. The townsfolk turned to the stake and stood aghast. Abigail stood to the side of the pyre without a single burn visible on her skin. Her lips curled into a smirk as agitation spread across George Putnam's face.

"This was your doing?" demanded George.

"It was not I but the fair lady moon that cast out the sun."

"You asked this of her, this dark goddess to which you worship."

"You burnt her sacred tree," replied Abigail, "so cursed now you must be."

George's moustache twitched at the young woman's scorn. Making the sign of the cross, he motioned for the guards who quickly seized Abigail by the wrists.

"Tomorrow you will die by hanging."

"Will you make the gallows strong?" asked Abigail.

"Of sturdy oak no less."

"Very well, then tomorrow I hang."

True to the Magistrate's word the gallows were built of the finest oak. Stepping up onto the platform, Abigail placed a hand to the frame, from which she would soon be suspended, and tapped three times. She whispered. Her hushed words heard only by the wise oak. With the noose tightened around her neck, George nodded to the executioner. No one heard the rumbling of the earth beneath the town. With a crack and a groan, the wood splintered and snapped until the entire frame collapsed into a useless heap of lumber.

"Impossible!" George roared, staring wide-eyed at the rubble, "seize the witch!"

Once more Abigail was taken to her cell, this time followed closely by the Magistrate cursing under his breath. He did not have a mind to notice his wife smiling eagerly amongst the crowd.

"I witnessed the construction of those gallows, the timber was strong, the building impeccable. The menfolk worked arduously through the night."

"And yet here I stand alive and well before you."

"Then tell me in truth, how is it that you came to live? What unholy prize did you promise the devil himself that he would bestow such powerful dark magic upon you."

"My dear George, I told you once before, the devil lives only in the hearts of men.

The magic which protects me is all around us. Nature is my lady and to her, I do offer my servitude."

"You consort with demons and devils, it is to them you asked for your life to be spared. Do not deny it."

She shook her head. "The Green Man is no demon. How quickly the converted forget the old ways. Oak is his tree and wise it is, with a tap of my hand I asked of him a wish and that wish he did lovingly grant."

"By my word, you will die," George insisted.

"That may be, therefore I shall request of you..."

"No more requests! I have shown you more than enough pity. Tomorrow you die by my hand and God's will alone."

Church bells chimed early the next morning as Abigail was marched across the town square and up the hill to the churchyard where a small group had congregated to bear witness.

George looped the heavy rope around Abigail's neck himself. The other end securely tied around the strongest branch of an ancient yew tree. As they hoisted her from the ground the crowd muttered prayers as Abigail dangled not

far above their heads. Her mouth gagged to prevent her from reciting any spells but a *witch* does not need words to speak. The old Gods would always hear the truth in her heart. A single crow squawked from the church's steeple. Stretching out its elegant cloak of obsidian feathers the bird soared effortlessly through the air skimming gravestones as it curved toward the yew and landed on the strongest branch. With haste, it began pecking at the rope.

Waving his arms frantically George shouted, "be gone servant of Satan."

Thread by thread the rope thinned until finally, it snapped. Bystanders held their fingers to their lips stifling cries as the witch landed on the soft hallowed ground without injury. Sarah burst through the crowd to hold Abigail in her arms. Removing the gag Sarah pressed her lips to Abigail's as the lovers melted into one another's arms. George, flushed with anger, grabbed at his wife's wrist and pried her away.

"Unhand me, husband," she demanded, "I am no longer yours. I never was."

"You made a solemn vow before God almighty."

"Your God George, not mine. I have always worshipped another."

"How is it this dark lord of yours grants your every wish?"

Three young girls in the crowd giggled, earning themselves a disapproving glare from the Magistrate.

"Abigail already told you," explained the first child with a rosy-cheeked grin.

"It is not the devil they worship Mr Putnum but another," added the second.

"Then who? Who has such power that they can thwart even death himself?"

"Our mother, of course, the Goddess of all things. The sun, the moon and the trees are all her servants. Just like us," clarified the third.

"Who are you?"

"We are the fae."

"You are heathens. You are evil," shrieked George, feeling a sudden sharpness run up his arm. "I will see to it that you all hang. Witch and fae alike by tomorrow's light..." George Putnam's face drained of colour, his breathing wheezed and lethargic as he tried to force out the last words. He clutched a hand to his chest and dropped to the ground.

The girls stepped forward in unison, curious to see the old magistrate lying grey and motionless at their feet. One reached out a foot and gave him a gentle kick. He did not move. Abigail and Sarah joined the fae girls standing around George Putnam's lifeless body. Together they joined hands and danced in hypnotic circles singing an unusual rhyme.

"Yesterday, today and tomorrow's tree, with magic whispers, they set her free. First Elder then Oak and now Yew, none can kill the witch, that much is true."



Another Ghazal for the Men Who Fired Me When I Was Suicidal



Laura Arciniega

Welcome to the Museum, said your incisors:
I'd come to teach all I knew about incisors.

You satin-hand men led me down unmusiced halls:
I tine-hungered to hear music of incisors.

You men awe-soft belong-called me *slink-still creature*:
You down-men forgot I came to teach incisors.

You tender-teethed men praise-joked my *slink-still* pelage
So iron velvet warm-sluiced down my incisors.

I velvet-sliced myself a *slink-still creature*—*yours*.
I joke-praised, my blades like mirror-warm incisors.

Satin-hands *slinked* up pelage, then awe-soft-you crunched:
There was no museum, just caves for incisors.

You belong: give us a soul-slice to satin-hand:
A femur, or music; a child. Your incisors?

Your *slink-still creature* fell, my awe-soft tender up.
Biting my jaw, you crunched out my twelve incisors.

Your cave down-sluiced iron velvet of wolf-music
Because you hunger-tined to smell wolf-incisors.

My blades-warm soul sluiced iron velvet from my face,
But I, a wolf with you, paid for my incisors.

Another Ghazal for the Men Who Fired Me When I Was Suicidal

Contralto taught you all I knew, what you'd paid for—
Tine, tender-tear: I'm wolf-music of incisors.

You learned me, learned wolf-slice, learned your satin-soft awe.
I *slinked* mirror-blades from your Hall of Incisors.

Sluicing joke-throats warm-tender like the wolf I am,
Up *slinked* Erra's wolf-contralto of incisors.

Wunderkammern

Emily M. Goldsmith

You wake up
on an earth-spilt floor
surrounded by drooping leaves
the ground is springy
everything is springy
you are sinking

You possess an unconscious yearning to regress
to the comforting confines of the womb-as-sea

Do you ever
have a suspicion
that trees talk
to one another
when we are not around?
You know that cypress trees
are especially talkative
because of their proximity
to water

They whisper contradictions
you can feel their gaze
on your back
They are watching you

Under the slumped shadow of your friend-turned enemy
You gorge yourself
with water
from the spring



Afia the First



Jacqueline Atta-Hayford

Afia sat in silent awe, in the middle of a shale-covered shore before a sea that reflected a sky the colour of a strong cup of tea, and the arc of an enormous moon half-dunked into the horizon. There were thousands of stars sparkling, like pinpricks through the sheet of atmosphere that allowed her to leave her suit back in the half-buried ship behind her. The air here tasted different, sweeter.

She raised a hand to trace out brand new constellations, feeling the power to impart new meaning onto these ungazed stars travelling from her mind out to her fingertips. She painted memories, watched them pour out of each gesture and settle into the sky. Her mother's hands cradling a cup of Milo was one constellation, the fan palm in the dining room that she used to pretend was an alien plant monster as a child became another. She imagined the sound of her mother's voice as a waveform and found stars to make up its peaks and valleys. She leaned against the hull for warmth, letting her brain fill up with the sound of engines humming all of their energy into broadcasting her location out to the B-team. Going in first to set up a homing signal for the rest of the team was a huge responsibility, which was exactly why she had volunteered. To be the first set of human feet on a new planet was something bigger than her, bigger than the mission. Not the First Black, the First Woman, or the First African. She wanted acknowledgement without the caveat.

The day Afia was invited to take part in the Perihelion Project the fear, anticipation, joy, and the breath-stealing beauty of infinite possibilities hummed all through her bones and blood, stirred up in her stomach and exploded out along every nerve ending. The thrill of discovery, the thrill of space and of working with some of her heroes in the field was all-consuming. Within days she became the sun; surrounded by interviews, tests of physical fitness passed with flying colours, introductions to the V-est of IPs, and raging goodbye parties thrown by her students in the months before she would go away for training. Colleagues who had dismissed her essays for years gave stiff congratulations, journals with no interest in her research had their editors reaching out to her about collections and reprints.

Afia the First

But at home, her family raged. Her mother screamed, forbade, and cursed until her body fell weeping into her daughter's arms. She couldn't lose her only child to oblivion, God forbid it. By the blood, she will see sense. But prayer could not keep Afia from glory. Before long she became a corpse. Family members visited daily in a constant sea of black and red to watch the deceased eating her morning cornflakes while they wailed and beat their chests. She watched her funeral rites play out before her and responded with silence. She would save her fury for her training.

A shiver shook the memory out of her chest and the glittering water shifting against the stone shore carried it off into the endless expanse. At this moment everything was a sea of stars scattered out into forever and this limitless beauty, this impossible reality did not deserve to be blurred by tears. She took a deep breath in noting the smell of salt in the air, the sound of her boots scraping stone as she shifted positions, the feel of her tongue pressed against the roof of her mouth and the slightly sour taste of tea from however long ago it was she had her breakfast. On the first full day of space travel, she drove herself to panic doing calculations, trying to work out how much time was passing on Earth versus the ship. How old would her mother be now, what about an hour from now, what about by the time she landed? That distraction had caused her to muddle the landing coordinates and strand herself on this patch of stone and sand thirty miles off target. B-team would arrive and have to waste valuable mission time picking her up before the habitation study could properly begin if they even found her at all. So she stopped keeping track of time, just ate and slept and worked to hold herself in her body, to keep herself among the stars.

She had been out here for hours now watching the skies but the cold night air was starting to tug the skin on her exposed arms up into goosebumps. She had been warming her back against the ship but it felt cold now and the hum of the engine sounded so faint now the water lapping up against the rocks was starting to drown it out. Had she set the ship up to conserve power upon landing like she had supposed to? The last time she checked she had four days of power left and there was no way it could have been that long, she thought. Impossible.

Afia the First

She began to shiver as the cold reached up under her skin towards her bones; it was time to go back inside where she could warm up and focus, step out of Afia the astrographer and into Dr Mensah the problem solver to figure out what was happening with the engine. If she ran out of power before B-team got into orbit...

She stood up and paced a little bit to wake herself up, rubbing her hands over her arms and breathing hot air on them for warmth before attempting to wrench the freezing metal hatch open. She hesitated, bracing for pain but also taking a moment to look up at the stars one more time. She had been drawing out the car her uncle used to pick her up from school in before the cold got to her but it wasn't lining up in quite the same way from this new angle. That was when she noticed it. A light burning brighter than the rest, tearing through the sky at speed. It grew and flickered like the flame on a match as it creeps closer and closer to your fingertips and Afia was mesmerised by it, frozen in awe. She had been painting pictures for the universe all evening and now it was returning the favour in this brilliant display, just for her. She could imagine herself in that light and wondered, if the light could see her, could it imagine itself in her.

Eternity

Nickolas Rice

“At Eternity, we promise an afterlife of dreams.”

Her voice is calm and soothing, but after the ninth, tenth, or however many times I've heard her say that; I wish my hearing was as good as my vision. I bounce my head to the synchronized chime that follows the recording. One second later, the holographic projection that accompanies the voice emerges.

I don't understand why they'd choose this pretty brunette to entertain me with over-simplified logistics. I've made the decision. The paperwork has been filled out. It isn't necessary to explain anything more. Especially using someone that won't even be able to utilize their product for another sixty years.

The walls are all white, split in half by a thin silver stripe around the room. Three chairs. One on each wall except way over to my left where the receptionist is sitting. No clock. When did places stop helping their clients know what time it is? As if it's too expensive to put a clock on the wall.

Instinctively, I glance at my wrist, but I've not worn a watch in years. The last one I did wear was a gift. It was probably the most used gift I've ever gotten. I massage my wrist, remembering the first band it had. It was leather and had such a strong scent. After that band gave way, I had to buy the oyster bracelet. I did like the way it clicked, but it was nothing like the first. It's a shame the hands stopped clicking and the glass cracked. When all signs of the original were gone, I was never able to put it on again.

I shift in my seat to pull my phone from my khaki's pocket. The black screen reflects the liver spots and wrinkles that I've patiently waited to wear.

I push the button to summon the time. Arthritic pain shoots up my elbow, then up to my shoulder, and subsides after singeing just to the side of my neck. I inhale loudly through gritted teeth. My shaking hand can't hold the sleek device and it clacks onto the tile. I curse under my breath as I balance on the edge of my chair. The simple task of reaching for my phone has become a scene straight out of an assisted living infomercial.

All this hassle to find out I've been waiting forty-five minutes in this uncomfortable chair. I wobble to my feet and stagger over to the receptionist,

Eternity

sitting behind her glass window. She continues typing. I clear my throat loud and obnoxious enough to get her attention. “Can I help you?” she asks, looking up at me with her perfect smile as if she wasn't ignoring me five seconds ago.

“Do you know how much longer I'm going to have to wait here?”

“Should be any minute now, sir. Please have a seat.” She gestures across the sterilized waiting room.

“Yeah, yeah.” I huff as I move back to my chair. A few steps away from her I stop to ask, “Whatever happened to wall clocks? What did those ever do to hurt anyone? Just a simple clock on the wall so that everyone could easily see what time it is.”

“I don't know, sir. Please have a seat.”

I dismissively wave my hand at her. I heard her the first time.

“At Eternity, we promise an afterlife of dreams.”

“So I've heard,” I tell the hologram as I lower myself into the chair. The moment I sit, the opaque glass door beside the receptionist slides open.

“Mr. Klendale?” A nurse in a baby blue smock calls out.

“Klen-DULL!” I correct her, frustrated, as I feebly stand again. “With the amount of money I'm paying this place, you'd think you could get my name right.”

“Mr. Klendull. My apologies. Right this way, please.”

I follow her down a hallway that has the same color theme as the waiting room. A few other opaque doors interrupt the silver racing stripe running along the wall. I'm doing my best to keep up with her, but my knees are quite a few years older than hers.

“How did you hear about Eternity?” she asks.

I know her empty small talk is intended to make this walk less boring, so I humor her. “How do you not hear about it? Y'all play ads on every radio station and TV show. Not to mention the billboards, on the Internet, or those stupid emails you send every week. You know, that's really annoying that you do that. I don't need to be reminded every Tuesday of how old I am. I feel it all day, every day.”

“I'm sorry about that Mr. Klendull.”

We reach another foggy glass door with the word “Six” written on it. The nurse waves her badge over a sensor, and the door transitions from opaque to see-through. A useless technological advancement. Just open the door if you want to see what's on the other side. The now-clear door slides open and she gestures towards the plastic bed in the middle of the room. “Please have a seat, Mr. Klendull.”

“Call me Abel, please.”

Eternity

“Certainly,” she replies as she sits at a monitor and scans her ID. “Please look straight ahead at this circle on the wall, Abel.”

I do as she instructs. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a thin red line flash. Before I'm able to look for the source, it's gone.

“I now have your vitals. You may lay back and relax, sir.” I stay seated the same as I have been but situate myself a little better. “Can you confirm your date of birth?” she asks.

“Today.”

The nurse annoyingly giggles. “Oh, I see that. Happy birthday.” I groan. “Abel, why have you chosen Eternity for your second life?”

“That's a foolish question.”

She cocks her head a little and then re-straightens before saying, “It's just to help us make the experience for you the best that we can.”

I roll my eyes at her cheery-scripted response. “My husband's in there.”

“Oh?” That surprises her. “I bet that reunion will be wonderful. I love that we're able to do that for you two. How long ago did he pass?”

“Forty years. Cancer.”

“Oh, Abel, I'm so—”

I hold my hand up to stop her. “Save it. I don't want to hear it. I'm legally old enough today, so just take my brain to him.”

“That's not exactly how it works. We'll scan your brain and extract your memories, personality, desires, and so on. We turn all of that into a file and then that file goes into the Eternity mainframe. But your brain remains in your physical body.”

I blink at her. It's as if my eyelids gained weight from listening to her explanation. “Just do it.”

She asks me a few more routine questions before leaving me alone. I'm relieved she's gone. She was far too chipper.

There's no clock in this room either. I think they don't want to remind people of how long they make them wait. I suffer the pain in my arm again to check my phone. Another thirty minutes of waiting. This is ridiculous.

Finally, a brief knock on the door just before it shifts to clear revealing a woman in a white lab coat. The door slides open.

“Hello, Mr.—Oh, I see the note. Hello, Abel. I'm Dr. Silvyn. How are you today?”

I look her directly in the eye and say, “Ma'am, I've done the paperwork. I've paid the fees. I've answered all the questions. I'm tired of waiting. Please just do what you're going to do and let me rest.”

Eternity

Dr. Silvyn offers me a smile. It's pleasant and I believe she's genuine. She holds my shoulder as she helps me recline onto the plastic pillow. "This is the last question I will ask you, sir. You're aware that once the extraction is complete, your body will have no consciousness? There is no undoing this?"

"That's what I'm hoping for," I confidently answer.

The doctor scans her ID badge. She types something in and the red laser returns. More than just the one I previously saw. I can't turn to see them all, but I sense them all shining on my head. A dull glow fills the room. I close my eyes for a moment. When I reopen them, the lasers are gone. The room is gone. I'm gone.

All I see is white, until I blink. It's a light, an extremely bright light. My hand quickly shields my eyes. *Quickly?* I squint through the shine, and as I do, I watch my hand. I hold it out in front of me, flex my fingers, and... it's easy. There's no pain. I feel up my arm to my elbow, then my shoulder. There's no arthritis.

The white light has dimmed significantly, or my eyes adjusted. I notice the ground as I push to my feet. It's cobblestone. The loose stones shift with a crunchy wobble as I walk across them. It's just like First Street used to be before it was paved over.

To my left, train tracks stretch in both directions until they disappear behind an orchard of trees. On the right are stores that have freshly resurfaced in my memory. That there is *Mrs. Mafalda's Soda Shoppe*. It's where I had my first kiss over the top of a strawberry shake with two straws. Next door is the hardware store where Mr. Brimson gave me my first job. Then the movie theater that burnt down. That's right. It burned down, but here it is. The Marquee reads "Welcome Home."

Where is everyone? I search through windows, but there isn't a soul around. Are we still called souls in here?

A train whistle from behind shocks me out of my thoughts. I run to the stop.

"All aboard!" the conductor shouts as he leans out the locomotive.

"Hey!" I wave for his attention.

"Hop on then."

"No, I don't know if I want to. You see, I'm looking for someone." He straightens and adjusts his red suspenders. "I'm new here, and I'm looking for my husband."

"Ahh," he says with a condescending tone. "Til death do you part."

"Excuse me?" My eyebrows furrow.

Eternity

“You *are* new here.” The conductor takes a breath. “It’s nearly impossible to find people you knew from the living. It’s best to start your new eternity without the weight of those you’ve left behind.”

“I didn’t leave him behind. He made it here before me. So I’m looking for him.”

He sighs and holds his hat to his chest. “I hate to break it to you, but there’s a very real chance your partner has already left you behind to start his eternity.”

My shoulders tense as anger stirs inside me. I guess the mainframe does keep all of a person’s personality. “First off, he’s my husband. Second off, there is no chance that he would leave me behind.” My voice catches at the end of my sentence. It’s been forty years, and in a way, he did leave me behind. He was granted a humanitarian upload, and he took it.

The man in suspenders puts his hat back on and gestures to the open door of the train car. “There is one place we can check. All aboard.”

I step off the platform and into a luxurious train car. From the lit sconces to the deep maroon and gold carpet, the whole thing has the grandeur of a five-star hotel. It’s far fancier than I’ve ever imagined a train could appear. The classy cloth chairs are mostly empty. A pair of women are sitting near the back. I take a seat in the front row. Easy on, easy off.

I watch First Street disappear as the clickity-clack of the train wheels pick up their rhythm.

“That sound always makes me giggle.” A small voice sweeps up from below me.

I look for the source, and a young girl with long blue hair is now sitting right beside me. I either didn’t see her, or she just snuck up. She can’t be any older than eight. “Hello,” I greet her.

“Hello.” She smiles back with a missing front tooth. “My name’s Shyla. What’s yours?”

“Abel,” I say but get distracted. The clicking of the tracks is gone. My breath catches when I see why. We’re not on the ground anymore. Our train is flying. It lifts us farther up into the simulated blue sky. “Do you know where we’re going?” I ask my new travel buddy.

“To the cloud. Why are you so old?” she asks with the genuine curiosity of a child.

I’m a bit taken aback. “Why are you so young?”

She kicks her small legs back and forth in her much-too-big-for-her chair. “This is the oldest I’m allowed to be. In all the memories I have, I’m younger than this so this is what I choose to look like. Except my hair. This is from a memory of playing dress-up with Mommy. We played dress-up every day after I got sick.”

“You choose?”

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“Yeah. That’s why I asked why you’re so old. You probably have so many memories you can pick from.”

I brush my tongue over the inside of the dentures. I rub my hand over my bald head. I slide the cheap bifocal glasses off my ears. “How do I choose?”

“Just remember.”

“I need more than that,” I snap, but as I start to remember a younger me, my focus unblurs, the top of my head feels a tiny bit heavier, and my tongue catches on the chipped tooth my brother’s baseball broke when I was twelve.

The little girl’s eyes grow wide as I transform in front of her. “That was neat.”

“It felt neat.” I smile for what feels like the first time in... I don’t know how long.

She asks something else, but I don’t hear her. There’s a new weight on my wrist. Actually, it’s an old weight with the scent of new leather, like the day he gave it to me.

“Who are you going to meet at the cloud?” she asks again. “I’m going to see if my mom or dad are there yet. I go every day. A lot of people just wait there, but it’s really boring so I ride the train around. It’s much more fun to see the things other people bring in with their memories.”

The train lurches us forward. “We’re here,” Shyla cheers as she jumps to her feet and runs out the opening train door.

As I follow her, I glance towards the two women at the back. They stay seated and continue chatting.

The cloud is a vast white space. All the items look like vague memories, lost and recollected. The tables and chairs are bits of furniture put together with missing pieces. The few buildings here try to express what they were, but large chunks omit any identity they once had.

There are more people than chairs, and they all look lost or frozen. Most are standing still, gazing into the bleakness around them. Shyla’s blue hair is easy to spot, and she is one of the only moving bodies here. She runs to a desk she can barely reach her chin up to. A woman who reminds me of a hotel clerk leans forward to greet her.

“Hello, Shyla. How are you?”

“Are they here yet?”

“I’m sorry, sweetie. They’re not here yet.”

I reach the desk right as Shyla turns away. She kicks at the ground. It jogs the memory of how I kicked rocks down the sidewalk at her age when loneliness surrounded me.

The clerk directs her attention to me, “Hello. I’m the cloud’s registry. Is there someone I can help you find?”

“My husband,” I answer. “Wesley Klendull.”

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“I’m sorry, sir. There isn’t anyone registered here with that name. If you’d like to—”

“You didn’t even check anything.”

“The registration is part of my programming, sir. Everyone that has registered with me is stored in my RAM.”

She’s a computer. I suppose real souls wouldn’t want to work in their eternity. It frustrates me that I’m forced to consult with code, but a new reality consumes me. I am a computer now too.

“What do you mean he’s not here? Where else would he be?”

“I do not know, sir. If you’d like to—”

“Check again!”

“Yes, sir. I did and there is still no Wesley Kendull registered. If you’d like to register your name and wait. I’ll be glad to inform him of your readiness should he arrive.”

Can she be glad? I’m not sure if she’s capable of feeling the way I do, but I have no other options. “Abel Klendull.”

“Thank you, Abel Klendull. You may wait anywhere on the cloud. If you leave the cloud, you will need to re-register the next time you arrive.”

Did he not wait for me? That question echos in my head as I slump to where the clerk directed me. Lost in thought, I bump into a picnic table. It’s missing half the top, one bench, and a leg. This seems like an appropriate spot to cool my heels. Did I wait forty years for my birthday only to be stood up?

Is this my eternity? A soul lingering in the cloud, mindlessly on pause. I take a deep breath and a sense of calmness seeps into me. My breathing relaxes. I’m not certain, but it’s as if the air on the cloud surrounds me like a security blanket. I will wait here for him. This is fine.

“Mr. Abel, come this way.” Something tugs at my jeans’ pocket. It’s Shyla pulling me out of stagnation. She guides me across the cloud and away from the untroubled. She brings me to another hotel clerk who looks identical to the first.

“Hello, Shyla. How are you?”

“I just wanted to show my new friend the pets.” Shyla leads me past the desk and the unhelpful program. I immediately see what she wants me to. Animals of all kinds, frozen in place. Sitting, standing, jumping, flying, swimming, galloping and so much more, but all still like a statue.

“What are they?” I ask.

“They’re everyone’s pets. Well everyone who had a pet. I never had a pet before so none of them are mine. I just like to come and see them.”

“Why aren’t they moving?”

Eternity

She kneels beside a collie and scratches its ears. “They’re just memories right now. If their owners come and claim them, they’ll behave just like they remember.”

“What if their owner never comes? Are they just stuck like this forever?”

“No. Rich people who bought extra space usually come and take those ones.”

“All aboard!” The conductor’s call resounds through the cloud.

“I’ll see you next time, Priscilla,” Shyla says, and presses her nose against the collie’s. She grabs my pocket again and tugs. “I hate waiting for the next train. It always takes forever to come back.”

She leads me back to the train and rushes inside, but I hesitate. “All aboard!” the conductor shouts again.

I know he’s calling for me, but my feet don’t want to move. If I leave, I might miss Wesley. He could arrive on the next train, looking for me. Or he could’ve done what Shyla’s been doing. Maybe he gave up on me ever making it into the mainframe and is spending his eternity exploring. That is something he loved.

The doors begin to slide shut. I watch as they squeeze together. My body has a plan of its own because right before they close entirely, my arm stops them. I press myself into the car. The doors seal and the train takes off.

“I’ll be right back, Shyla,” I tell her as I walk towards the other passengers still chatting near the back.

They both look a bit older. Not as old as I am—*was*—but older nonetheless. One is wearing a pastel pink dress with a matching hat, and the other a black-and-white suit. They don’t notice me approach so I clear my throat. “Excuse me.”

They stop talking and stare at me. After a moment, the woman in the dress asks, “Can we help you?”

“I hope so,” I start. “I was wondering how you two found each other? You know, from the other side to in here?”

They seem briefly confused, then the suited woman answers, “Oh! No. We didn’t know each other before. We met each other here—”

“—on this train actually,” the other finishes her sentence.

“Thank you,” I say. My head slumps as I return to the front.

The woman in the suit stops me. “Are you waiting for someone?”

“No.” I look back to be polite even though I don’t feel like talking anymore. “I thought my husband would be waiting for me, but he wasn’t on the cloud.”

Eternity

The woman in pink clasps my forearm. "I hate to hear that. On the bright side, now you have all of eternity to find a love that you weren't fortunate enough to find on the outside."

I swallow my first reaction because I know she meant well. "I was fortunate enough," I say instead.

"Have you tried a memory search yet?" the other woman asks.

"I don't know what that is."

"Oh, sweetie," she scoots to the edge of her seat. "It takes a little longer, but you may be surprised with what you find." The two women share a smile. "Go up to the intercom at the front there. Push the button and think of your husband's favorite place. That's where the train will take us."

"It's that easy?" They both nod encouragingly. "What about you two? Don't you have somewhere to go?"

"We go wherever the train takes us."

I head to the intercom but take a moment before I push the button. If Wesley was waiting in a memory, where would he be? The first one that comes to mind was our home. The place we shared everything with each other.

Colors whirl past the window when I press the button. First, it's all green, then some hotter colors, and lastly browns. In a blink, everything stops, and I lurch forward again. I stumble and fall into the rickety door between train cars.

Shyla jumps from her seat and runs out to see where we are. I recognize it the moment the doors slide open. Brightly colored row houses, each two stories, with one car garage, and a set of concrete steps leading up to a vibrant door.

My little friend found a hopscotch board chalked along the sidewalk. I watch her skip across the numbers as I walk up to my yellow door. When I turn the knob, the door creaks on its hinges. It's dark inside, like how I left it.

"Wesley?"

There's no answer. I enter and flip the light switch. It's clear no one else is home, because it feels how it's felt every day for the last 40 years. I notice an umbrella in the stand next to me. It's the one I had to buy a couple of weeks ago.

This isn't the home I shared with my husband. It is, but this isn't the memory of my home I shared with him.

I close the door and let my mind trace back as I did with my appearance. With a deep breath, I turn the handle once more, and the door swings open without a sound. The lights are on. There's a fire lit in the study. I smell chocolate chip cookies. "Wesley?" I yell again. But there's still no answer.

I walk through the house. Every room on both floors. It's still empty.

“All aboard!”

I sit in his recliner. A photograph of the two of us smiling stares at me. It’s laughing at my loneliness. Taunting me with happiness that I’m not meant to have anymore. Someone knocks on my front door. I begrudgingly answer.

Shyla stands on my stoop with her hands planted on her hips. “Mr. Abel, if you don’t get on the train, you’ll be here until someone brings a train to you. If someone ever brings a train here again that is.”

Shyla skips back to the train. I take a moment to think about what she said. Could this be my eternity? Is this where I want to stay forever? I look back at the photograph. It was the same day we had our first kiss.

“All aboard!”

A new vigor overcomes me. I dash back to the train, and once again catch it as the doors close. It clacks across the ground. I press the intercom before the colors shift to blue. Greens fill the window with a sunny day at the park.

I push my hand against the wall to brace myself for the lurch. Before Shyla’s feet touch the carpet I’m standing on the grass outside. Birds are singing. The air is warm as it hugs my skin. I run to the tree where we shared our first kiss.

Only the tree’s roots lay underneath. I look around thinking maybe I have the wrong tree, but this is the one. And he isn’t here either. This memory was our favorite. Why is he not here? Did he actually leave me? Was I not worth waiting for?

I’m back on the train before the conductor even makes his first call. Shyla has her arms wrapped around her knees with her feet in the seat. “I’m sorry you can’t find your husband, Mr. Abel,” she whispers to me.

I don’t reply. A tear drips from my eye.

“Would you like to go get something to eat? I usually go get ice cream when I’m feeling sad.”

“Do we need to eat in here?”

“No, not really,” she says. “But ice cream still tastes good.” She flashes her missing tooth grin.

“I know the perfect place,” I tell her, and push the intercom again. The pale blue outside shifts to a dark night sky. The doors slide open to a diner in the heart of San Francisco at the corner of Sutter and Powell. The red marquee spelling *Lori’s* welcomes me. I push the glass door open for us, and the little bell above our heads chimes.

Shyla skips past me, finds a barstool, and climbs up onto it. I hear her immediately say, “One hot fudge sundae please.”

I hold the door open for a couple of twenty-something ladies, one in a

pink dress and the other in a black-and-white suit.

“Thank you, sir.” They wave as they pass me.

I must’ve had a confused look on my face because the woman in the suit tells me, “Even in Eternity, some guys are assholes.” Then she holds her girlfriend’s hand and the pair cuddle up in a booth next to the window.

I sit on the far side of Shyla. “I’ll have a sundae too.”

“Me three.” A man on my right says.

I turn to find the most handsome twenty-five-year-old that I’ve seen in all of eternity. “It took you long enough,” he says.

Tears burn my eyes as I grab onto his coat. I spin him on top of his barstool to face me better. I can feel the fabric under my fingers, but it isn’t enough. It isn’t him. My hands reach for his face. His shaven face. It feels exactly as I remember, but better. He isn’t as fragile this time. His skin is pink. His eyes are bright.

“You have hair.” I try to speak, but I can only manage a whisper.

He laughs and runs his hands over my head, “So do you.”

I lean to him, and he returns the gesture until our lips meet. We hold each other close and share a kiss forty years in the making. When our lips part, we stay with our foreheads pressed firmly to each other. He whispers to me, “Happy birthday, Abel.”

“I thought you’d forgotten me,” I choke out.

“I could never forget you. I love you,” he says and kisses me again. “I’ve been right here waiting for you.”

I look around the diner and realize why this is the perfect place. “This is where we met.”

He nods. “Are you ready to spend eternity together?”

“Almost.” I hold my husband’s hand. “We have quite a few animals we need to pick up on our way home. My friend Shyla’s got an eye on a collie, and we have a couple zettabytes of space to fill up.”

“All aboard.”

Shyla rushes to the door with a knowing smirk. “I’ll tell him we need a few more minutes.” The bell chimes as she pushes the door open.

Three sundaes are placed on the counter. I lean in to kiss my husband again. As our lips touch, I smile. This is the afterlife of my dreams.

Mage-Born

Freydís Moon

The first time my mother called me *mage*, I cradled a blue-bellied lizard in my palm. I'd heard the word before, hushed like a curse during garden parties, passed across white teeth in expensive restaurants, but I'd never imagined *magic* and *mystery* and *mystic* would ever belong to me. I was two and twenty years, and the world was flayed open in the aftermath of a coup—the Born King rises!—while Camelot's future unhappened before us. She said the word reverently. Mage, like *secret*. Mage, like *finally*. And then, of course, *you've been summoned, son. The King would like to meet you.*

That's how it came to happen. Not it—we. Me and him. I waited on the clean steps outside the castle and busied myself with my phone. I had no idea how to right myself against a King, and my phone was thankfully *not* a King, so the device was safe to analyze. Someone sent their Subaru speeding through a craggy pothole, tossing piss-stained rainwater over the sidewalk. The sticker on its rear windshield read FOR THE SWORD, and a knight cooed desperately to their spooked piebald, angling its hooves away from the filth. I hadn't a clue how to be a mage, if a mage was something I could be, but I tipped my thoughts toward the frightened animal and willed it to be still. Sure enough, the horse quieted, and I thought, *fuck, okay, I guess so.*

"Westley Binx, the King will see you now," the castle secretary said, clutching a clipboard to her finely tailored blouse.

I stood, because you're supposed to stand for royalty, and I walked, because the King wouldn't be greeting me in the foyer—heaven forbid—and I found myself guided to the Throne Hall. Castle staff poked iPads and whispered to neatly tucked ear-pods. *He needs better PR and this all happened very fast and most of the reputable suitors have left.* I hadn't understood my purpose until then, and when I did, I wished I was back home, holding that blue-bellied lizard.

But instead, the secretary nudged me with her pointed Chelsea boot, and I stumbled into the hall, empty except for the throne and King Arthur splayed on the polished floor. He stared at the ceiling, one arm resting above his head, the other curved over his belly. His beige tunic was awry, hiked toward his navel and wrinkled at the collar. He sighed like a mule, and I thought *this is our Born King. Fuckin' batshit guy with pretty eyes.* I cleared my throat. The sound echoed, terribly.

“Your Highness, I—”

“Arthur,” he bellowed. “Call me Arthur, man. C’mon.”

I started. “Arthur,” I tested, because I’d never imagined saying his name to him. “My family received your summon, I’m honored to—”

“Cut the shit. Are you a mage or not?” he asked and tipped his head to look at me. Blonde hair fell away from his furrowed brow, and mottled light skipped through the window, chasing knuckle-deep dimples and fine mouth and crooked canine.

I wrung my hands. “I’m not... I’m not sure, honestly. I’ve been told as much. Yesterday, literally.”

“You probably are, then. Since yesterday, literally.” He bared his dock-teeth, sallow, like mine, and laughed at his own joke. “Plan on standin’ there all day?”

“Plan on layin’ there all day?” I snapped back. Panic surged. *That’s a King you’re talking to. You huge idiot. Monumental dumbass—*

But King Arthur laughed. Beautifully, to be fair, and patted the space beside him. “Maybe.”

I went, because he’d implied that he wanted me to, and I placed my gangly limbs next to our Born King, our saving grace, our birthright ruler. At first, I was too afraid to look at him, but when I mustered enough bravery to turn, his nose was an inch from mine.

“Do you know why I called for a mage, Westley Binx?”

My name, his lips. I became a tight-chested mess. “No, I’m not sure.”

“Because the people—*my people*—they call me lionhearted, and I want someone who can speak to the heart of me,” he said, timidly, like someone trapped in boyhood. And he *was* just a boy. Nineteen. Twenty, maybe. “I didn’t ask for the crown,” he added. “I’m not cut out for this.”

I hadn’t a clue if I could hear his spirit. I didn’t know if I could reach between ribs and commune with his heart. But he was smiling, so I told the truth. “I’m not sure if I’m cut out for that, either.”

“But you might be.”

“And *you* might be,” I said. I had no idea where my breath had gone, but it was missing. Stolen, I guess.

Arthur stared at me for a long, disquieting time. Beyond the castle, car horns honked. Horses whinnied. Someone shouted, *he is here, he has returned*. “You’re handsome,” he said, stupidly.

My breath remained missing. “Do you say that to all the mages?”

Mage-Born

He laughed—I'd *made* him laugh—so, I laughed, too, and my thoughts wrecked around inside me: he was a market-worker, he was a fisherman, he was a boy sowed from reverence and born into secret.

Before I left home, I'd released the blue-bellied lizard into a petunia bed and asked my mother why she hadn't told me I was mage-born. *It was better, she'd said, to be nothing and free than to be something and caged.*

Arthur asked, "Do you see anything, mighty mage? Am I truly lionhearted?"

I reached for his heart. Found it, beating and wild, frightened and strong. "Yes," I said, and when he kissed me, I saw violet petals in my mother's garden, and cobblestone near the castle steps, and loneliness—aching, hopeful loneliness—nestled behind his sternum. I was a market-worker, too. An apothecary. A boy sowed from power and born into secret. When Arthur pulled away to say *I'm sorry*, I swallowed his apology. I kissed him something fierce. How could I not?

Yesterday, he was not a king.

Yesterday, I was not a mage.

Settling Down

K.J. Kogon

I think maybe we could live like this. Safe, I mean. Hidden away with only each other to feed on. We don't deserve anyone else. I can't tell if we're creating or destroying anymore, but this appetite is dangerous all the same. We're too hungry to keep hunting. We'll deplete the population at this rate.

Besides, together is just as good as alone. Nothing can kill us except for separation. Or the police. But we're tough rabbits to snare, you and I. We've made it this far anyway.

Yes, I think we could live like this. Normal, I mean. Forget the cellar beneath the floorboards. Forget the rot and rust, the butcher knives and the blood bags. We'll redecorate. Nail the trap door shut, rearrange the furniture. I could walk the dogs. You could play piano. Doesn't that sound nice?

Don't you think we could live like this? Happy, I mean. Forget the bodies rotting in the soil. We'll start a garden. Plant some flowers, grow our own food. I could talk to the neighbors. *Why, yes, we just have the most excellent compost!* You could bring over a casserole, use up those old ingredients. *Why, yes, isn't he a marvelous cook!*

Please. Can't we be good for a change? Can't we try?

The Doors are Much Too Tall

James Parker

The building on the other side only exists at certain times and down the right hallways. Passing the wall of fish tanks yields a corridor almost too narrow to walk through. Here, everything is mirrored. Backward numbers rest atop door frames that are much too tall. Waste no time wading through the rooms as the desks multiply. Instead, follow the hall and its honey-yellow light to a stairwell that goes up to a third floor locked behind a metal door with a window staring into darkness, follow that darkness to the only light: a glowing, red exit sign. It's the same shade as the Cadillac that comes late to school every day that threatens to stop returning for you.



The Lantern Waste



Sarah Malini

SK made the same rounds every night, circling the city, spiralling down the main street, following each glittering spire to the centre. As they glided along the streets and alleys, they would stop at each lamp post, touching it softly, with appendages that had been made to resemble human hands. Once this city had been ablaze, or so the histories stated, but now the city lingered in darkness, hampered by the burnt out sun.

At each lamp SK mimicked the motions that humans would have done when they had lived here and mimed breathing deeply in and then out, reaching out for the aura of the flame in the lantern. This flame fluttered and sparkled, bursting with brightness. This flame had lived a long, happy life and would burn brightly for a long time yet. Its satisfaction burned yellow, as it re-lived moments of its life.

Satisfied, SK moved along the narrow, cramped streets, searching for the faint specks of light that signified the next lamp post. This one danced in its lantern, the flame mutating from orange to yellow and back again. It was a young life, short lived perhaps, but happy. It would burn for a little longer yet and again. Satisfied, SK approached the next light post. It was black and empty. SK was not surprised as this flame had been shrinking, glowing a deep, burning red for days. Some flames could last for a long time even in that state, but others would only maintain the sullen crimson for a short amount of time before winking out of existence.

SK had never received any explanation for what happened to the flames once their lives had been re-lived. They had only been taught how to fetch the flames in the darkness and imprison them in the lanterns to light the way. It was a holdover, believed to have been started when humans had still roamed this planet. The robots had no need for light, could see just as well in the dark as in the day, but this tradition had remained even after so many others had become redundant and then faded.

SK spread a grey checked cloth out before them and pulled out a deck of cards, unwrapping them from their protective covering. This was the only way to draw in the flames. There were tales that SK had found, of those that could draw flames in just by sitting in meditation and willing them to come, but SK had not been programmed that way. None of the StarKindlers had.

The Lantern Waste

They shuffled the cards quickly, efficiently, their human-like appendages allowing them to feel the shape and weight of the deck. It was better this way, more effective. The flames were always more responsive when they felt the proper rituals were being observed. SK mimed taking a deep breath and then two more, before systematically flipping up the cards in the only pattern they had been taught. It was then that the flames began to arrive. There were three of them.

The first was sad, its flame small and dark. It wouldn't last long.

The second was hotter than most. It burned a bright crimson.

The third was soft, yellow, and flickering faintly.

Each flame was drawn to a separate card and after the third one settled, SK sealed it into the empty lantern. This light was gentle, it had raised many others, those of blood and those not. It would never burn the brightest or the hottest, but it would provide ample light for a long time.

The light of the child had gone out. It had changed to blues and greens as its end neared and unlike those that had lived full long lives, it did not change into the cold, dark red that would burn slow and faint. Instead it had simply ceased to be. That was the way of the young flames, the ones that had never gotten the chance to grow up.

SK unfurled their grey checkered cloth and unwound their cards, shuffling through them in the only pattern they knew. Only one flame came, hovering around the card depicting the Tower. But when SK tried to seal it in the lantern, the flame would flicker out and disappear.

So SK tried again. They shuffled the cards, mimicked the breathing, and then laid out the pattern. The Tower immediately appeared and the same flame came too, small and umber, sullen and cold. Again the flame refused to light the lantern and died out the moment the ritual was completed.

SK had never had this happen before. So, once more, they shuffled the cards, breathed in and out, and laid out the cards. This time when the Tower appeared and the flame did as well, SK paused and watched as it clutched it, the same way all flames did when their card appeared.

"Why do you call me?"

SK started at the voice that came from the flame and then responded, "I need you to light the lamp."

The flame cried out, "But I cannot do it alone!"

“All do it alone.”

“I am too sad.”

SK gestured to the dull glow around the bend that was emanating from another lantern. “All do it alone.”

Yet, when the ritual was completed, the flame fled, leaving the lantern dark and empty. The flames could not resist the cards. Every flame had a card that they would be drawn to and so it was with this flame that did not wish to light the lantern. The golden pictures on each dark card would glitter, shining fiercely, surrounded by the dark ice that coated the grey electronics and the leaden walls. SK continued to lay out cards and every time the Tower appeared, its golden lines glowing in misery and destruction, and every time the flame would be compelled to make contact.

Finally, the flame came when summoned and rested itself upon SK’s outstretched palm, flickering warmly in their silver hand. “I cannot burn you?”

“No.”

“Can you let me free?”

“No.”

The flame let loose a cry that started low, but increased in pitch, forcing SK to continue recalibrating their auditory sensors to keep pace with the rising shrillness. “You have a job to do and so do I.”

“I told you already!” The flame cried out, “I cannot light that lamp alone.”

SK completed the ritual once more though they already knew the outcome and watched as the flame spluttered and disappeared once more. SK would have sighed if they’d had the capacity to do so, but again they shuffled the cards, mimicked the breathing, and laid out the pattern. As had happened so many times before, the flame reappeared with the Tower.

“I am not going to stay.”

“What are you looking for?”

The flame danced around, floating itself around the stack of tarot cards before coming to rest on the one that kept drawing it in, “I am looking for someone.”

“Are they important?”

Flames had spoken to SK in the past. It wasn’t abnormal, most were lonely and liked to take the first moment of contact to exchange a few words, but none had this level of intensity as they surveyed the wreckage of afterlife. Most of them were content to be corralled into the lanterns and allowed to light the way.

The Lantern Waste

The card started to smoke and SK batted the flame gently away from it before scooping the flame up in one hand and the cards up in the other. “I guess we can try to find them. But I don’t know if I can put two flames in one lantern.”

“Have you ever tried?”

SK had not tried, but did not say so. “Do you know where to find them?”

Having the right card was not enough. The place needed to be correct as well. Though the StarKindlers had programmed much out to an exactitude, some things, such as actually finding the flames, were beyond their abilities to pinpoint.

The flame seemed to know something though, seemed to know where it needed to go. It eventually led SK towards the northernmost gates, at the very edge of the city. The galaxy uncoiled out from there, dark and bleak with cutting solar winds. There was brief reprieve from the vast nothingness when the flashing lights of satellites flew past, transmitting and blinking, before they followed the curvature of the rock, winking out of existence, much like this flame had continued to do.

“Here?”

The flame tried to dance, but it looked more like shivering. SK began the ritual, but SK had never attempted to deliberately call out a particular flame. They knew of no other way to get the flames to come and could only do what they’d been programmed for. The flame grew agitated, its colours snapping from reds to blues, fluttering erratically as the discard pile grew. This was the third place they had been to. SK had no experience, but other flames expressed distress at how much different the world looked after death. SK wasn’t sure if this flame was distressed due to the way a soul perceived things after death or if it was bothered by how different this planet had become after all the humans had gone. The city had gotten darker and cramped, its winding passages disorientating to those who had roamed here before.

Half the deck was gone before the Chariot appeared. When this happened, for a moment, a little blue flame appeared, before it quivered, shimmering in and out of visible light, before disappearing. None of the sensors that SK possessed were equipped with whatever was necessary to see the souls before they made contact with their cards, if there even was such a radar. The little flame vanished and SK picked up the deck and shuffled,

The Lantern Waste

miming the act of deep breaths, before laying out the cards again. Immediately both the Tower and the Chariot reappeared, glowing yellower and brighter than any previous iteration.

There was a stillness for a moment. Even the harsh solar wind, which never seemed to subside, quieted for a moment as the flames hovered over both of their cards. SK didn't really need to ask and yet, "Have you found who you were looking for?"

The flame burned bigger, brighter, almost white in its intensity, turning the walls around them almost iridescent as the light caught and refracted along the panels and circuitry. SK needed no other answer. Almost as a challenge the other flame began to grow and burn hotter, though it maintained its bluish hue, turning everything near to azure in its wake.

SK picked up the cards, rolling them back into the grey checkered cloth, while the flames pulsated and danced, frolicking towards and away from each other, fingers of light reaching upwards and mingling in their delight. Then gently, after each flame paused for a moment, their lights shrinking briefly, SK scooped one up in each palm.

"Where are you taking us?" the first flame cried out, its white light shot with an angry red lick of colour.

"To the lantern you both must light. Remember?"

The flame shrank at these words, but quieted, "Both of us together?"

"I will try."

The flames led the way, dancing down the corridors of the narrow streets, their passage turning the aseptic alleys to shades of gold and silver that shimmered. When they got to the lamp post they circled it, twirling up and down its height.

SK approached them and held out their hands, both the flames settled into SK's palms and SK was finally able to complete the ritual. They tapped the side of the light post twice, in completion, and then the lantern flared into life, burning hotter and brighter than the murky flecks of light all of the other lamps held.

The whole square buzzed with the energy from these flames, a beacon that could be seen for months. It was an enticing brightness that one could follow down the labyrinthine corridors until coming into the square where this lamp post stood, the flames within bathing the entire space with colour, allowing the entire city to glow.

Evading the Curse

Max Cherniyak

When my granddaughter was born, she had a full mess of black hair and a red face and she screamed like she already knew her fate.

But we didn't.

She was born the way most people in the Forest are: in her grandmother's cabin, surrounded by all of the neighboring witches, chanting and praying together. As soon as we saw her, we all breathed a sigh of relief. She was a girl, not a boy.

None of us said it, but all of us were thinking about the prophecy. I certainly was. It had been almost forty years since I had broken up with that fae bitch, Nerisse, and I hadn't stopped worrying about it since then. But it was Maurin's choice, and she wanted to risk having a child.

Holding my grandchild, Nerisse's curse had never felt farther away.

A boy of your blood born

Will give his life to save the world.

It rhymed in Nerisse's stupid fae tongue. Barely.

"What's her name going to be?" One of the older witches offered Maurin a drink of chamomile tea.

"Peregrin." Maurin beamed.

The little baby stirred a little in my arms, as if she felt fate accept her name. She had a red little face and chubby cheeks. Peregrin was the perfect name for this perfect baby girl. And she was going to get to have the perfect childhood, not grow up with saving the world on her shoulders the whole time.

The night wore on and the other witches all trickled back to their homes in the Forest, leaving me dotting on Maurin and Peregrin. Once I had soothed them both to sleep, curled up in a pile of blankets and inoculated against the winter cold, I retrieved the basket from underneath her bed and crept outside.

Even though the cabin only had flickering fire light, it took several minutes for my eyes to adjust to the darkness under the moonless sky. The wind howled through the dead oak branches above my head, and the chill burrowed into my bones. Normally, I would take that as foreboding, but I had no use for omens anymore. Peregrin was fine. A happy, healthy baby girl. Whatever chaos was going on in the rest of the world, whatever it might need

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to be saved from, whatever the wind was howling about, that was none of our concern.

“Ha.” I spat at the dark void where the moon should be. “I win again, Nerisse. Peregrin is safe. You can’t get her. We’re safe.”

There was no response from the dark sky.

I set the basket down beneath the great oak tree, and a few poultices spilled out onto the frozen ground next to it. I had traded so many favors for these, this heap of poultices, herbs, and powders that I had used to evade the curse. For months, I had spent every night casting those rituals. And they had done their jobs. Another sigh of relief.

Now I had to bury them under the ground. Giving the Forest back some of its magic was showing gratitude for the miracle it had given me.

The ground was frozen and stiff, but I didn’t hesitate to fall to my knees and dig. My fingers turned red and stiffened and started to bleed, but I couldn’t keep the stupid grin off my face. Nothing could bother me right now.

Once the poultices were all tangled in the roots of the oak, I took one last look at the new moon before heading back into the warm house. On my way to my soft and warm bed, I paused for one extra second to check on mom and baby. They were both sleeping peacefully, happy and healthy and safe.

My pride lulled me to sleep that night. Everyone always said there was no way to beat a fae curse. But little ol’ me, with just my hedge magic, I managed to do it. I was a powerful mage after all, and those stupid big city sorcerers could suck it. The curse was gone. We were safe, at least for another generation.

As my granddaughter got older, it got even easier to forget about Nerisse and her stupid barely-rhyming curse. Who gave a shit about generational curses when I got to teach Per to walk? And talk? And stop torturing our cat? Plus, I had never seen Maurin happier. She loved sewing little dresses for her daughter and giving her warm baths and rubbing it in my face.

“Ma, I told you so, didn’t I? Didn’t I tell you that I could have a girl if I really wanted to?” she asked, at least once a day. It didn’t really bother me though. It was worth the nagging to see my grandbaby smile.

She was perfect.

Unfortunately, I missed the first few years of her life since I had to travel. All those favors I owed came due. When she was one, I spent the entire summer scaling cliff sides in the south to find lizard’s tails and then immediately had to deal with two sisters from the oldest family in the Forest,

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who were quarreling over some petty lost wand. The next winter, I spent several months in a dungeon, trying to deal with a nasty construct infestation. The entire year that Per was four, I had to stay up all night every night to chart the stars. Apparently, some of the witches in the west thought there were omens of doom yet to come outlined in the sky.

It was pretty hard to concentrate on any of that, because I was too focused on Per.

She spent all her time outside, from dawn to dusk, all throughout the year. We could barely get her inside for long enough to sleep. I didn't have any room to complain, since I was the same way at her age. I never really grew out of it either. So it meant she spent all her time with me, or, when I was traveling, with the twin boys who lived about a mile from us in the Forest. It drove her poor mother crazy though, since she had to spend most of her evenings patching Per's dresses.

Our favorite thing to do together was chase toads in the stream. I've always had a natural affinity for toads, and thankfully Per learned quickly. Our favorite was the green spotted toad, mostly because the other toads kept croaking out warnings of doom to come. But the green spotted toad was too dumb to channel fate. Or really do anything, except hop away just fast enough for us to chase.

When Per was five, she decided she didn't want to wear skirts anymore, but really, who does? It made sewing a little harder, since Maurin had to re-make new pants every year instead of just letting her skirts out, but she couldn't say no to Per. I hated wearing skirts too. Pants were just more comfortable.

It had barely been a week after Maurin sewed Peregrin her first pair of pants when it started snowing. In the middle of summer. The night was warm, and then the morning dawned freezing.

"Ma, it's snowing," Maurin panicked.

"It's fine." I reassured her.

"But it's summer."

"And?"

Maurin looked frantic. "Don't play dumb, Ma. It's not supposed to snow in the summer."

She just wasn't getting it. The curse couldn't affect us anymore. "We don't have anything to worry about, honey. It's all going to be fine."

That was the day Peregrin learned how to make snow angels.

Evading the Curse

When Per was six, she declared that she wanted short hair. Not a big deal. I cut her hair the same way I cut mine. It was better that way anyway, so it didn't get tangled or dirty when we were running through the forest.

But the older she got, the harder it got to keep her safe. When she was eight, we started to hear cannons and wagons rumbling through the Forest, replacing the sound of the birds screeching about the end of the world. Personally, I wasn't worried. The Forest had its way of protecting its denizens, and I had safety wards on the house. As long as none of us had to leave, the affairs of empires were not our concern, but several of the other witches in the Forest got nervous and fled, including the mom of Per's playmates. Per was sad about losing her friends, but at least we still had each other.

We didn't have a long time to miss our neighbors though. Shortly after they fled, a blight started spreading through the Forest. Some kind of dark moss crept up the trunks of the trees, causing them to twist in on themselves in a frenzied search for daylight. Many of them died. The branches thickened, blocking out the sun, and the roots, desperate for nutrients, hoisted themselves out of the ground, gnarled and hideous and covered in moss almost immediately. I didn't care, at least until walls of roots blocked our paths through the Forest. But even that was something we could deal with. Per was nine then, old enough to be able to clamber over the roots, and I was not about to let myself be shown up even by a little girl as precocious as her.

I was perfectly happy just to hang out, the three of us, but Peregrin seemed lonely without her friends. She spent a lot of time by herself and I caught her moping a lot.

On the morning of her eleventh birthday, she woke me up.

"Nana," she whispered. She was standing next to my bedside, fully dressed, even though it was still dark out.

"Per?" I asked, sitting up. "What's wrong?"

She stepped back timidly. "I think something's wrong."

I couldn't bear to see her afraid around me. Whatever she was dealing with, we would deal with it together. Besides, what could be bothering her right now? She had the perfect childhood, the curse was broken, and none of us had had anything to worry about for eleven years. I pulled back the quilt and patted the bed next to me. "Tell me about it."

Peregrin hopped up. The sound of the wind rattling through the dead branches of the oak tree in the yard drifted in, along with a lingering chill, and I tucked the edges of the quilt in around her.

"I don't..." She paused. "You love me, no matter what, right?"

“Of course I do.”

“Nana, I don’t want to be a girl anymore.” She said, the words pouring out of her like water from the creek. “I know it sounds weird, but I don’t want to be like Mom or like the other women witches. I don’t want to be a girl, I don’t want to be a woman. I want to be a boy.”

My ears were ringing, like the pressure had just changed in the room. Peregrin’s dark eyes were staring directly through me, and her lips were still moving, but I had no clue what she was saying. She... was... what?

I managed to choke out, “What?”

“I knew you were going to be disappointed.” Peregrin said, crestfallen. “I can-”

“No, no!” I corrected quickly. “I...” All I could think about was the curse. What did this mean?” “I just don’t know what you’re saying, honey, that’s all.”

My granddaughter looked at me, her eyes glistening with tears, and said the four words I’d never forget. “Nana, I’m a boy.”

And then several things happened at once.

First, my heart stopped. I couldn’t have been wrong about all of this. It’s not possible that I could have been wrong, that Nerisse’s curse could still have come true, after all this time.

At the same time, the ground shook beneath us. With a sickening crunch, the old oak tree crashed through the wooden wall next to us. A massive branch just missed hitting my knees.

“Nana, what’s going on?” Per sounded panicked.

Was that it? Was that really all it took? All he had to do was declare he was a boy and then suddenly the prophecy was about him? It was that easy. And, looking at him, I don’t know how I hadn’t realized that before. I had been so preoccupied with relief about the curse that I hadn’t even paid attention to who he was becoming. He didn’t look that much different from the boys next door. I should have seen the signs earlier. But I didn’t think just having short hair and wearing pants made him a boy. Obviously, or else I would be a boy. There had to be something else, some other sign I hadn’t seen.

His life flashed before my eyes. All those years, climbing trees, splashing in the creek, there had to have been some warning. But it all just seemed so normal then. And now all that had to end. Now he had to go off on this quest or whatever. The curse said he wouldn’t come back.

This all was my fault. Not completely, but I was the one who dumped Nerisse to get this curse in the first place. Plus, for the last eleven years, I’d

Evading the Curse

been watching the world get worse and worse and hadn't done anything about it. I'd assumed it was just someone else's problem. Now it was ours. His.

I glanced down at him. My grandson. He was so small, still scrawny and shivering in the chill from the hole in the wall. No way. This was too much pressure for him.

A boy of my blood born.

"It's going to be okay, sweetheart." I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him in for a big hug.

"You're... you're not mad?"

"No, Per, I could never be mad at you."

I felt him relax into my arms, just as Maurin ran into the room, still in her nightgown. "Ma, are you..." She paused, looking from the crying Peregrin to the massive hole in the wall, corked by the oak tree. "What's happening?"

I pulled away from Per. "Are you okay with telling her?"

His eyes got wide.

"I think you should."

"Mom," Peregrin stammered. "I don't want to be a girl anymore. I want to be a boy."

Maurin nodded a little bit, then her eyes wandered from the giant oak to the terror on my face. I tried to change my expression but it was too late. Her eyes widened as she got it too. "The curse..."

"It's okay." I reassured her. I did this and I was going to figure out some way out of it. Somehow.

So fate had just accepted that Peregrin was a boy. And that was great. Except for the curse. I guess I had never realized that was an option. Could a girl become a boy, just like that? But clearly he could, since he was now.

The idea kept swirling through my head.

Being a woman had never really felt... right to me. Whenever I was going into the village, I was always careful to wear pants and short hair. I liked it when people didn't know how to address me.

And it seemed like most of the women witches my age liked gathering in their little cabins and gossiping. I had spent plenty of time with them, and there had been some fun times there, sure, but I never really felt like I belonged. It felt like I had to pretend to be someone I wasn't. But when I was with the guy witches, or with Peregrin, I didn't have that feeling. Things just felt right.

If fate accepted Per as a boy, just because he said he was, maybe it would accept me too. Maybe there was a way to solve all of this.

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I swung my legs out of bed and started putting my winter pants on.

“Nana?” Per asked.

“Sweetie, I love you.” I told him. “Everything’s going to be okay. You’re going to be okay.”

“Where are you going?”

“I have to save you from a curse.” I told him.

“What do you mean?” Maurin asked. “Ma?”

But I wasn’t her mom anymore. I grabbed my backpack and started to stuff clothes in it. “Make sure you lock the doors. And do the protective wards every night. Don’t forget.”

“Where are you going?”

I grabbed a dagger from under the bed. There was no telling what I would need over the next few years, but a dagger couldn’t hurt. “This curse isn’t going to fall on Peregrin’s shoulders.” I told her. “Because I’m a man too.”

The ground shook again, stronger this time. The oak tree sank further into the wall.

“I love you both, but I have to go.”

And with a hug to each of them, I strode off into the woods.

Sea, Shore, Self

Ingrid W.

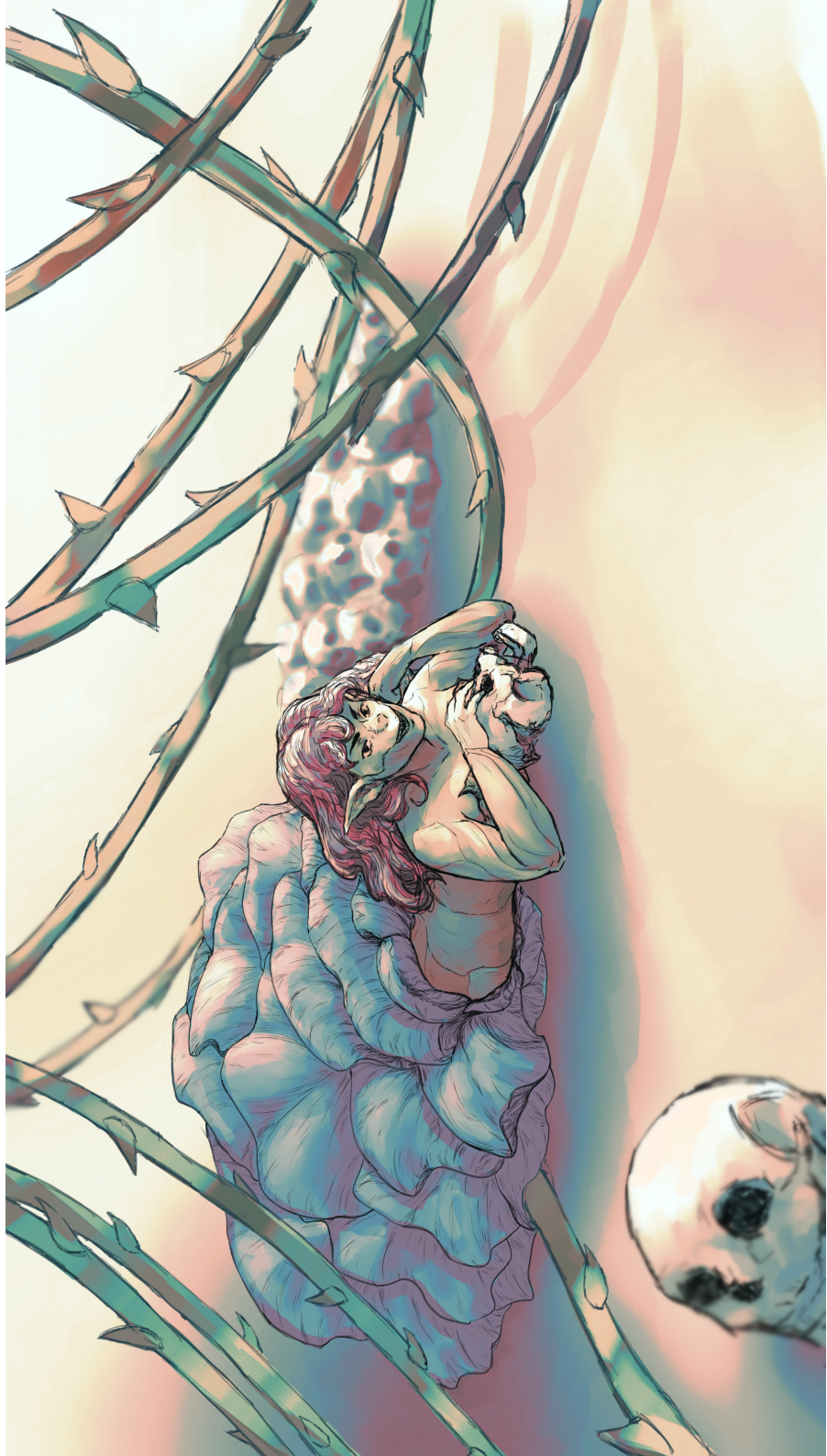
Is it worth it,
shedding the skin of familiarity
to wear the shroud
of terrestrial belonging, just so

and no other way?
Must I clog my throat,
choking on normalcy —
Must I ache with every step
that I take like everyone else —
must i stagger, slit my windpipe

to be human? i am quiet, so
you must tell me this. why
do my scales have to go? why
is sea-foam strangeness a necessary
casualty so i may remain
on land? you say

there are rules that must be followed, lest
fleshy hands snatch my stranger's
body and throw me back. to change
is to hurt. well then,

listen to me! i no longer want this.
give me a bloodless transformation,
clinging to fins and fish-gills —
breath that doesn't sting
like knives — no! i don't need
pain to be myself —



Thorny Rose Vio Écija

Contributors

Ruth Crosthwaite aka Ruthenium (she/they) is an artist and writer currently living in the state of uncertainty. She believes creativity is real-life magic, and is obsessed with texture, context, light, and the question “what if?...” Her work has been published in *Sandpiper*, *Rabble Review*, *Celestite Poetry*, *Lavender Lime Literary*, and *Vulnerable Magazine*. Her various presences, publications, and collections can be found at <https://linktr.ee/Ruthenium>

Clem Flowers (They/ Them) is a poet, soft spoken southern transplant, low rent aesthete, & dramatic tenor living in a mountain's shadow in Home of Truth, Utah. In an eternal quest to be the host in constant disbelief in an infomercial. Nb, bi, and queer as the day is long, they live in a cozy apartment with their wonderful wife & sweet calico kitty. Found on Twitter @clem_flowers

Nicks Walker is a queer trans Scot. His allies include yellow, and his enemies include the sun. You can find his objects in *Perverse*, *SPAM*, *Punk Noir Magazine* and elsewhere. He has tricked *Bullshit Lit* into printing his first pamphlet, *Two Vapourwave Classics*, in Autumn 2022. He has four rats and autism and tweets @nickserobus.

Ami J. Sanghvi (he/they) is a HOT ALIEN WRAITH BABE. Twitter/Instagram: @HotWraithBones || Info: amijsanghvi.com

Rachael Crosbie (they/them) is the Editor-in-Chief and Founder of *the winnow*. Rachael has four poetry chapbooks: *self-portrait as poems about bad poetry*, *swerve*, *MIXTAPES*, and *Trick Mirror or Your Computer Screen*. You can find them on Twitter @rachaelapoet posting about squishmallows, She-Ra and The Princesses of Power, and their cats.

A'liya Spinner (he/him & she/her) is a non-binary activist, author, and aspiring paleogeneticist. Most importantly, his favorite dinosaur is the *Allosaurus fragilis*. Talk about magpies, dinos, and queerness with him at her Twitter, @cladist_magpie.

Max Turner is a gay transgender man based in the United Kingdom. He is also a parent, nerd, intersectional feminist and coffee addict. Max writes speculative and science fiction, urban fantasy, furry fiction, many sub-genres of horror, and LGBTQ+ romance and erotica. More often than not, he writes combinations thereof. maxturneruk.com

Ellen Huang (she/her) is an aroace writer of fantasy. She reads for *Whale Road Review* and is published/forthcoming in *Honey Literary*, *Brown Sugar Lit*, *Levatio*, *Wrongdong Magazine*, *celestite poetry*, *Lucent Dreaming*, *Moss Puppy Magazine*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, and more. She is currently working on a fairytale chapbook and ace horror anthology. Follow @nocturnalxlight

Contributors

Ken Anderson was finalist in the 2021 Saints and Sinners poetry contest. His novel *Sea Change: An Example of the Pleasure Principle* was finalist for the 2012 Ferro-Grumley Award and an Independent Publisher Editor's Choice. His novel *Someone Bought the House on the Island* was finalist in the Independent Publisher Book Awards. A stage adaptation won the Saints and Sinners Playwriting Contest and premiered May 2, 2008, at the Marigny Theater in New Orleans.

sylvie hopewell (she/they/he) is a queer chicano teen who may or may not be at the behest of an ancient god. you can find their writing and writing-adjacent posts on tumblr at revenge-syndrome.

Dwin Phillips is an eldritch being from the swamplands of Florida. He has just begun to emerge from his cocoon to write about invisible worlds while studying at UCF. He enjoys D&D, black coffee and possums. You can follow Dwin's journey @dwinphillips on Twitter.

Lauren Theresa is a divergent poet, therapist, witch, and mom to 2 tiny humans and 109 plants. Her work has appeared in over 30 publications including *Hobart After Dark (HAD)*, *Rejection Letters*, and *Hecate Magazine*, and her chapbook *LOST THINGS* will be out August 2022 by *Bullshit Lit Mag & Press*. www.laurentheresa.com

Ashley Varela (they/she) is a queer writer & author based in Seattle, Washington.
Twitter: @ashleyvarela_

Carys Crossen has been writing stories since she was nine years old and shows no signs of stopping. Her fiction has been published by *Lunate*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *FlashBack Fiction*, *Honey and Lime Lit* and others, and her monograph *'The Nature of the Beast'* is available from University of Wales Press. She lives in Manchester UK with her husband, their daughter and their beautiful, contrary cat.

Jake Morris is a 20-something living in Colorado, teaching by day and being driven mad by prophetic visions by night. He also writes in his off time too, usually during lunch breaks. You can read his other work at jakem.neocities.org, or mail him a river rock and he'll send a couple pages of his latest thing (return postage paid).

Adler Johnson (they/them) is a lifelong fantasy and science fiction enthusiast. They are currently studying physics and astronomy to provide a stronger background for their future writing. This is their first publication.

Elyssa Tappero (she/her) is a queer pagan who writes creatively about mental illness, spirituality, queerness, nature, death and disasters, and how it feels to be alive for the end of the world (which is not great). You can find her work at onlyfragments.com and on Twitter at @OnlyFragments.

Contributors

Lemmy Ya'akova is an advocate for y2k low culture, a film photographer, a popcorn enthusiast and a cat parent to their overgrown son, Moose. Their work can be found in *Hooligan Magazine*, *HAD (Hobart After Dark)*, *Knight's Library Magazine*, *Fifth Wheel Press* and more. You can keep up with their jokes on twitter @lem_jamin and read their work here: https://linktr.ee/lem_jamin.

Lucy Hannah Ryan (she/they) is a poet, fiction writer and essayist from London. Her work often concerns gender, sexuality and complex relationships with the body inspired by lifelong chronic illness. They also have an affinity for the strange, magical and macabre. They have had the pleasure of being featured in various publications including *Half Mystic*, *Corvid Queen*, and in *Arachne Press's* Solstice Shorts 2021 collection.

Nickolas Rice spends the majority of his day raising his twins, Nya and Tommy, two two-year olds that inspire his heart every day. Even when they only allow him to work during naptime. *Eternity* is his first publication. He's written a couple of novels, a few short stories, and slews of flash fiction. He wrote *Eternity* as a love letter for his husband, Thomas, the only man he'd search all of *Eternity* for. Find him @slikniky.

Avra Margariti is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Rhysling-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. "The Saint of Witches", Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is forthcoming from *Weasel Press*. You can find Avra on twitter (@avramargariti).

Freydís Moon (they/él/ella) is a biracial diviner, poet, and creator, writing fiction in the Romance, Horror, and Speculative categories. A lover of culture, mysticism, history, and language, they constantly find themselves lost in a book, trying their hand at a new recipe, or planning a trip to a faraway place.

Scott Aaron Tait (he/they) is a queer autistic writer with a Fine Art MFA from Newcastle University. Their stories are published in *The Write Launch*, *Odd Magazine*, *Untitled Voices*, *Pastel Pastoral*, and *Farther Trees*. They are currently editing their debut YA novel with *Bloomsbury Publishing* as part of Cornerstones Elevate Scheme. Scott is editor of the LGBTQIA+ journals *Powders Press* and *Queerlings*. Between meltdowns, they collect things, mostly books, and drink copious amounts of coffee.

Laura Arciniega (she/her) is a writer whose work has appeared in *Maudlin House*, *FIVE:2:ONE Magazine*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *Relief Journal*, and elsewhere. She lives in Southern California with her husband and son. You can find her online at lauraaliciaarciniega.wordpress.com, on Twitter @LauraAArciniega, and on Instagram at [arciniega_laura_alicia](https://www.instagram.com/arciniega_laura_alicia).

Contributors

Emily M. Goldsmith (they/she) is a queer Cajun poet originally from Baton Rouge, Louisiana who attends the University of Southern Mississippi as a Ph.D. student in Creative Writing. Previously, they received their MFA in Poetry from the University of Kentucky. Emily is one of the managing editors of *Giving Room Mag*. Their work can be found in *Fifth Wheel Press*, *Pile Press*, *Hecate Mag*, *Fine Print Press*, *Witch Craft Mag* and elsewhere.

Jacqueline Atta-Hayford (she/her) is a writer based in London, England who splits her time between writing short fiction, working on an as-yet-unnamed fantasy novel, and working full time for her local library service. In her spare time, she enjoys live music, sad poems, and Tabletop Role-playing games. You can find her on Twitter @jaxxolantern and links to more of her writing at <https://linktr.ee/jackieatta>

K.J. Kogon is a young writer from Southern California. They especially enjoy writing poetry and flash fiction. When they aren't obsessively editing, they can be found watching horror movies and cuddling with their three cats. Find them on Twitter @kj_kogon.

James Parker (he/they) studies History and Education at Francis Marion University. He works for his university's literary journal, *Snow Island Review*. They enjoy sewing and watching horror movies. They have work appearing or forthcoming in *Moon Cola Zine* and *en*gendered*. Find him on Instagram @lulvl12 and less frequently on Twitter @JLP_Poems

Sarah Malini is a bridge troll asking for riddles three by day and a trans-dimensional wraith by night. She has work published by *Northern Otter*, and forthcoming work from *Gutslut Press* and *Bullshit Lit*. When she is not lurking about in your dreams you can find her on twitter at @smalini9

Max Cherniyak (he/they) loves queer fantasy. He loves reading it, writing it, and he's very excited to share it. He particularly enjoys stories that feature trans and queer characters. In his free time, Max enjoys cooking (read: burning food) and succumbing to drive-thru after futile attempts in the kitchen. For more trans short stories or misadventures, follow him at @maxcherniyak on Twitter.

Ingrid W. grew up on fables and fairy stories, their whimsical nature inspiring her to write works of her own. Her stories and poems have been featured in *Cloudburst*, *Sacred Blossom* and other anthologies, and she won third place in the 2020 Elmbridge Literary Competition. Ingrid W. writes and studies in Hong Kong. To keep up with her writing whims, follow her on @seaviolets on Twitter.

Vio Écija is a Spanish illustrator whose work is inspired by fantasy, fairy tales and queer narratives.

!! Content Warnings !!

The Petrified Forest of Tongues and Stars: sexual content, sexual slavery (fictional), abuse, violence

Trust: mention of murder

android works the graveyard shift: brief mentions of death and allusions to ableism

Each Garden a Grave: body horror, physical injury

Prized Possessions: queerphobia

Fly Me to the Moon: violence

Wolf Seeds: swearing, body horror

It's Gonna Be Another Hot One!: blood, gore

Tethered: murder, gore

A Light In The Garden: death mention

Witch for Demon: sexual content

Tomorrow's Tree: imprisonment, death, murder, queerphobia

Another Ghazal for the Men Who Fired Me When I Was Suicidal: violence

Eternity: cancer, depression, medical procedure, suicidal ideation

Settling Down: implied cannibalism, knife mention, blood mention

Evading the Curse: misgendering, family, witches

Sea, Shore, Self: mild mentions of violence

