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in loco monstri / In 'loukou moʊnstri /

from latin, meaning in the role of monster. To act in loco monstri is to bend reality to within an inch of its life; to rise from the shadows, a looming figure seeking to lay bare the artifice of humanity; to frighten, to disgust, to leave in awe; to haunt, to defy, to torment.; to terrorize, to monstrously transform.

FRESH FROM HELL

Helen Gwyn Jones

Helen Gwyn Jones started recording her world at the age of 8 when she bought a Brownie camera from her sister, something which has become a lifelong passion.

A collector of the past (hers and other people's) she likes nothing better than muted images of imperfection. Maybe found poring over Welsh grammar books when not photographing drains or going into raptures over rust.

Recent publications include Acropolis, Terse, Heimat, Paddler, Hyacinth, Dayjobjournal.

Twitter/X/Instagram: @belengwynjones



TO BE AN AGENT | WHILE X-FILED

Joshua Merchant

I show up to a dilapidated
school dressed in all black.
whisper to myself “the truth

is out there”. today I am Mulder
to the full clip; bullshit be told,
I’ve died in a place similar to this.

was a Scully then. every nightmare
could be explained with enough
evidence: my arms swung open

like locker room doors while everyone
else’s became the lambo entrances they
dreamt dripping with the flex while my

senses told me I belonged in a cliché in some stall
blowing bubbles through some reflection
some future somebody would refer to

as a UFO... did you see that? my neck
snapped under a tree and I became a shadow
within the hollow point of my own

sentence. my blood soured during one reckless
night of abandonment and I became a vengeful
spirit. I died- am dying slowly. once again,

a Mulder rustling through the rotted wood
of bleachers and chipped portables spat out
from a wind unforgivably engulfed and gagged.

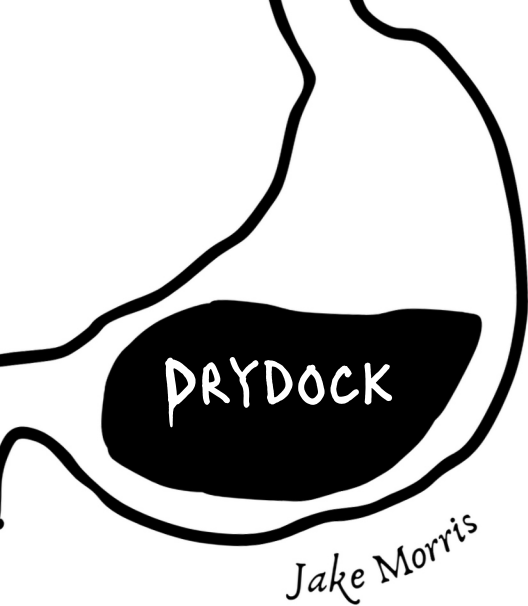
my fear frozen in time across retinas pickled by the
snow gluing me to whatever ditch I am to be found
under. or worse- another badge number
declassifies my name in a stack of paperwork.
my body is propped open and lies are told
to the news about how my ancestors are

being honored by letting muddy boots trample
through me holding m-4 carbines and cell phones. a shrine
of my face is built from newspaper clippings

law students make drinking games out of.
the next child with too many channels
and not enough incentive to fall asleep

will see a mockumentary convincing them
that we were just a tall tale for a tall order.
all traces leading to some place
we could never reach

*Joshua Merchant is a Black Queer native
of East Oakland exploring what it means to
be human. A lot of what they explore is in
the realm of love and what it means while
processing trauma, loss, and heartbreak.
They’ve had the honor to receive the 2023
San Francisco Foundation / Nomadic
Press Literary Award for poetry.*



I couldn't remember anything when I woke up. My brain pounded against the inside of my skull like it was trying to escape, the pain nearly immobilizing. I cracked my eyes open carefully, only to be met with a stab of light streaming in from shattered windows. Squinting through the brightness, I saw that I was crumpled up in the corner of the navigation room of a ship, the sun shining through the broken glass as it sat low in the sky. The room felt warm, so it must be setting. I was dressed in leather work gloves, pair of tattered steel-toe boots, and a blue jumpsuit stained with something dark and oily. Attached to the front pocket of my jumpsuit was a grimy old ID card, made of a thick, light colored plastic. The card itself was blank, only a small string of numbers on the back, barely visible beneath the dark smudges of... something. Maybe the same stuff that was on my suit.

I carefully shifted to my feet, clutching my head. As I gained more awareness of the state of my body, I realized just how much the whole thing ached. *It feels like I got hit by a truck.* I stayed hunched over the defunct ship controls for a while, waiting for the pain to ebb enough that I could stand upright. My ears rang and it felt like my mouth had been sealed shut from how dry it was. My empty stomach lurched as the last sensation emerged: hunger.

Eventually, I acclimated to the unpleasantness enough to

straighten my back and look out over the deck of the ship. The ship itself was in drydock, walls of rust surrounding the bow. Rows and rows of rusty shipping containers were stacked up below, most of them empty. Their doors hung open, some swaying gently in the sea breeze with a soft metal creak. I pulled my hand away from my head and was startled by the sight of fresh blood smeared across the work glove.

My head is bleeding... that explains a lot. What the hell happened?

I shambled to the rusted doorway at the other end of the bridge. I emerged into the light of the early sunset, the smell of stagnant saltwater washing over me. Clouds hung in the sky in fine gray wisps, drifting along in the muggy air that stuck to my skin. I heard a flock of seagulls pass by, echoing each others calls as they flew towards the shore. The hunger continued to gnaw at my vacant stomach, easily becoming the most distracting discomfort out of all of them.

A faint memory crossed my mind, one of boots clanking on a metal stairway, the warm glow of the ship's galley through the pitch-black nighttime at sea, me and another man in a blue jumpsuit laughing and eating some kind of mush on a tray. God, it made my stomach grumble just thinking about it, even if my brain insisted that there wasn't much to be desired there in taste or texture. The path there - the place with the food - had been drawn in my mind like I'd taken it a hundred times before, and the rest of my body willed my legs down the metal stairway to the deck.

Out on the deck, the containers loomed above me. Most of them were not as empty as they seemed, instead strewn with decaying cardboard and shredded plastic wrap, some soggy boxes still intact and filled with odds and ends. One container had boxes filled with CDs. Another had the shattered remnants of lightbulbs. Still, many more only had scraps of packaging to hint at what was there before... the memory was lost in a pale fog that only seemed to get thicker the more I tried to focus.

Before what?

The hunger drove my brain away from the effort, and I moved

my body towards where food could be. That would help, food would definitely help. The galley was at deck level, it too had its windows shattered and door coated in a waterfall of rust. My fingers weakly wrapped around the handle and pulled the heavy metal door open. I felt the muscles in my arms stretch unpleasantly as they strained, and I almost collapsed in the doorway from the effort. As I caught my breath in ragged gasps, I looked through the swirling motes of dust in the air and saw a figure freeze amidst the tarnished stainless steel of the kitchen.

His eyes were wide, his body stock still as he looked at me. He was a young man, couldn't have been more than 30. His face was smudged in dirt and he wore clothes that were more made of stitching than they were fabric, with a messenger bag slung across his shoulder. On his left arm was a red bandana tied over a bloodstained bandage. I tried to think of what to say, what I needed to convey, no- what I needed to *ask* this person.

“Whh... gkkk...” I croaked, the question dying somewhere in the back of my desiccated throat. The words just didn't come, no matter how hard I tried to force my vocal chords to make them. The other person swallowed, slowly backing up through the kitchen. I reached out and tried again to say something. He let out a terrified yelp and ran, knocking over stained pots and cooking utensils in his wake before disappearing, leaving me in the kitchen in silence.

What the hell? Another noise came gurgling out of my throat, my thought painfully butchered by my broken mouth. Stumbling through the kitchen, I looked around to see where he had gone but saw nothing. A stab of hunger knotted up my stomach again, there was no time to dwell on it.

As with the shipping containers outside, the insides of the galley had already been picked apart before I had arrived. Running my gloved hands along the empty shelves of the pantry, skulking in the desolate walk-in freezer, I was about to give up and move on until I saw a rainbow-colored can of fruit cocktail, tucked away in a rotten cardboard box on the rough metal floor. I plucked it from its soggy resting place, scrambling to open the top. My gloved digits couldn't get ahold of the tab, which had corroded slightly and stuck to the

lid, so I pulled them off with my teeth. I salivated at the thought of its contents, soft chunks of fruit in a sickening sweet syrup, hardly noticing the deep purple bruising on my fingertips.

The can cracked open, revealing the fruit floating around in the sweet liquid. I dumped it into my mouth, my brain lighting up with anticipation of the sugary reward.

Oh god, this isn't-

As it cascaded down my throat, I realized it tasted absolutely disgusting. The chunks of fruit felt mushy and mealy against the sandpaper texture of my mouth, and I gagged as it slid down into my stomach. I looked inside the can, thinking I'd be met with rotten fruit sitting in fermented juice, but everything inside looked, even smelled normal. My stomach rumbled in protest, demanding to know why I'd stopped. I pinched the bridge of my nose and scarfed down the rest of it until it was gone, heaving between each gasp for air.

I sank to the floor after I was finished, the remains of the horrible syrup sticking to my dry lips, and heard my stomach growl even louder. I wanted to cry, all that effort for nothing. It felt like I hadn't eaten anything at all, the hunger still raging in my abdomen. I almost felt even hungrier. Clutching my head and curling my legs, I shuddered as I tried to will it away, make my body accept the horrible canned meal I just gave it. It didn't work.

The other guy could help me. He had to know where some real food was, or at least have some he'd be willing to share with me. I clumsily pulled myself onto my feet again, the fruit churning in my stomach. I shambled into the kitchen, trying to remember where I saw him go. A door in the back of the kitchen was cracked open, fresh scrapes from boots in the grime beneath it. My feet dragged against the metal floor as I emerged into a long metal corridor lined with doors on either side, lit in pale red by the chemical glow of emergency lights.

Another memory came faintly in my mind. Seven doors down, to the right. Somewhere familiar. My body moved almost automatically, the rhythm of my boots on the floor was one I'd felt a hun-

dred times before. Seven doors down, to the right, a door with a name placard on the side that had been eaten away by salty air: LEO DELMAR. I wasn't able to tell if the name felt familiar, my tongue couldn't seem to match the syllables.

I pushed myself against the door and it swung open easily. The room was, oddly enough, mostly untouched compared to the rest of the ship. It was small, but still livable. The bed was unmade and covered in laundry, but looked terribly comfortable. There was a small desk in the corner by the door with a corkboard above it. Pinned to it was a picture - two young men in blue jumpsuits just like the one I was wearing, arms over each other's shoulders on the deck of the ship, rows of colorful shipping containers behind them. Beneath it were more pictures, the same two men with a bunch of others. Drinking, laughing, hanging out. I looked around the room, curious about other things in here, what they could mean to me, and stopped when I saw my reflection in the mirror above the sink.

Looking back was the visage of a man who was terribly injured. I instinctively recoiled, covering my face with my hands, taking perilous glances from between my bruised fingers.

Oh god. Is that... me?

My mouth had been so dry because unbeknownst to me, my jaw had been hanging open and slack like it was detached from the rest of my skull. The stubbled skin around it was deeply bruised, a smudging of red and purple. Dried blood pasted my dark hair down to my forehead, mingling with the fresh blood from a gash in my scalp. My eyes were bloodshot and sunken deep into their sockets, my nose twisted and broken, and my teeth... *Jesus Christ*. It's like they'd been smashed in with a hammer. They were jagged like shattered glass, haphazardly stuck into my gums. If I bore even a resemblance to the men in the pictures, it was impossible to tell with this amount of damage.

From the outside the room, I heard a loud thump. I pushed the door open and started moving towards the source of the sound. From two doors down the man from the kitchen emerged, looking

frightened. I tried to form another sentence with my mangled mouth.

"Hhhhhh...hhhhhe..." I rasped, the noise coming out like the cry of a dying animal. The man whipped his head towards me and quickly pulled something from his pocket. Before I could realize I was staring down the barrel of a pistol, he fired.

The bullet ripped through the air and into my torso, then burst out the back in a small cloud of blood. I hardly felt it, most sensations had disappeared under the encroaching hunger. The hole it left was like a cold spot in my body as the air touched it, and my fingers traced against the wound lightly. Dark blood stained the tips of my bony fingers.

What is wrong with you? I tried to scream it out through my broken mouth, only letting out an agonized gurgle. He ran down the hall, hoping the bullet would have stalled me. I continued to shuffle after him. I could feel the muscles in my legs stretch and warp with every step, pushing me forward. My organs were twisted up in the barbed wire of starvation, my arms and hands twitching in anticipation.

I watched him sprint down the hall to a heavy bolted door and start pushing on the opening mechanism. It hardly budged, even as he put all of his might into it. I heard him grunt, the blood flowing through his veins and bones creaking under the stress of exertion. I let out another horrible noise from my throat, trying to tell him I was just injured and hungry.

Why won't you help me? I just need help, please. I'm so hungry.

As I got close, the mechanism of the door gave way. He slipped through and disappeared behind the hefty watertight door, slamming it in my face. I heard the clamor of boots on metal, then a loud crash as he screamed. *Oh no*.

I wrenched the door open and peered down into the stairwell. He was crumpled at the bottom, surrounded by the collapsed steps of a metal spiral staircase. His limbs were bent at odd angles and the corroded metal had sliced up his flesh when it gave way beneath him. As the dust settled, he wailed in pain. My heart sank deep down into

the pit of hunger inside my body.

He saw me and screamed in mortal terror, trying to pull himself up with his shattered limbs. I crawled down the stairwell, bruised purple digits stretching to wrap around the fragments of metal left welded to the walls. My jaw hung open, saliva pooling around the shattered teeth. He pleaded and fired bullet after bullet into me as I descended, each one passing impotently through my ravenous form.

Stop it. Stop it. I just need help. I'm hungry. I'm so hungry.

He screamed and swore, hammering his fists against me after the gun was spent, thick maroon fluid dripping onto him from my bullet wounds. I dug my fingers into his flesh, feeling it burst under the pressure like ripe fruit. Seeing the bright red liquid pool out of his wounds made my brain light up, knowing it would taste sweet on my tongue. I sank my broken glass teeth into his exposed skin and tore off a chunk of soft, syrupy flesh. The juice dripped out of my mouth, my jaw stretching and contracting to chew it like it was a piece of warm cantaloupe.

Finally.

This part felt familiar to me, as familiar as the walk to the galley and the cabin seven doors down to the right. The yawning rapacious chasm in my body, my stretching limbs and sharp digits puncturing and ripping at flesh, the rubbery muscles in my jaw flexing bite after bite, the taste as sweet as fruit cocktail in my mutilated mouth. Any trace of guilt or horror there was in my eyes was now completely masked by the mindless desperation to sate my hunger until there was nothing left, just like I'd done a hundred times before.

Jake Morris is a guy in Colorado who writes horror and other fiction. He's a big fan of science, scary movies, annoying electronic music, machines, and rock formations. If you enjoyed this piece, consider checking out his work in other volumes of warning lines, or at jakem.neocities.org (or just read it again, it's up to you).



M. Špoljar

The body that was Monica Wells launched at her the moment the lid was off, but then again, Jude had had that coming.

She barely got to drop the shovel before the other girl was on her – Jude put up no fight, so they went down together, and when Jude's back hit the still wet earth by Monica's grave, she hissed purely on instinct. She hadn't felt much pain in the last twelve hours. She hadn't felt much of anything.

Monica's hands had found her throat already, but then immediately stilled, and Jude knew she was realizing why.

"What," Monica said. She was still straddling Jude's waist, the way you were supposed to when you didn't want someone to get up. Her hands were loose around Jude's throat, but no longer cold, not by comparison.

Jude looked up at her, and as if answering some unspoken question, nodded to confirm.

Jude Mitchell had been nineteen when she died, and she would never turn twenty. Unless this counted. It didn't, if you asked her – this stiff, cold existence, the way she could feel her organs decomposing even though the internet swore that would take another twelve hours. The way her breath didn't fog up mirrors anymore. The fact her blood dried up.

Monica lifted her arms off Jude's throat, and climbed up to her feet. She visibly considered offering Jude a hand, but took too long to decide, so Jude got up on her own. Even in her post-alive state, the feeling of mud on her jeans made her want to die.

"So," Monica said. The side of her head was still slightly caved-in, from where Jude's brother had hit her with a shovel. "You're dead, then?"

Jude said nothing.

Monica arched an eyebrow. "Did he – "

"No," Jude said – too quickly, even though it was true, even though Monica hadn't yet finished her question. She could tell where the question was going. Jude's brother had not killed Jude, though, no matter how satisfying that would have been, for Monica, for dramatic irony itself.

Jude cleared her throat, swallowed. "But he will – he wants to."

And with that, Monica closed her eyes, and inhaled.

"I should hand you over," she said.

"He'd put you in the grave again," Jude said back.

And Monica looked at her, really looked at her, even though she barely still had eyes.

"I don't know," she said. "Would you help him this time?"

Jude, as a rule, did not take part in her brother's haunts. But the call for this one came while Gabriel was visiting her dorm, and the clients turned out to be just down the hall.

She'd known the guys from passing, from the downstairs cafeteria. One of them took Introduction to English Romanticism with her. The other was in her poetry workshop. The other three were all majoring in STEM, so the overlap was unlikely. They were a D&D club, apparently. They played every Wednesday.

The target had been a part of the club, too – the sole girl, the group partner two of them were assigned while scrunching up credits for a robotics remedial. She was Jude's age, which she knew would skeeve Gabriel out, and in the ground for barely two days. The group looked like they'd been haunted for weeks. The one from her Introduction class could not stop crying.

Gabriel never asked how she'd died. Jude had noticed that then, but never asked him about it, and she never let herself wonder. Maybe she had known already, or maybe she knew now and it was leaking through her memories.

It had all been so much easier then. Now she knew why they were always so angry.

She hadn't realized, until – until. Trying to look back felt weird now, like it had happened to someone else. Felt like a bad movie she would have had to watch for class. Like a Wikipedia article for a book she would choose not to read.

She went to her brother because she didn't know who else to go to. She wasn't sure why. She wasn't about to tell him – she wasn't sure how to tell. But she wanted to be near someone, and she had no one else to be near to. Prayer felt foreign to her now. Like it would burn her tongue off if she spoke it.

He saw her. It looked like it had stabbed him through the bowels. She rushed to explain it away – to downplay it, to make a joke, to say he should not feel bad, that he did his best to protect her, that it was not his fault.

But her tongue felt weird in her mouth, and then she looked at him properly, and then she realized.

He loved her still. She knew that, because he let her escape.

She did not feel like explaining it to Monica, though. It felt disrespectful. It felt silly, too, even to her own ears. She knew he'd come for her, love or no love. She knew he would have to. Their family was known – around town, through the Church – for step-

ping in, when the tragically deceased refused to go. It was not the norm for family to take care of family, if she could even still be considered that, but there was no one else left to do it. And he wouldn't let her — her, as she was now — go around, in his sister's body. Disgrace the her that once was by surviving.

Monica cleared her throat. Jude realized she was still waiting for an answer.

“No,” she said. She kept wiping her hands on her jeans, like a nervous habit. She was starting to realize she was not the kind of dirty any wiping would fix. “No, I'm — I'm not here to kill you.” She screwed her eyes shut, swallowed again. “I wouldn't let him — again. No.”

She couldn't open her eyes. She couldn't handle any of Monica's possible reactions.

Monica had had too much to drink, the night before — before. She was wearing beer-stained jeans when they found her, and no shirt.

She had a shirt on now. Gabriel put it on her once he'd knocked her out with that shovel.

Jude wasn't usually a part of Gabe's haunts, but they were told Monica appeared to women only, so it made sense to include her. They bought her a beer and set her out to walk the area — the short-cut students took, between the dorm and the nearest pool table — it didn't take long for Monica to approach her, half-naked and already decaying.

Jude had smelled her first — skin, flesh, someone else's after-shave. She barely got to turn around before Gabriel knocked Monica unconscious.

She had never asked Gabriel if they ever really died. It was another of those things she must have known she was better off not asking. But the way he buried them — like he didn't want them to claw their way back out — she felt comfortable inferring.

And now she'd dug Monica up, and proved herself correct.

“Do you think I'd have stayed awake forever?” Monica asked minutes into their walk. They were going to the nearest boba place, because Monica said she wanted boba. Jude had thought of asking if they could still have boba, but Monica seemed so certain of her actions, and Jude was so sad, it felt pointless to start that conversation. “Is everyone else your family got still awake?”

Jude had been wondering that. She'd been wondering that for as long as she was alive.

“Cause that would blow,” Monica concluded. Then, “Oh, we're here.”

If the server could tell that they were dead, they did not feel compelled to react.

“I don't know where they are buried,” Jude said. It wasn't exactly a non-sequitur, because she could tell what Monica was asking — what Monica was condemning her for not having done earlier.

Monica blinked. “Oh.”

Jude paid for their boba — a *sorry for baiting* you fee — and then they moved back towards the forest.

“Would you,” Monica started. “— dig them up, if you did?”

Jude shut her eyes again, and bit down on her straw.

“He thinks we're dead,” she told Monica.

Monica was busy squeezing their cups into the plastic container. She turned around, said nothing. Her lips were pressed together.

“I know we're not,” Jude went on.

Monica's eyebrows went up, eyes down.

“So,” she finally said. She was facing the recycling bins again. “Did you try telling him that?”

Jude said nothing.

Monica gave her another look.

“No,” Jude finally answered.

Monica didn’t look surprised.

Maybe they both understood that everyone already knew.

“So,” Monica asked, eventually. “Do you want revenge?”

Jude, huddled with her under their shared jacket, gave the question some thought.

She knew Monica was not asking if that was why she’d stuck around. She knew by now, and knew that Monica had known long before, that they were not around for unfinished business. They were around because what happened did not kill them, no matter what her brother’s clients would have liked to believe. No matter what her brother –

“Does it matter what I want?” is what she finally settled on.

Monica gave her an incredulous look. “Why do you think I’m asking?”

Jude said nothing, and kept looking away.

If anyone could tell that she was rotting, they were polite enough not to comment.

Jude finished her semester, turned all her papers in on time. Her skin fell off in wet, putrid chunks. Contrary to the fun facts she remembered from her childhood, her nails and hair did not keep growing.

Monica found a new D&D group. They saw each other in passing, said *hi* and *hello*, and never even followed each other on Instagram. Jude stopped going to church. She talked to her family only to discuss Gabriel’s disappearance.

She hadn’t even been the one to call the police. Her mother listened to a lot of true crime podcasts, and in those podcasts, it was always the ones who called the cops that did it. She left it to his girlfriend, who reported him missing three days after – after. The po-

lice did talk to Jude eventually, and if they suspected anything, they did not let it on. They barely even blinked when one of her nails came off mid-conversation.

She told everyone she didn’t know where her brother was. That she’d do anything to find him. That she missed him every day. None of it was a lie. Every time she walked around campus, she’d take a different route, look for freshly moved earth, keep her ear close to the ground.

Monica’s old friends were buried near the chapel. She knew that because she’d been the one to bury them. She never told Monica, and Monica never told her what she did with Gabriel. They promised each other they wouldn’t. No matter how much the other begged.

Jude, at least, had not resorted to begging yet. Sometimes she felt it was a question of time. She wondered if Gabriel would still be alive, if she found him. She wondered if he was also decaying.

A thought crossed her mind, more than once, that maybe they were buried in the same spot. That Monica and her chose the same place by accident. She felt tempted to check, sometimes, but the thought of unburying the men she’d drugged with over-the-counter sleeping pills filled her with so much dread, she’d already chickened out five times. She still hovered around the area, two feet from where she’d dug a hole big enough for three, and strained her ears.

If any of them were alive, they weren’t making any noise. She’d long stopped wondering if this was what justice felt like. She’d decided by now there was no way to know.

M. Špoljar (he/him) lives in Croatia with his wife and their cat. His work can be found in various places online.

ROADKILL DINNER

Rain Helvia

There is a dead dog buried in my backyard.
Do you remember?

You shot it in the head. 'I must have crossed a line. I'm sorry'

That's what you said
The next day.

Would you have been so forthcoming with remorse if I were less obviously nervous about the gun between your teeth?

So I said 'it's fine', of course. If I hadn't ignored the bloodstains and bits of brains that hadn't quite washed out that might have been a whole Thing and it's rude to make people acknowledge the road-kill I buried alone surrounded by friends.

...

Was it really a dog?

Who can say there ever was a dead animal now the thing is buried and gone.

Surely humanity isn't so unkind that as every person drove by not a single one stopped while I dragged a corpse home.

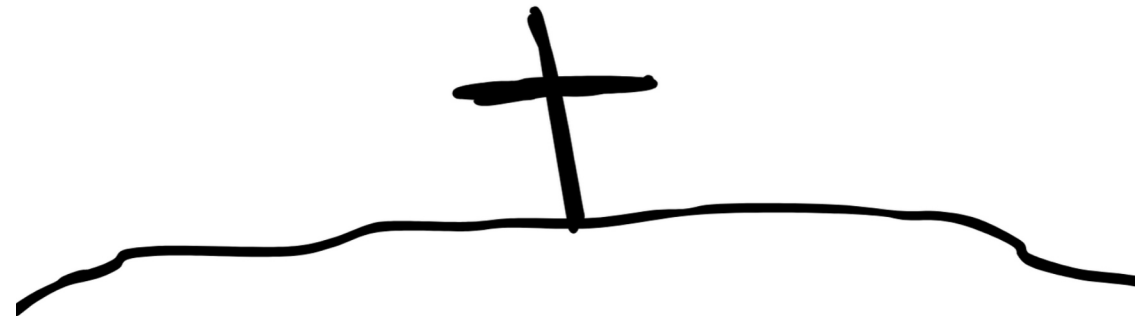
Surely one of my friends in the car would have said something about the bump in the road or the sickening crunch of bone or the unwashable stench a skunk leaves when you hit it with a fucking car!!

And surely if there *were* a dead cat in my yard I couldn't have merrily danced on its grave the day after the next day without a thought to its name?

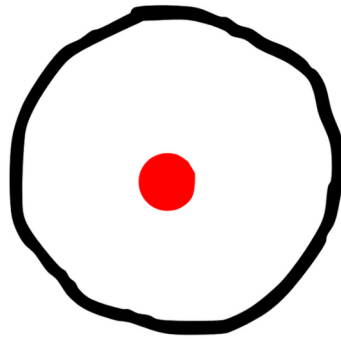
...

Something buried and dead can't possibly be scratching, scratching, scratching at my backdoor.

Filling my yard with undone buttons and spit until I give a feral animal a seat at my dining room table.



Rain Helvia is a hobbyist writer from Philadelphia. She is a 24 year old transfem lesbian, possibly the devil, 98% ruthless, and a frequent insomniac. By day she keeps the computers running for an organization helping children learn to read. At night, she wanders the woods, plays haunting melodies on the viola, runs tabletop games, and occasionally lets words tumble out of her pen. She can be reached by messaging robotwithgender on discord—if you dare.



BLOCKAGE

Cheyenne Brabo

When I was ten, I developed a fear of choking. I was so afraid that sometimes I couldn't eat. I consumed liquid food only - refusing anything more consistent than mashed potatoes for months. Weeks passed while an imaginary rock sat somewhere in my throat. My condition brought images to mind of the Foie Gras delicacy and I was the duck, fattened through gavage before my impending slaughter.

It wasn't as if I didn't get hungry. Headaches plagued me daily. I shook with the ever-present weakness of my need for food. Three months into my childhood affliction, my gums started to bleed freely - even though I drank watered down protein shakes to get enough nutrients in my system, my molars started to atrophy with disuse.

Another, perhaps equally detrimental aspect was my parents. My father believed that my fear of choking on food was childish and stupid. He was convinced that nothing was physically wrong with me, arrogant as he was towards most of my mental health, which grew increasingly more difficult to cope with as he refused to agree to any diagnostic testing for possible physical ailments. Though my doctors suggested we rule out any corporeal causes, my father was certain that any x-ray or nasopharyngeal probe would cause my nervous thoughts to further worsen.

Like many old men stuck in their ways, my father skated a precarious slope of logical inconsistencies.

Seventy days into the whole affair, I realized that I could live no longer as I had been. If no one around me was interested in taking me seriously, then I would have to become my own savior, I would have to help myself. I had always been a serious, analytical individual, and I fully believed that I could solve the issue of the blockage in my throat if I fully put my mind to it. So, slowly starving and half mad with anxiety, I devised a plan to take matters into my own hands.

I planned an exploration of my own inner throat on a Friday night, giddy with the anticipation of finally knowing what was wrong with me. First, I needed to make it through the school week, to hold out until I could find time to be alone with myself and secure my much-needed privacy.

When I felt a strange, pulsing new sensation on the back of my tongue while I was sitting in Wednesday's sixth period pre-algebra class, I knew that I wouldn't be able to wait any longer.

Thank goodness I sat in the classroom's final row of desks, for when a jolt of pressure assaulted the back of my throat, I was forced to stifle a gag. Thank goodness I was a shy, unassuming girl, since the scratching in my throat turned suddenly into a thudding, striking sensation, like the wiggle of a fingertip or a toothbrush in the back of my throat. Whatever was happening inside of me had taken a turn for the horrifying. The sensation persisted until I felt like I was getting punched in the windpipe from inside my esophagus.

Still, I was a good child, hyper aware of our class dismissal looming only several minutes away, and I stayed quiet and complacent. I wrapped my hands around my throat very gently as I fought to ignore the pounding, churning sensation inside of me. A belch was forced out of me as the sensation of being slugged in the throat came over me again.

When the school bell rang, I ignored the teacher's calls of question and the startled sounds of my judgmental peers as I jumped from my seat and ran into the hallway. Hand over my mouth to hold down lunchtime's protein shake, I took off into a sprint.

It was my mother in the driver's seat waiting in the school pickup line - thank goodness my father hadn't come to pick me up by

surprise. I sufficiently ignored most of her conversation on the ride, only responding to her questions in simple yes's and no's with an occasional it was good. I felt guilty for responding to my mother so dryly, but I feared I would vomit everywhere if I kept my mouth open long enough to utter a complete sentence.

When I made it to the safety of the bathroom in my house, I turned the sink on to disguise any sounds I'd make. I barely made it to the toilet before I emptied my already empty stomach into the water of the bowl.

My upper body ached as I leaned and heaved, desperate to get whatever was inside of me out. Even as my body evacuated every piece of nutrients it physically could, my throat felt no relief. While I tried to calm my spasming gag reflex, I knew something had to be done and it had to happen soon, lest my mother sense something was wrong, or I passed out from exhaustion.

Hardly thinking, I slipped my fingers into the drooling darkness of my own mouth. I took a choked, agonizing breath through my nose as I felt along the ridges of my molars. I realized that I couldn't even swallow my saliva without wanting to vomit again.

When I found where I assumed my tongue would begin to slope down and into my windpipe, I felt the hardened, curving shape of something foreign and round at the entrance of my throat.

My fingertips and hand recoiled violently. I fell onto my butt on the bathroom floor, drooling and panting as multi-colored, protein-smoothie vomit sat calmly in my parents' white, brightly lit toilet.

Terror and despair reared inside of me as validation eased my horribly troubled mind.

To me, the world had been instantly split into two, manageable sides of an easily understood coin. Yes, I had an object physically lodged in my throat and something was terribly wrong with me. I had also just discovered undeniable proof that my own suffering had happened.

If something was wrong with my body, my father would have to listen to me. If something that my father could see with his eyes and confirm to be real had been growing in my throat the entire

time, his guilt could inspire him to finally take me seriously, never again to write off the paranoia of my thoughts again.

I realized, as I stared at my own pale, sickly face in the bathroom mirror, at the red rims of my tired eyes, that I knew exactly how to alleviate my situation.

Two wrongs couldn't make a right, but sometimes one had to meet other people where they were, and I'd been compromising with my father for as long as I could remember.

When I stepped shakily towards the vanity mirror, snot was leaking from my nose and tears of irritation were falling from my eyes so that I could hardly breathe through my emotions. With determination renewed, I tilted my head back and to the side, angling my mouth so that I could see as far into my throat as possible. To be understood by my father - but more importantly, to ensure that the problem would need to be solved - I needed as much evidence of my physical turmoil as I could possibly gather before presenting my case to the adults who controlled my life.

I grabbed one of my mother's pick-combs, whose handle was long and pointed for separating hair into intricate styles. Opening my mouth until my jaw cracked, comb poised in my grip like a weapon, I prepared to investigate the depth of my dark delusion.

Where my esophagus began and my tongue ended, in the dark hole in the cavern of my body cavity, an *eyeball* was staring up at me.

I took a deep, gasping breath full of mucus and vomit as I stared at the contracting pupil of the eye. Though I had to cough out all the air I'd just inhaled, I kept my mouth open, scared to look at the eye for too long while afraid to look away from it. Like a child in the throes of a nightmare, I made no attempt to understand what I saw, to question how an eye had come to grow between my tonsils and uvula - my mind locked into a state of action, I had finally identified the cause of my problem and I felt duty-bound to solve it.

As the ocular growth swiveled around in the modified socket of my throat, darting back and forth as if it were trying to see me better, I thought that it looked like one of my father's green-grey eyes.

I raised my hand as the eye stared back at me, all the fear and suffering of two months of an anorexia-like diet bubbling in my heart like a field of volcanic magma. With unflinching determination, I stabbed the pointed tip of my mother's comb down the back of my throat and directly into the black pupil of the blockage inside me.

Hot blood poured down my throat like searing, molten fire. I swallowed compulsively and swore I felt something slide down my throat, something spherical that hurt my esophagus all the way down. As I slid to my knees on the bathroom and darkness spread across my vision, I couldn't help but smile.

The following days passed sporadically - I'd been deemed a suicide attempt according to my mother, who also informed me that I'd been in a coma for over forty hours.

Though I was hardly conscious enough to understand it, I'll never forget the hushed, nervous conversation I'd overheard between my father and one of the emergency surgeons. The man explained that he'd removed the remains of an incredibly rare, severely disturbing mass from inside me. Despite fervent requests, my father refused to allow any testing to be done on the excised material.

I don't need anything written in my medical records to have my experience vindicated, certainly not when I heard the surgeon tell my father in a horrified voice, "Mister, your daughter had an ocular nerve growing out of her esophagus!"

Cheyenne Brabo (she/her) is a queer horror writer from Northern California. Her writing is slated for publication in Scissor Sisters Sapphic Villain's Anthology and Moth Eaten Mag, was a finalist in Crystal Lake Entertainment's Flash Contest, and has appeared in the Raven Review. When she's not writing, she enjoys taking her cat for walks on his leash. Find her on twitter @cheyssectoplasm.

SWALLOW ME (W)HOLE

Briar Ripley Page

June 6

Practice today. Cyra and Trevor fighting again; Zissi and I ignored them. New songs coming along okay. Cyra liked my improv on "Nail Through the Palm". Trevor said I was showboating, but I think he just wanted to make Cyra mad. I don't showboat. Don't like the attention; they know that. Cyra kept trying to take video for her Instagram, and I brushed all my hair in front of my face. If I could've ducked under the keyboard, I would have. If they could've played the song without me, I would've left until she put her fucking phone away. Cyra and her sequins, her silver lips, her artful, calculated filters and hashtags and whatnot. Cultivating her band as brand.

...Shouldn't be such a bitch, even in my private notebook. Cyra's cool. Cyra's a normal person, with social media accounts and friends and ambitions and a partner— though I'm not sure how long she and Trevor are gonna last at this rate. Or what it'll mean for Virginia Fur if they split. I'd have to find another gig, I suppose, but I like this one. I'm used to it, at least— it's been steady work for months now. Cyra's a trust fund baby, and she pays a lot better than taking piano requests at hotel bars.

And I like Zissi. We play well together. Wish she talked more. I'm no good at talking to people, but if she talked to me, I'd listen. She's prettier than Cyra, and her voice is better, too, but she's shy.

Sensible shoes, sensible bob, no tattoos or fishnet. I feel we've made a real connection, though. Her cello, my keys. We converse with strings, with bow and hammers, notes and chords. It's a language more comfortable than words.

It's starting to get so humid at night. Moisture like a big animal licking me all over. Gives me the weirdest dreams.

June 8

Woke up sticky. Get your mind outta the gutter, diary—it's the damn weather. I got my box fan going right next to the bed, but it's not enough. I need a dehumidifier, but I'm broke. That old hospital-green paint is peeling off the walls, especially up near the ceiling. Reminds me of diseased skin. The bread I bought two days ago already moldy.

Hauled myself upright to take a cold shower, trying to remember my dreams. Had a dull headache, beer hangover most likely. I don't go out much, but it's hard for me to sleep without three or four drinks in me, anymore. I read somewhere that alcohol inhibits dreaming, something about neurotransmitters and sleep cycles. Try telling that to my brain. Every night, I'm lost in these phantasmagoric sensory landscapes. Sometimes they're pleasant. Sometimes I hear music that melts my insides into, just, this jelly of rapture. Sometimes—okay, *usually*—they're worse. Broken glass puncturing me, hands all over, dirty fingers jammed in my mouth, in my crotch, in the cartilaginous spaces between my vertebrae. Everything thick black and shiny green, humming like flies. I think there are stories to these dreams, but once I'm fully awake I can only recall fragments.

So I'm standing in the shower, letting the water hit me right at the nape of my neck, rubbing pine tar soap all over myself, when I see that I'm hurt. There's a hole in my chest, set right smack between my breasts at nipple-level. It's tiny, like a zit, but it's

definitely a *hole*—some kind of puncture wound, I guess. Perfectly round. It's not bleeding, and I don't feel any pain, but the edges are super inflamed, bright red and puffy. The contrast between edge and interior makes the hole look pitch dark.

I poke at it a little, and it stings bad enough that I don't try that again. I have a crazy thought that in my dream last night I was being chased by this gigantic insect, this thing like a big butterfly or moth, and when it caught me, it lanced me with its proboscis. Right *there*, right where that puncture wound is now. At first I'm like, *Get real, Maureen. This isn't a movie in the Nightmare on Elm Street franchise. Things that happen in dreams can't injure you in real life.* But then it occurred to me, of course, that something happening to my sleeping body in real life could affect the content of my dreams.

I think maybe a bug bit me. Or a spider. Debating whether to consult Dr. Google on this one, but searching for my symptoms, or for a list of venomous insects in my area, would probably just freak me out and convince me that I'm dying. Anyway, I don't have health insurance now that I'm 26. I'll wait a few days and see if it gets better or worse before I decide anything. In my experience, 90% of health problems eventually go away if you just pretend they're not happening and leave them alone. And the other 10% are all in your head. Ha-ha.

June 9

Practice today was a shitshow. Trevor kept picking and picking at Cyra, criticizing her voice, her lyrics, her outfit, until she finally blew up and yelled at him. Told him if he was so unhappy with Virginia Fur, he could fuck off and start his own band. She spit at his feet on the cracked cement floor.

He called her bluff. "Okay," he said, "let's see how well you do without a drummer. You think I'm expendable, but I'm not. Now get the hell out of my dad's garage."

Zissi and I looked at each other all nervous. Her eyes were big and soft and shocked. Trevor glanced at us and said, voice dripping condescension, that we shouldn't worry, that we'd be fine, that Cyra had enough money to rent better practice space and if we were smart we'd be leaving the band soon anyway because it was nothing more than a talentless rich girl's narcissistic rock star dress up game.

Cyra took a step towards Trevor, her hands up in a truce-calling gesture and her mouth open like she was about to say something, but he didn't let her speak. "Get out," he said quietly, pointing a finger at her. "All of you. Leave *now*."

So we left. Cyra said she'd try and talk him out of it. Failing that, she'd find a new practice space, rearrange some of our songs. We have a show booked next week, but she's sure everything will end up okay. Zissi tried to comfort her; she shrugged it off. Acted like she wasn't upset at all, but I could hear her voice get thick and shaky with emotion. Poor, silly Cyra.

My chest itched like crazy where the bug bite was, and I kept scratching and scratching through my shirt during that whole conversation. Didn't even realize I was doing it until they both looked my way and Cyra said, "Jesus, Maureen," and Zissi asked me if I needed her to go over to Walgreen's for some bandages and hydrogen peroxide. I noticed my fingers were wet and sticky, and when I looked down, blood was seeping through the fabric of the shirt. Big spreading stain with a circular indent in the middle marking the wound. Maybe it was my imagination, but it felt like it was sucking at my fingertips through the blood. Pulling them towards it. Greedy little mouth.

Of course, I was freaked out and embarrassed. I told them it was nothing, just a cut I'd gotten the other day that must've opened back up because I kept messing with it. Hurried home as fast as I could and ran straight to the bathroom to clean it off. God, Zissi was so nice, but her *face*...she had this absolutely *disgusted* look, like I was an insect. Like I was some kind of horrible giant bug. ~~I never want her to look at me that way again.~~

Weird thing: turns out all the blood was from my scratching around the wound. The hole itself is still neat and black, not bleeding at all. Not oozing pus. Nothing like that, except. Except I'm almost positive it's bigger than it was yesterday? It was the size of a zit; now it's a little wider than a pencil eraser. It's *really dark* inside the hole, darker than it should be. I ought to be able to see some red, right? Some flesh colors? But no. It could be deep space in there.

Anyway, I seriously dug into myself. It's nasty. Haven't pulled that sort of stunt in a while, but I did used to have a real thing with picking at scabs and popping zits. *You* know. I put Bactine on the scratches and then a gauze pad over hole and scratches alike, taped down firm. I'll give it another day or two for observation and then go see a doctor if it's still like this.

June 10

Well, I won't be going to the doctor. Fuck. Okay. I have to try to write this down.

~~It's fucking insane. I don't understand what could possibly~~
~~Someone wake me up~~

Okay. Okay, okay, Maureen. We're *not* getting hysterical. We're writing this shit down. Writing can help us make sense of things. Remember what the shrinks told you.

Breathe in and out. In and out.

Here's what happened:

I woke up this morning (still sweating like a hog, thanks), and the gauze pad was gone. The tape was gone. Most of the worst scratches on my chest were gone, too.

The hole had eaten them all. It had eaten them, and it had grown.

It's more than an inch and a half wide now. I measured, and then it sucked the tape measure out of my hand, pulled it into itself. I saw the tape measure unspooling, falling, falling a long, long way, like down a mineshaft, until it disappeared. Impossible, of course. I'm not that deep. And yet I watched it happen.

When the tape measure was gone, the hole was just a little larger than it had been before. That's why I write "more than an inch and a half". Ha. All measurements will have to be approximate from now on, diary. Sorry.

The hole takes up space on my chest; it pushes my breasts out a little to either side. I still can't feel it, apart from those itchy edges. Where the hole sits, there's nothing, no sensation, not even a sensation of numbness. It's like it's not a part of me at all.

Maybe it isn't. Fuck. I don't know. It doesn't lead inside my body, that's for sure. The interior of the hole is clearly visible now, and it's still dark, all black. Smooth, no meat or bone to speak of, but with a depth to it, somehow, even without any objects falling through it to give a sense of perspective. It looks like it goes on forever.

It's *hungry*, too. I can feel its suction, the no-sensation eating at the edges of itself, pulling on my hands and the ends of my hair when I'm not careful. I don't dare try and put on a shirt. Leaving the apartment is completely out of the question. I've been sitting in the middle of the floor all day, drinking fucking Genessee Cream Ale like it's water. (Frankly, it might as well be. Three cans in, and I'm still sober as a Mormon missionary.) Sweating it out, staring at the peeling walls. Wondering what the hell I'm supposed to do now. Hoping this is another one of my nightmares.

June 12 or 13, I think

I've been playing the keyboard. Virginia Fur songs, first:

"Garbage Sucker", "Celestial", "Eat My Liver", all the ones with complicated parts for me. When I get tired of that, I play my old karaoke night favorites. "Creep", "Violet", "Against Pollution", more embarrassing stuff. My downstairs neighbor bangs on the ceiling, but fuck him. This is the last thing I have to keep myself from losing it completely. Apart, I suppose, from writing in here.

All the booze in the apartment is gone. I drank until I passed out. When I woke up, after I could open my eyes again, I examined the hole in my chest and went back to the fridge for the rest of my beer. Then the half-empty bottle of vodka I keep under the sink, mixed with orange juice. The hole keeps growing, mostly slow and steady, but faster when I was drunk enough to think that feeding it my crushed beer cans would be a funny idea. It swallowed them as easily as it did the tape measure, and I watched them swirl away into the void like tiny sparkling U.F.Os.

The hole is about as wide as my fist now, about the width of my heart. I don't understand how I can be alive with this thing in me, but alive I am. Haven't been eating much. I don't feel hungry at all. ~~Maybe the hole eats for me, now. Maybe the hole is something new that I'm becoming, the way larvae become winged insects. Or maybe the hole is something eating me, as much as it eats the things that fall into its small gravity. Maybe it's like one of those parasitic wasps that incubate in the bodies of spiders.~~

~~(Yeah, I watched a lot of nature documentaries when I was in the hospital. You remember. And yeah, I've considered that maybe I'm just crazy again, too. But this feels so real, and I never had hallucinations or delusions before. They said it was depression and PTSD. And self-mutilation. Excuse me, "body-focused repetitive behavior".)~~

I keep thinking about that dream I had, however many days and nights ago. The insect proboscis penetrating me. Did it leave something behind, besides a wound? ~~An egg? A child?~~ Fuck, *now* I sound crazy. But it's not like there's a rational explanation for any of this.

My phone's been blowing up, of course. Cyra and

Zissi and even a few messages from Trevor. One from Mom. One from my brother, but he just wants to borrow money, as usual. (Like I have money to spare, Dylan.) I read them all, but I don't answer any of them. What could I possibly say?

I hope nobody comes looking for me. I hope they'll be able to let me go without too much fuss.

The darkness of the hole seems to pulse whenever I stare into it too hard, as though it's a sea inside me, with tides. A new heart made of devouring. I keep having this urge to stick my hand in it, straight down, just to see what will happen.

I keep resisting that urge. So far.

~~June 14? Not that it matters~~

~~Fuck~~

~~fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck~~

~~I'm so sorry, Zissi. I'm so so so very sorry.~~

~~I won't forgive myself.~~

~~Breathe in and out, Maureen. In and out. In and in and out and~~

[undated]

This will be the last time I write anything in here. Before I go, I will put this notebook somewhere in the building where another person will find it. I don't particularly care if anyone ever learns what became of me, but I think that Zissi's friends and family deserve to know what happened to her. And Zissi deserves an honest account of her...death? *Probably* her death. But I hope not. I cling to that hope.

Here's what happened:

I was lying on the floor in the heat, because the linoleum is

cooler than my mattress, watching the paint slowly peel off the walls, marinating in my own stink. It was late afternoon, and the light was gold across my skin, across the milk crate bookshelves and the folded keyboard in its corner. The light was gold everywhere except where it fell into the hole in my chest and became nothing, became dark. I guess I was watching that, too. Then there was a knock on my door. A short, sharp knock, deliberate and unmistakable.

I figured it was my downstairs neighbor, the one who thinks I make too much noise. I ignored it. It came again, and again.

"Go away!" I shouted.

"Maureen?" someone cried through the wood of the door, and I knew Zissi's voice immediately. I remembered that Virginia Fur had a show coming up, and that if I hadn't missed it entirely by now, I'd definitely missed a lot of important practice and prep. All those texts I hadn't answered suddenly unfurled themselves in my mind. Everything about life outside my barren little apartment seemed so distant and trivial, some moderately interesting daytime TV show I'd once watched while home sick as a child. Even though I knew it had only been a handful of days since the hole began to be a problem. Less than a week. I figured Zissi had come on behalf of the band to tell me off for flaking, and I felt a little bit bad for her—for all of them—but mostly I felt bad for myself. I still remembered Zissi's face the last time I'd seen her, the disgusted way she'd looked at my bloodstained shirt.

~~What shapes would her face make if she laid eyes on me now?~~

"Fuck off, Zissi!" I yelled. "I don't want to see anyone! Tell Cyra she can forget about me! I'm out of the band!"

"Maureen!" Zissi yelled, pounding on the door. "We're all worried about you! What the hell is going on?"

I hoisted myself off the floor and walked over to the door. Holding my chest well away from it, I pressed my face and hands against its heavy, smooth dead-tree surface. It smelled of dust and sweat and old beer, or maybe that was me.

“Zissi,” I said, as kindly as I could, not wanting to shout anymore. “It’s none of your business. Please, for both our sakes, just leave now.”

“At least open your door, Maureen. Tell me that face to face.”

“No,” I said. “How did you know where I lived? And how did you get in?”

“Your brother’s name is Dylan, right? He used to work with my girlfriend at the frame shop. I asked him. And the front door of your building was ajar, lucky me.”

I considered asking whether she meant girlfriend-as-in-friend-who-is-a-girl or girlfriend-as-in-romantic-partner, then dismissed the question. It didn’t matter. ~~I ignored a sudden flutter in my gut, a twisting lurch.~~ “Zissi, I’m sorry, but I can’t see anyone.”

“Maureen, I only want to talk for five seconds. Let me see that you’re not sick or...hurt. Then, I promise, I’ll go. It’s not my business if you want to self-sabotage.”

~~My intestines were a rollercoastering tangle.~~ “What if I *am* sick, Zissi?” I asked her. “What if I *am* sick or hurt? What if I’m sick or hurt in a way that no one can do anything to help?”

I could hear her breathing on the other side of the door. She drew a long gulp of air into her lungs. “Then at least let me see it for myself, Maureen. At least let me understand what’s going on. I care about you, you know.”

“Not really,” I admitted. “I mean, I don’t think I knew for sure.” We both stood in silence for a moment, listening to each other breathe through the wood. Then I made the worst decision I’ve made in my entire life. God help me.

“Do you promise not to freak out?” I asked Zissi. “Do you promise not to be afraid of me, or...repulsed?”

Another silence. Then she said yes, she did promise, and her voice was very small and grave. And so I took a deep breath, and I

unlocked the door, and I opened it for her.

Zissi was wearing a dress that made her look like she was going to church. Her hair was soft and shiny, pushed back behind her ears. I felt even grimmer than before. She frowned when she first glanced down at my naked chest, and then her wide eyes went wider. I saw disgust flicker across her face, and fear, and then something like awe, but finally her features settled in a configuration I couldn’t quite identify. Pity? I think maybe it was pity.

She took a step forward, into my apartment, and I took a step back. “Oh, Maureen,” she said, “what on Earth happened to you?”

“I don’t know,” I told her. I gestured helplessly at the hole. “At least you can see it, too. I guess that’s good.”

“*Good...?*” Her voice broke off, incredulous. She took another step in my direction, reaching out. “Maureen, it’s horrible. You poor thing. Did you do this to yourself? Oh my God.”

“How could I do this to *myself?*” I demanded, as she took another step towards me. She began to reach out, and I moved away from her again. “Why would I *want* to do this to myself?”

“We can bandage it up,” Zissi was saying. “We can get you to an ER. They’ll be able to help you...Holy shit, Maureen. I think there’s something moving in there.”

I looked down at my chest, but I saw nothing moving inside the hole. I saw nothing. Darkness, blackness, empty space devoid of light. I started to tell Zissi I didn’t know what she was talking about, but I stumbled on an empty can I’d left on the floor and I tripped. ~~I tripped, that’s all, I swear that’s all, I’m sorry.~~ And as I started to fall backwards, I thrust my body forward to try and get my balance again. I instinctively grabbed hold of the closest solid thing I could, which was Zissi.

I grabbed Zissi. I pulled myself up using her body. I could smell the clean mint of her mouth as she gasped in surprise and horror. Our breasts touched.

And then, before I had time to push her away, before she had time to scream, it got her.

The hole pulled her inside itself with the same ruthless appetite it had shown for tape measures and beer cans and me.

She was, of course, too big to fit, so it crumpled her up like flesh origami. There wasn't much blood, but there was a crunching, grinding sound as her skin and bones and meat shifted and stretched and compacted. I heard screaming, then, but I realized soon enough that it was my own. Zissi never made another sound, after that one little gasp. Perhaps she was dead in an instant, or hypnotized beyond feeling, beyond hurting. Perhaps it only *looked* painful. I hope so. I really, really fucking hope so.

When it was over, I was on my back on the floor again, shuddering and howling and crying. The downstairs neighbor banged on his ceiling, but that only made me louder.

The golden light had turned to dusky indigo and then to a sickly streetlamp glow before I calmed down enough to sit up and take stock of the situation.

Zissi was gone without a trace, and the hole had expanded tremendously.

It takes up most of my torso now, from collarbone to navel. It's grown out of its circular shape; the inflamed edges are the edges of my body. From the front, my chest is a silhouette of a woman, a girl-shaped blot of dark. When I reach around to touch my back, it's still there, skin and spine intact. The hole leads not through me, but directly into something beyond me. Unless it simply crushes everything it eats down to an invisibly tiny point, I suppose. But maybe it's a portal. Maybe it's a tunnel to some otherworld filled with giant moths and singing and beer can U.F.O.s. Maybe Zissi is there now, in the belly of the beast, shaking the void out of her skirts.

Soon enough, I'll find out. The tug of the hole is stronger. I feel it lapping at the inflamed skin surrounding that numb space, converting more and more dirty, sweaty flesh into not-me. It makes

it so difficult to move, to lift and carry objects. I have to hold this book and pen at arm's length across the kitchen table. (Forgive my sloppy handwriting.) When I'm done, I'll sneak it downstairs. Leave it in the laundry room, maybe, atop a coin-operated machine. Someone will find it before long.

And when I've done that, when I've left my record, I'll ouroboros myself. I'll stick my hands straight down into the dark and see where the suction takes me.

That's the only way this can end, whatever this is. Whatever it will turn out to have been in the end. I wonder if I'll get to know, somewhere deep in that infinite mystery. Even if I imagine the only thing waiting for me is oblivion, still I feel a surge of relief thinking about it. A long-standing itch I finally get to scratch. There's no reason to hold off now. ~~I've done irreparable harm, and Zissi will never, never come back.~~

My only fear is this: what if I put my hands in the hole and nothing happens at all?

Briar Ripley Page is the author of CORRUPTED VESSELS and THE FALSE SISTER, among other books. Their website is briarripleypage.xyz.

MISCARRIAGE

d. b. lane

a birth gone wrong. blood spills on the floor between pigeon-toed feet.

the child has ripped its way out, curled around carnage

it wraps a pink fist around the umbilical cord and rips it out. uprooted from the family tree before the brutal process even really began. the vivisection of growing up; coming out once and coming out twice. held by the wrong hands.

stitched, fixed, after the delivery. its body is wrong in its proclivity and instinct. ugly, sinful.

skin too tight,

belly hanging loose, nails dirty. the thing is not womanly, the thing is downright hideous. what is it, without softness? femininity flayed.

they tear through family like wildfire

burning herself while they smother the little oxygen still remaining for her to breathe.

hate what you don't know; don't know what you hate

family reunions in a slaughterhouse. idle conversation as digging a knife into the flesh in order to see where it gives.

call in a priest to offer graces to the depraved and blood-stained thing. lovingly murmur condolences while a rosary is held like a severed limb

MISCARRIAGE

enforcing the barrier between the woman it was supposed to be and whatever it became instead.

whatever it had been all along,
covered head to toe in blood, horns protruding from her head;
godless, born with an incurable condition,

not a woman or a nest,

a curse as sore as an open wound

a birth turned death as the child
before you
transforms, molding himself into
an image that would affront god.

D. H. Lane (she/he) is a creative writing and linguistics undergrad at Syracuse University. She focuses on classic civilizations, language, queer identity, horror, and deer in the headlights. He edits for The Dawn Review and Renaissance Review. You can find her works in anti-heroin chic, warning lines, dog teeth, perennial hauntings, Beloved Zine, and her substack at <https://delightfullyunhinged.substack.com>. His twitter is @schrldingersdyke.



CAVE CANEM

Elyssa Tappero

Footsteps. Tanim stilled, straining to catch the sound through the muffling fog. Boot heels clicked on slick cobblestones, the gait patient yet determined as it moved directly toward him. A shudder rocked his crouched form as he fought the urge to flee. Better to wait and see who approached. *'I'll find you.'* He repeated the instructions like a mantra to calm the mad panic of potential capture. *'I will always find you. Trust me. Wait for me. I will come.'* Just wait. Only one pair of footsteps. Everything would be fine. Just wait.

A shadow stretched long across Tanim as the footsteps drew to a halt. He lifted his head slowly, a sharp headache pulsing behind his eyes, to stare up at the man haloed by the gas street lamp above. Nothing but a silhouette - then the figure shifted, illuminating sharp, pale features and cavernous eyes. "Daren," Tanim choked wetly. He raised one clumsy hand but left only more blood streaked across his lips as he wiped at them, not less. The liquid coated his throat and tongue, dribbled down his chin to soak the stiff lace collar at his neck. "I couldn't help myself."

"Oh Tanim..." The man clucked admonishingly and shook his head as he surveyed the scene. "You've made quite a mess of her. And yourself." Tanim turned back to the crumpled body beside him. Below the woman's slackened lips her throat oozed cooling blood, jugular torn in ragged chunks. Her petticoats were likewise soaked with blood and street filth, ripped to tatters where she had fought in vain for freedom. "She struggled," he explained dully as

he wiped sticky fingers on a corner of the dead girl's coat tail. "It made me angry."

"So I see," Daren bent to stroke his companion's black locks fondly, forever calm in the face of his lover's mounting madness. "Come, darling. Let us be off home before the fog thickens. You're soaked through; you'll catch a chill." The touch stirred Tanim from his morass and cleared the blood lust fever from his muddled mind. He lurched to his feet, weary yet steady, and gestured to his battered victim. "Should we not hide the body? Dump her in the river like the others?"

"No time," Even as Daren spoke church bells tolled in the distance, marking the late hour. "The Watch will come 'round soon. Leave her; they will think it only another dog attack."

"They did not think it a dog attack last time. They put up warnings. They questioned the town--"

"Hush," Daren looped his arm through Tanim's and turned him away from the ghastly mess on the cobbles. "Forget about her. One more dead beggar means nothing. Come home now. I've been to see Isaac Fox and he swears this new opium is his purest yet. You will sleep the night through and feel yourself in the morning." He slipped his greatcoat off and draped it over his lover's damp shoulders. One hand lingered on the man's jaw with a loving caress. "And perhaps when spring arrives we shall move somewhere more... metropolitan. Paris, perhaps, or London. Would you like that?"

London. Easy to become anonymous in a city that size, to blend into the crowds and the shadows and the smoke dens. And people vanish in cities all the time. No one would notice a few missing beggars. Tanim licked at the blood on his lips. He was getting used to the taste.

"Yes, I believe I would."

Elyssa Tappero (she/they) is radically queer, vocally pagan, and writes a lot of weird shit she hopes will leave you feeling vaguely disturbed. Find their work at onlyfragments.com and on Twitter at @OnlyFragments.

MOLAR BREAK

Rabbitfeet

She died in my arms coming down the mountain, and it took me days to press the beast back beneath my skin.

The sky slipped over itself in endless writhing and I wondered if it was in grief at her loss or in a kind of ecstasy at receiving her among the stars. Or perhaps it was pain; perhaps her coming was so hot it burned. That thought comforted me: old habits die hard. She was always meteoroid, and would be scorching the soft velvet of the clouds green and black, as she had my skin, tender and bruised as deep time. The beast felt her loss more keenly than I; I was selfish, in a way; coming back to myself, I reflected often on the macrocosm of another queer corpse, of more blood spilled but tempered with revolution, with memory, with righteous anger and hope. It helped dull the grief, made me go on, had me scraped knees and still crawling my way out of the woods and back to civilisation.

The beast had no such thoughts, no such touchstones; it railed against her loss for the sake of loss, and of pain, and of the *injustice* of the cold and empty space between my arms. We tore through tendons and broke bone, salted the soil with her final breath and the mulched pine beneath our feet was too soft for our bile-sour rage.

One dusk it was pink and blue as she had been, and frosted solid like the paint in her hair. I lay listening to the world, letting the wind play over the beast's humus-braided pelt and watching the light fade from her eyes over and over and over. Voices drifted up to

me, a mile off or so, and fear tried to build in the depths of my belly, stone-heavy and urgent. I could not find the fire to dismiss the beast until they were almost on me chattering like birds and starburst blinding, at which point the beast fled in thumping and migrainous betrayal without my trying.

I was forced to swallow both beast and my grief, to shadow them behind the story of a lost hiker in the mountains, confused and turned around and trying to get back to...to...where exactly? To get out of here. I could not answer them when they came to me, bright in whispering waterproofs and tumbling over their questions, and pulled me from where I lay half-submerged in the swollen and hungry river. I could not tell them how long I had been in the woods; I did not know. I guessed at weeks, and my answer shocked them into tittering glances and simpering shifting feet, so I learned to watch my honesty. I could not answer them when they asked what had happened to me; I could not remember all of it. I remembered walking, I told them, and losing my way; I remembered, I told them, being afraid in the dark.

They were sympathetic, though they would not touch me. They crackled with a nervous energy so tangible it made the beast's laughter roll in the back of my throat. They were a pretty couple, decked out in a rainbow of bulky and expensive hiking gear; he leaned on smiling whenever the conversation made him nervous enough to run a hand through his thin, dark hair; she let her words run from her mouth like waxed string slipping through her fingers and every silence filled would make her wince. After a hurried and desperately hushed conversation which he won, they decided to be kind, from arm's length, guiding me down into the woods where the dark was thick and watching me closely.

Every flickering glance, every rolled eyewhite or fluttering pupil, had the beast rising along my spine, rippling like a wave beneath my skin as though my time in the mountains had filled me with bugs. Their polite distrust captivated the beast; like the rabbit before the racing hound, my attention was caught on their jerking movements, and the beast wanted to circle them, teeth bared and

trotting. We wanted to pester and threaten and leave that safe and crackling distance between *us* and *them* empty all the while. Wanted to allow it to fill with potential until every step had them feeling our touch, a ghost of wet teeth and lolling tongue and salivating grin: *are you afraid? Think you'll catch something?*

Now the beast roils and begs, but I think of that high glass building pouring violence from its every orifice; I think of her hair soft in my tight grip and rolling her face up to look me in the eye. I bite the inside of my lip too hard at the remembered sight of her and the taste of blood in my mouth chases her face out of my mind before I can understand her expression. I toss my head and two white and bobbing faces snap back to watch me in the gloam. I smile, and attempt to look meek. Embarrassed, my saviours turn away.

We pass a tent, glowing orange in the canopy's hazy black, and though they both try so very hard to avoid acknowledging its presence, I smell them on the slithering fabric that rattles against its poles in the snowballing breeze. *Not gonna invite me in?* I want to ask, but snap my jaws shut to keep the words from escaping. That earns a flinch from the woman that makes the beast slaver. She is pretty, blonde, smaller than me. She turns back to make grudging eye contact with me and smiles half-heartedly. "I'm sorry you've had such a hard time out here. Don't let it turn you off hiking! It's so good to just get out here and *breathe*, you know? Good for the soul." Her voice is passerine and lilting. "Sure," I say, and my voice is rough by comparison, hoarse with disuse, "might give this particular trail a miss for the foreseeable, though." She laughs like the ringing of a bell, so unlike Puppy; her smile is perfect and glitters in the moonlight coming down through thick-slit wounds in the canopy; I am filled with a hatred for her that even the beast almost cringes away from. Her man gives me a look both hard and puzzled, and I meet it.

At the edge of the woods, the road rushes like water. I heard its currents up in the thickest trees, but Andy and Brianna, who are careful to tell me their names only as they are dismissing me, seem

to hear it for the first time here on the naked trail. They ask me if I can find my way from here. I smile and it feels lopsided. "Back to the tent? Sure, I could find you from here." Both blanch, and I sigh. "Kidding. Yeah, I'm sure I can get where I'm going from here. Thanks." "Where *are* you going?" Andy asks. His tone has taken on a harshness it did not have when they found me. I suppose I am no longer woman to him; my unashamed and bullish watching of his wife, my grudging acceptance of help. I sigh once more, a hangover of the beast, canine huffing impatience. "Hey, sorry, man; my mother always told me that's the kind of stuff you don't give out to strangers." I take a step back; gingerly, testing the waters.

Brianna gives me a look that is something akin to sympathetic. "Are you sure you'll be safe?" She asks, and Andy turns away.

"Sure-sure," I tell her, taking another step back. "Okay. Hey, you should maybe stay away from the town there on the other side of the mountain from where we just came down. Andwicke? There's some kind of something happening down there; we came past on our hike up and it looked like riots or something." She shivers in the gathering chill. So does the beast, bucking against my beating heart, though only Andy seems to notice, narrowing his eyes against the flash of my own bright gaze, my shuddering skin. "Thanks," I tell her, stepping back faster now, as fast as I dare, as fast as I can convince myself is normal, "thanks for everything, you guys."

They remain, shuffling feet and clearing throats. I smile, trying to loosen the tightness evident in my pulled back lips. "Good luck," Brianna says. "See you around," Andy says, and I turn my back despite the wrongness he sparks in my blood. He is the type to see too much: not through any real skill, but by inventing enmity in everyone and proving himself right nine out of ten times.

I head down the trail beneath the green spray of stars, bright overhead without the purple-orange curtain of light pollution drawn over them, and bold in their exposure. The wind whips through the scrub and leaning little trees, sickle thin and bending beneath the moon. The breeze tears in through my mouth and

lights fire in my throat; curls up behind my eyes and has me snapping and tossing my head; it calls the beast. It is a spearmint night, fresh and cold, and the acrid smoke of Andwicke burning is so faint I can almost ignore it but for the heaviness of its flavor draped across my restless limbs. I am tired and sick of tired. I let the beast rip forth, dropping teeth and flinging off reams of wet skin like a dog rising from the river and shaking dry.

We walk on lupine feet, clawed hands curved and searching, scratching in the soil. When we sniff, the air huffs out and chases dry dirt away from our damp nose; long snout of conical and yellowed teeth; bright eyes reflecting silver in the rays of the climbing moon. I let the beast carry me on curious feet down the trail, scenting and snuffing and grumbling deep in our chest. There is an ache in the beast's heart; my grief calcified into something frightening. *If she could see me now.* The whispering road has grown to a constant murmur now, and the occasional flash of headlights catches my attention, bounces off the backs of my eyes. Ragged and winding, we carve a snake trail through the brush, hunched and crawling to avoid human notice.

When dawn comes, breaking shy and pale through the indigo, a rabbit bursts from the bracken to zig and zag across our path. The beast catches it up in our long clawed fingers in one fluid movement, instinctual hunger and tearing grasp spilling its blood, red on the dew-covered and dusty grass, faster than fast. We hunch for a moment, stark against the shade and chewing. In the dripping slick of our mouth, the rabbit is changed and made a part of us. A thought comes skittering across the back of mind; *a mercy, a higher form;* but I dismiss it, shuddering.

A headlight cuts across us, so bright against the dim morning that the beast squints. The low rumble of the idling engine grates with a terrible strangeness in our ears. The beast shakes its head, irritated, and rumbles back. Our heart is pounding; who is that? For a second, I allow myself to hope. *Evan?* But it's not our car, and the people inside are hostile: the beast can smell it on them. We back up, slowly, drawing ourselves up to full height and bristling. The

beast opens its jaws, pulls its top lip back. A tongue-lolling challenge. The car people emerge, and I realize with a sinking heart what they are.

Two men in dark tactical gear step from the vehicle, hands at their hips. One extends a hand. *We want to help you,* the beast hears him say. I wish I could laugh. The beast shudders as the men move closer, and I am sure that some of *me* is visible beneath it because the men hesitate, eyes wide as Puppy's and just as full of exhilarated fear. I know what they think; here is something wrong and awful, something inhuman and crawling; and I know the decision they have already made, in their infinite disgusted mercy, a second before they do.

The beast lashes out, strikes in one swift, fluid motion that cleaves through both men and the car between them. We follow the curve of the claws, chasing our flung quarry. Our teeth taste warm metal and flesh; we twist and tear, and in the frantic waving of flashlights and shrieking and pleading panic we are unstoppable. The car is left a smoking and shattered wreck, spilling oil and shattered glass and crunched metal. The men we leave quivering red smudges in the grass. Something is moaning, and I can't tell if it's the settling skeleton of the car or one of the men. We run.

Loping through the trees, we are alert, head pivot-swinging and eyes flickering against the thick, muffling pines. Pain lances through our right leg. I pause to look, to let the beast sniff at it, the jerking movement spraying blood from our muzzle across the trunk of the closest tree. We took a hit from something; glass from the car, it seems. Perhaps it was an accident; perhaps one of the men struck us with it in his final moments. It's pretty deep, but we go on, letting it hurt. *Good,* I find it in myself to think, *good. I want to feel everything that happens next.* The beast growls in response.

Dawn has lightened to day now, and we stumble over the squishy, mulched needles, dripping blood. I think there are arteries in the top of the leg, and try not to dwell on that. The beast recedes and returns, wanes and waxes and wanes again, and I ripple and shudder, changing and changing, bone breaking and teeth falling to

trail behind us. My legs are liquid, mulched like the pine needles and I am staggering, swaying, bruised. I stop, lean up against a tree half-formed, and grit my teeth. My breath is shallow; my lungs are filled with stones, and sucking the air through the spaces between burns my throat. *Come on, I think, fuck this, come on.*

Propped against the trunk, bark rough against my raw skin, I am exposed; a vulnerable pupa. I am struck with the urge to cry; to wail; to curl up and let what happens wash over me and drag me away. It isn't fair. It isn't *fair*. It wasn't fair when it happened to Puppy, it wasn't fair when it happened to the others, to Mike and to Jude and to Evan, if it happened to Evan, and it isn't fair that it's happening to me. *Fuck this*. It isn't going to happen to me. I decide it in the moment, and it is true. Not on their terms, at least.

Too late now, I think, too late now, then whatthefuckever, why shouldn't we? Why shouldn't we!

There was a guilt hard around my heart, before; not because I was going on after Puppy was gone, not even because I couldn't save her. I don't blame myself for what happened to her, not really; I know *exactly* whose fault it was. Who hurt her, *killed* her, and why. No, the guilt hovering like mist in the shadow of the beast followed me because I *wanted* to go on. That guilt evaporates in the atom-split second I make my decision. I am determined now that I will be the instrument of my own fate, and of the fates of those people down there.

Maybe those men called for backup, and are hunting me now. Maybe the people of Andwicke will have me, as they want to. Maybe not, but maybe. But they already want to chain me, hurt me, kill me, and I will not make it easy for them. I refuse. And I'm gonna get mine on the way out, no matter *what*.

One final effort, and the beast throws me off like snakeshed. Teeth cut through gums, so the muzzle emerges slick and red. Fur bristles out from beneath skin, pushing through everywhere at once. Eyes are molded like clay, changing shape and purpose, to become deep amber and watchful. The claws are always my favorite; tearing

through my fingers so viciously they reform the shape of my new, curved hands, rough with dogleather pawpads and dexterous. The new shape fills me with what I need: righteous anger. The beast breaks bone and re-shapes organs to emerge, with heaving breaths and clacking jaws. With renewed speed, we crash through the trees, our leg wound a welcome sharpness to the brain.

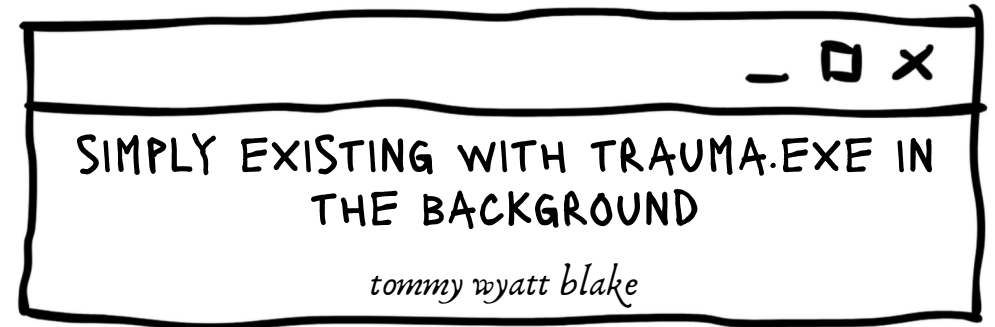
Nothing moves but to flee before us as we carve our way across the mountain; behind us we leave only crushed undergrowth and dark hair and the humming of wing and paw. It is silent beneath the canopy but for our breathing, heavy and uneven, and the occasional alarm call from somewhere among the pinpricked beams.

Andwicke is bustling with muted termite business when we come down out of the foothills to perch atop its walls. Days have passed, I know, but it still smells wrong, like singed keratin and dry rot. The sun is high above us now, and I am pleased. They will see it all. Smoke still rises from somewhere beyond the square, thick and black. I swallow bile, and the beast howls, a silvered shadow, smudged against the blue bright as paint. There is a shock of reaction that starts slow then ripples through the town at the sound, and I think of the alarm calls in the woods. Our hackles crest like a wave along our steel-tight neck, a coarse knit-purl. Blood runs from our leg to stain the walls, and there is a second wave of movement beneath us. *They will overwhelm us*, I think. The beast does not care. *We will take as many as our teeth will reach*, it tells me, sage and staid, and I agree, leaping down from our perch to arc over the gathering crowd. Somewhere, a bell begins to ring, loud and panicked, but it sounds strange to our ears, like the bells of sunken Ys tolling from beneath deep and troubled water.

We land heavy on our injured leg, but the beast takes it in stride, and is red in tooth and claw before I can blink. There is terror; there is horror; there is blood and bone and viscera and a buzzing in my ears that echoes and echoes and echoes. *See me*, I will the people of Andwicke, *hear me; witness what I can do*. The blood rush; the roar of the stampede; the shattering of glass; all fuzzes our senses, driving the beast faster, faster, more frenzied. These people

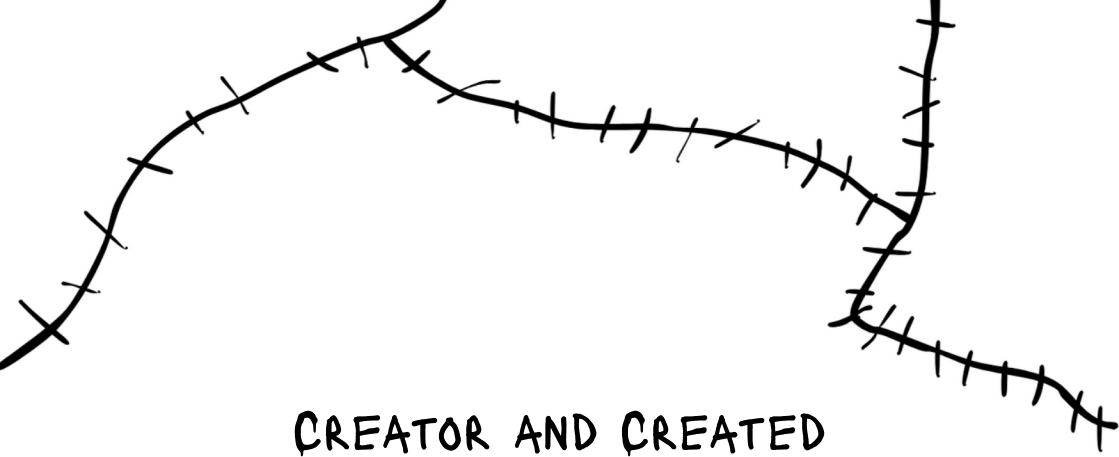
have taken so much from us, *too* much, and the catharsis of their destruction glazes my eyes. *See me; hear me; witness what I can do.* We are surrounded, and our leg buckles and bleeds, but the beast refuses to give in, hacking through the crowd with the ecstatic desperation felt only by caged animals. It echoes and echoes and echoes as we are overwhelmed and refusing the overwhelm: *see me; hear me; witness what I can do.*

Rabbitfeet (they/sbe) is a queer, non-binary writer who enjoys exploring gender, queerness, and nature. Their tales are those of the very human through the lens of the non-human. Expect mangled word choice, a little terror, and transcendental joy. And animals. Lots of animals.



that garish glow from the keys spawns haunted inertia so will you please do something about it *when i touch technology it breaks my fingers with bright light nd viruses what are you opening bugs r now craling out of the screen how cn you see anything right now WHAT ARE YOU OPENING do you feel thm on the body how they bite thru bytes of pixelskin bc you say yur just DIDcoded you say it like a joke nd so i want to be funny too but i said do you feel thm consume sinew do you hear their teeth metallicgrind t'gut the body machinewarm YOU BETTER FUCKING STOP I'M WARNING YOU mmm they masticate with spit thyr fangs twisting the skull open nd i'm hoping they don't stop there this time*

tommy wyatt blake (he/they/ze) is a professional goofball with a silly amount of books, like: NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL HORROR! (Gutslut Press); So, Who's Courage? (Bullshit Lit); TASEREDGED (watch out!) (Querencia Press); TAKE THIS QUIZ! 11 questions to see if you agree with courage as a metaphor (Ghost City Press); and more. they are a system who's writing about intersystem communications and things that go bump in the night.



CREATOR AND CREATED

Ash Kingery

He had already lit his own funeral pyre when he decided he no longer wanted to die.

The ship that contained his father's body became a dot on the horizon, then vanished. He remained by his pyre for a bit longer, savoring its warmth.

Just moments ago, he had fully intended to and had truly wanted to die. He couldn't fathom living after what he'd been through—after what his *father* had put him through. He wasn't even sure if he deserved to live after the things he'd done. The regret threatened to consume him, so much that he took another step towards the pyre. But something held him back. Looking into the flames, he suddenly saw another path—a path that had been there all along, if he had only allowed himself to see past his rage. If the father who had brought him into this world couldn't *wouldn't* show him simple kindness and connection, then he would create it himself.

He reached into the pocket of his tattered coat and pulled out the small journal that had belonged to his father. It contained scientific research he had never looked closely at before. He had found himself more concerned with his father's personal accounts, but now that very science filled him with passion. His future seemed so clear, and he was shocked he had almost thrown it away.

CREATOR AND CREATED

First, though, he needed a name. With no one left to give him one, the duty fell to him. He tucked the journal away and took a piece of wood from the pyre, kindled from his broken sledge, to light his way. As he walked, he thought back on the books he had read and the people he had met, if only in passing. He settled on the name Adam.

And so Adam continued, tireless and unhesitating, across the Arctic ice, driven now by a goal. His father, for all his flaws, had been a man of passion and purpose, and without him, Adam would not have been given life. His passion was infectious, it seemed. Like father, like son.

Now that he was dead, it was much easier for Adam to call that man his father. He did it out of spite, really.

Adam didn't bother keeping track of the days and nights. He just focused on retracing his steps until he had returned to the beautiful Alps. He was inclined to call them home. There, he found an abandoned chalet, and there, he began his grim work.

Adam knew he could not be seen, so he ventured out only at night, his shockingly tall frame bundled in scavenged clothing he'd patched together. Wherever he went, he carried his father's journal. It was not something he could leave to be found by prying eyes. He was able to quickly and efficiently dig up corpses (and rebury the ones that were not satisfactory, albeit not very neatly), gather hanged bodies from their gallows, and raid charnel houses for pieces of their inhabitants. He made sure to gather only the most beautiful parts, though he acknowledged every time he drank from a nearby lake that he was hardly one to speak accurately of beauty.

Elizabeth had been beautiful. She would be his muse. Perhaps that would make up for what he had done to her.

The selection of parts took only a few days. From there, the work was dark and fevered. He did not emerge from that chalet for weeks on end, except to gather food and any errant materials he required. The work consumed him wholly. Nothing mattered but the work.

Why he took on this work, he could not say. Every time he asked himself that, he had a different answer. Perhaps he wanted to show that he was better than his father. Perhaps he wanted to prove that he wasn't the person his father had thought he was. Perhaps he just wanted something to live for. Eventually, when the question drifted through his mind, he stopped trying to answer it. He almost feared doubting himself.

Finally, after spring had bloomed, Adam's labors were complete.

Beautiful! Great God, she was beautiful. Lying still, at least, she was angelic in every way. Not only had he used his father's procedures to craft her, but he had improved upon them—she would be everything he was, but better. Now, all that remained was the spark of life. She would be his Eve.

Adam paused.

Would she want him? Would she love him as his equal? Would she find beauty in his strange features, or be willing to look past them to appreciate his well-honed mind? And if she rejected him, what would either of them do?

Would she want *life*? If she truly did, could he give her the life she deserved? He had not asked for life, yet it had been forced upon him nonetheless. It was supposed to be a gift, but it often felt like a cruel joke, given how he had been inches from ending his own just months ago. Did he dare submit her to the indignities and vagaries of a world that refused to so much as look his way?

Would he be able to find a new reason to live? Creating Eve had given him purpose and let him shoulder the burdens of existence, for a time, but now the faceless *after* he'd been chasing suddenly loomed over him, large and terrifying in its closeness.

Was this atonement for the sins he'd committed, or selfishness? Really, how *could* this make up for the people he'd killed, when he'd let rage and hate for his father cloud his head and heart? The creation process that he had hoped would purge him of his base instincts had been impure; it was not pure birth, but vile reconstruction. And he was vile too.

Adam slid the needle he'd forgotten he was holding under his nails and picked out the dirt and dried blood. He pricked himself and didn't even wince. Dark, coagulated blood began to drip slowly from his finger. It was red, but not a vibrant, *human* red; it was so dark as to almost be brown. It dripped onto Eve's hand, staining her perfection.

He thought again about his father, a man of singular focus, bottomless curiosity, and unrivaled intelligence. He'd been an obsessive to his core. There had been some kindness in him, but he had bestowed none of that upon his own son. And yet, Adam had turned out to be quite obsessive himself. Like father, like son.

No, he did not love his father. He had never loved him, but he had *wanted* to love him so badly. Now the chance to *give* love to another was upon him—a chance to turn the tides of fate, to perhaps receive what he had dreamed of for so long. Why, then, did he still pause?

Adam was lonely. But maybe that was how it was meant to be. He could not trust himself beyond a shadow of a doubt to rise above the man who had created him, could not trust himself to lift Eve out of the morass of loneliness and lift himself in turn. It was that small shadow of doubt that kept him at bay.

Maybe he was depriving himself of happiness. It didn't matter. He would not repeat his father's mistakes. Maybe in time, he could learn to be better. More human. But he could not bring another like him into this world. Not now. Maybe not ever. If he stopped now, he could be the last link in a short chain of sorrow.

Adam took a deep breath and fetched the cleaver. At least Eve would not feel pain when he disassembled her.

Asb is an author from Phoenix, Arizona who is probably lying on the hot pavement right now, trying to become a human scrambled egg. Her published work so far has been... eclectic. You can find it at asbkingery.wordpress.com, and you can tell from the address that she's currently too cheap to buy a domain.



HOMEBODY

Jake Morris

The paint chips flaking off of the walls in the bedroom were still making William's skin crawl. He hoped trying to sleep it off would help, but it was just as bothersome as it was the night before. Of all the little things falling apart in the old house, the dust-stained windows, the groaning plumbing, the faulty wiring, the overgrown lawn and the broken shingles and the musty carpet... the peeling paint in this *one* room was bugging him the most.

He found some painting supplies in the basement, and had piled them into a storage container to take upstairs. Walking up the creaking wooden steps, he froze, seeing his brother Wade loom in the doorway at the top. His dark hair was soaking wet and plastered to his forehead.

"Whoa," Will said, trying to hide his surprise. "I thought you left."

"I didn't get far," Wade replied, sloughing off his rain jacket. "The storm washed out the road to the highway last night. We're stuck here until they fix it."

"Oh..." he said, trailing off. Wade noticed the container in Will's hands and his gaze became sharp through his rain-speckled glasses. The paint cans and brushes started to feel heavy in his arms.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I was just... going to go fix up some things in my old room."

Wade heaved a deep, irritated sigh. Will avoided eye contact with him.

"It's just that-" Will started.

"No. What part of 'the house will be jointly owned between William and Wade Gardner until further notice' did you *not* understand yesterday?" Wade angrily cut him off.

"I don't see why I can't fix the paint."

"You should have at least asked."

"You already left! It's not like you would have even noticed!"

"That's not the point!" he snapped.

They stared each other down in the stairwell. It was silent, save for the remnants of the storm pattering against the upstairs windows. The stillness in the air made Will's face feel warm and his heartbeat thump in his neck. The bitterness seethed in the space between the two of them, the air growing stale and suffocating.

"Put it back. If you need something to do, go clean out the attic or something," Wade huffed, the tension releasing like an aggravated sigh. He stormed off, Will standing on the steps as he heard him stomp all the way up to the master bedroom and shut the door. Will's body felt warm, almost sweltering as his anger simmered into resentment.

"Asshole," he muttered.

Slumped at the edge of the bed, Will stared at the peeling paint and felt the itch return. It crawled along his shoulders like little insect legs, the urge to scratch overwhelming. He reached for the top of the wall, peeling away the chips with his hands, relief washing over him as the feeling of insect legs on his shoulders faded away. He couldn't stop himself after that, it was like raking his fingers over a rash. Will knew he shouldn't be doing it... but god, it felt so damn *good*.

Tiny flakes of decrepit paint collected on the floor in the

cracks as he sloughed the rest of it off. He grabbed a putty knife from the bin and scraped at the edges to smooth them out, lead-laden dust building up on the sharp edge like snow. As he carved away the last of the flakes, he stood back and admired his work. The walls looked worse now, but he felt a whole lot better knowing that step was taken care of. The sight of the bare walls peeking through the off-white paint in wide blotches left him feeling satisfied.

Throwing the putty knife back into the bin, he slid the whole thing into the closet. Crouching down, he pushed against the door to the attic and felt it swing open. A burst of cold, damp air wafted over him as he pulled the crate of painting supplies into the attached attic. He pulled the chain for the light and discovered it didn't work.

In the darkness, he could hear the sounds of the house's aging structure clearly. Ancient plumbing groaned and antique wiring buzzed nervously, the beams creaked like fragile bones as the house settled. Will thought about how he'd hear it at night as a little kid and hide under his covers, fearful of the monstrous noises. He would only stop being afraid when his father would explain it to him, showing him how to fix whatever blown fuse or leaking pipe caused it. The house shuddered around him, as if telling him there was work to do.

"YOU REALLY SHOULDN'T LEAVE THE JOB UNFINISHED," he heard. It was something indistinct in the midst of the creaking beams and electrical buzzing, but he felt the meaning of it strongly in his mind. The work wasn't done.

"No, I can't. Not right now," Will said to himself.

But he couldn't deny that the once satisfying swatches of freshly peeled paint now felt like fresh scrapes on his shoulders. The walls felt open, bleeding, raw. He turned around and opened up the crate of painting supplies, feeling the icy air cling to his skin as he pulled out a paint can and brush. The strokes of pale paint over the skinned walls were like a salve. He dragged the brush across the walls evenly and slowly, tenderly dressing the wounds on the wall until the sun started to rise. The air rushed through the vents like a

sigh of relief.

At the dinner table, Wade sat across from William, deeply absorbed in a crossword as he ate the leftover casserole that Aunt Doreen had brought to the will reading a couple days ago. William stared out of the window at the overgrown backyard, his fork tracing idle circles on the paper plate in front of him. The rain clouds had finally dissipated, giving way to a vibrant sunset that painted the distant lake and swaying pine trees in orange hues. The sight conjured a childhood memory in William.

"Hey," he said to Wade, "you remember when dad taught us how to fish at the lake?"

"No," Wade replied, looking up from the crossword and peering over his glasses, "he taught *you* how to fish."

"He didn't ever take you out to the lake?" Will asked, confused.

"Oh no, he did, once. He just yelled at me when I tangled the line and then called me a crybaby when I got upset."

"Oh..." Will trailed off.

The same uncomfortable, simmering silence fell across the table. Wade returned to his crossword, hoping the conversation was now over. William frowned, staring him down. Wade wouldn't shut him down this time.

"Wade, I get it. Dad was kind of an asshole sometimes, but it's not my fault—"

"When did I *ever* say it was your fault Will?" Wade interrupted, exasperated.

"Then why are you being such a jerk to me?" Will demanded.

"I just don't wanna hear about all the *great times* you had with dad," he said, voice laced with sarcasm. "Frankly, I don't remember most things with dad the same way that you do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“The *golden boy* Will never did *anything* wrong, did he? Never messed anything up. Always did it perfect the first time.”

William remembered Wade sitting on the ground in the backyard, wiping away his tears as dad came into the dining room with two poles and a tacklebox. Dad hardly looked at Wade when they walked out to the lake. Will’s line got tangled too, but he remembered his dad carefully pulling the nest of monofilament apart without a single harsh word.

“That’s not true, I’ve messed things up before,” Will mumbled.

“Not according to dad. That was *my* job apparently,” Wade said, scowling at Will.

“It’s not my fault he was still upset that your mom di-”

“That wasn’t my fault either!” Wade snapped, slamming his pen on the table. “You have some serious nerve you know that? You act like I have no place or voice in this family when you know *damn* well I have equal claim to the house-”

“That’s another thing,” Will interjected, deflecting the accusation. “If you hate dad so much, why do you care about getting his house?”

“The will said ‘to my son’! Am I not his fucking son?” Wade yelled.

The electricity buzzed through the house nervously. He felt the house creak under its own weight, its own disrepair.

“HE WOULDN’T TAKE CARE OF ME. HE WOULDN’T TAKE CARE OF THIS OLD HOUSE,” the voice came rumbling into William’s head again, deep and low like water through the house’s pipes.

“At least I’m actually taking care of the place now that he’s gone,” Will said.

Wade’s face was flushed and a blood vessel in his temple pounded rapidly. His eyes burned with rage, boring into Will’s forehead. Something itched at the tip of his bitten tongue, something that he knew would hurt William just as badly.

“At least I have a fucking job!”

“Goodnight,” Will said through gritted teeth. Wade’s chair screeched against the old wood floor as he stood up. He didn’t look at Will even once on his way out of the dining room, but Will could see furious tears welled up in the corners of his eyes. The front door opened and slammed shut.

Will sat with his arms crossed at the dinner table, cold casserole starting to make the paper plate in front of him soggy. Through the gaps in the doorframe, he could hear a barely stifled sob.

“HE REALLY IS SUCH A CRYBABY, ISN’T HE?” the house said. William agreed.

Curled up under the covers, William stared at the freshly painted walls of his bedroom. It was midnight, and he couldn’t sleep at all. The argument replayed itself in his head over and over, feeling pangs of regret cut across his chest every time he got to the end and said what he said and watched Wade get up from the table and leave. Despite how deep the resentment ran between the two of them... they were still brothers.

“WILLIAM,” the house said. “WHY ARE YOU STILL AWAKE?”

“I... I feel bad about what I said to Wade. I think I should apologize.”

“DON’T.”

“What? Why not?”

“WADE HATES ME. HE WON’T BOTHER TO FIX ME. HE REFUSES TO INDULGE IN ANY FOND MEMORY. HE JUST PACES IN HIS ROOM LIKE A CAGED ANIMAL, WAITING FOR THE CHANCE TO LEAVE... DON’T YOU SEE WHAT HE’S TRYING TO DO?” the house creaked impatiently. “HE WANTS THE HOUSE SO HE CAN GET RID OF IT.”

Will turned onto his other side. His brother was so keen on clearing the place out and leaving it empty until the will could be sorted out. He told their relatives about the land's value, about contractors and lakefront property.

"HE'LL TEAR ME DOWN, WILLIAM. HE'LL KILL ME."

"I won't let him do that, I'll talk to him-"

"HE DOESN'T CARE WHAT YOU THINK."

"...he doesn't?" Will said, his voice cracking.

"OF COURSE HE DOESN'T."

William curled up tighter in bed. His heart ached inside his chest at the thought of his brother caring so little about what he thought, but he gripped the covers in anger when the argument played in his head again.

"He keeps acting like it's all my fault. All he does is blame me for what dad did to him, and whenever I try to argue he just-" he mumbled.

"SHUTS YOU DOWN. HE DOESN'T CARE ABOUT HOW YOU FEEL."

"He doesn't! He doesn't care!" Will hissed, pushing the covers off of him. The room felt like an oven.

"BUT I CARE ABOUT YOU WILLIAM."

"...I care about you too."

"I KNOW YOU DO."

There were more repairs to do, and it kept William busy. He was far from a handyman, but with the house to guide him where he needed to go and a garage full of tools and parts, the jobs became easier. The attic lightbulb was quickly replaced, and the light revealed the bare beams arching over the storage boxes. He gripped a truss as he stepped over the clutter.

"AH- DON'T TOUCH THOSE," the house winced.
"THEY'RE OLD, THEY NEED TO BE REPLACED."

"That's gonna be hard to fix," William said, letting go. He wiped the sweat from his brow. The sun had returned, and the attic was starting to get stuffy.

"WE'LL GET THERE. FOCUS ON THAT LEAK FOR NOW."

Hours passed as William bounced from repair to repair across the whole house. Patch the leak in the attic. Re-attach the kitchen cabinet handle. Grease up the hinges on the basement door. Tighten the dripping faucet. Spackle over the holes in the living room wall. Each finished job came with a wave of relief, followed by a surge of anxiety when he remembered just how much there was left to do. As he kept chasing the relief with each new job, the dread of the looming attic repair kept growing. Will was halfway through replacing the weather stripping on the front door when Wade came to talk to him.

"Hey Will," he said sheepishly. Will wasn't used to that tone coming from him.

"Hey," he replied, not looking up from his work.

"Can we talk?" he asked. That was even more unlike Wade to say. He vastly preferred getting straight to the point.

"I'm a little busy," Will replied.

"I wanted to say that I'm sorry about last night."

"NO YOU AREN'T," the house spat from the vents.

"It's fine," William replied. An apology of his own itched at the back of his throat, wanting to come out, but he pushed it away. Wade stood there, scratching the back of his head and looking off in the distance. William tucked a strand of his hair behind his ear, feeling how it was slick with sweat. He kept working diligently on the weather stripping as his neck started to itch.

"Is that it?" Wade said, the blunt tone creeping back into his voice. "*It's fine?*"

"THAT'S MORE THAN YOU'RE OWED."

"Yeah. It's fine," William mumbled.

“Seriously? You’re not going to apologize?”

“SEE? HE ONLY SAID SORRY BECAUSE HE EXPECTED IT IN RETURN. ALWAYS BEEN THAT WAY, ONLY BEING KIND WHEN IT STANDS TO BENEFIT HIM.”

“Hey, are you listening to me?” Wade snapped, waving his hand in front of Will’s face. He stared at it for a second before slowly pushing it away, annoyed.

“I’m in the middle of something,” Will replied tersely, “do you mind?”

Wade’s arms fell to his sides and his face twisted into a scowl. He sucked in a deep, long breath of late afternoon air.

“Alright,” Wade huffed. “I’m heading out.”

He left, and Will heard the sound of his car engine firing up. He didn’t really care where he was going, in fact he was almost relieved he’d finally left. He finished the weather stripping and moved on to the next job. Dissonant thoughts crashed into each other in his head. The apology he wanted to say was still stuck somewhere in him, but it slowly withered away as the sun set and Wade never came back. He didn’t see the point in waiting for him. He didn’t even see the point in making himself dinner. There was work to do.

The days blurred together as Will labored at the encouragement of the house. A dull ache spread across his ribs like damaged attic trusses. The exhaustion weighed him down, but he couldn’t stop. When he fixed one thing, three more repairs would pop up in its wake.

As the time passed, William became deeply familiar with the house’s internal structures. Shimmying into tight spaces between the walls, he could see the wires twist and wind like nerves through the insulation packed in between the beams. He could close his eyes and feel the pulse of electricity beating throughout the house, deft hands working their way into the fiberglass to find the circuitry.

Pins and needles prickled at his legs as he grabbed hold of them in his fingers.

“THANK YOU WILLIAM,” the house would say as he would work, twisting wires together and sealing up the drywall cuts like he was suturing up a surgical wound. “YOU ARE SO WONDERFUL. SO MUCH LIKE YOUR OLD MAN. HARD-WORKING, SKILLED, FAITHFUL.”

“Of course,” William always replied, then he would slip into a fond memory of him and his father in the home together. It kept him going.

He was back in the attic, armed with half the garage in tools and spare wooden boards. It would be the most difficult operation he’d have to perform, fixing the trusses. The fix wouldn’t be permanent, but it would buy some time. He started to saw away at the damaged sections of the truss.

“Will,” Wade’s voice filtered through the door to the closet. “What the hell are you doing?”

He didn’t answer, he just kept sawing. It felt like he was cutting into his own ribcage, the teeth of the saw grinding through the wood like it was bone. All along his back, he started to feel the crawling of insect legs.

“Will!” Wade yelled, grabbing his shoulder. His hand felt cold. And itchy. Will stopped sawing and stared at him.

“I’m fixing it,” he said flatly.

“No, you’re going to make the fucking house collapse! Stop it!”

“No.”

“You don’t have a choice. The lawyers settled the will. The house goes to me.”

William’s guts turned to ice, and the attic suddenly felt 10 degrees colder. The saw clattered to the ground and he looked at Wade through the wet strands of hair hanging in his eyes.

“I’m the eldest son, so I’m considered the next of kin,” Wade

continued.

“NO!” the house roared. “HE’S NOTHING TO ME! HE’LL TEAR ME APART LIKE I’M WORTHLESS. HE’LL KILL ME. DON’T LET HIM KILL ME!”

William clutched his head, feeling himself spiraling. He grabbed the hammer by his feet and started pulling the nails out of the truss, continuing the repair. Wade heaved a frustrated sigh, and the words he wanted to say at the dinner table bubbled to the surface.

“Of course you’re gonna throw a fit about this. You know what Will? You can’t change the fact that you weren’t there,” Wade snarled. The words stuck like venomous barbs in William’s back.

“You weren’t fucking there when dad was sick. You weren’t there when he was getting worse,” his voice was a roar, years of rage getting dredged up in a single moment, “you didn’t even show up for the funeral! You just rolled up to the will reading hoping, *no-expecting* that dad left you the good stuff. The house. The car. The money. I helped take care of him for *years*, Will. Where the hell were you?”

“HE WAS ONLY THERE BECAUSE HE WANTED IT TOO. HE THOUGHT HE COULD EARN IT. TRYING TO INSERT HIMSELF WHEREVER HE COULD AT THE END, FLOATING UNWANTED AROUND THE HOUSE LIKE THE MISERABLE VIRUS HE IS.”

Virus. That was it. That was the source of the terrible sensation crawling up Will’s back. There was a virus here. A disease. Inside him, inside the house. His grip tightened around the hammer as he ripped another nail from the wood.

“DESTROY HIM. BEFORE HE KILLS US.”

“Go ahead, fix the place up all you like! It will NEVER make up for the FACT THAT YOU WEREN’T TH-”

The hammer slammed into Wade’s temple with a sickening crack. He fell to the ground and clutched his head, blood flowing between his fingers from the perfect circular indent it left in his

skull. William brought the hammer down again and again, each blow driven by a blind, feverish rage. Wade cried out with each strike, helpless against the onslaught of his brother’s wrath, until all Will could hear was the sound of Wade’s bones breaking.

“WILLIAM, STOP. THAT’S ENOUGH.”

William complied, dropping to his knees next to Wade’s body, breathing heavily. Wade didn’t move. His battered arms limply covered his lifeless face, painted in rivulets of blood that flowed out of his broken nose and mouth. Will watched it drip onto the wooden floor next to Wade’s shattered glasses, his own arms and chest splattered with red.

“YOU HAVE FELT HIS BLOOD. IT’S NOT THE SAME THAT RUNS THROUGH YOU, OR THROUGH ME. YOU ALONE KNOW ME. WE ARE THE SAME.”

Every opening in the home felt like an open wound on his body. He grabbed the nails and boards and rushed to fasten them to the windows. His brother’s blood was smeared on the planks he carried. The virus was gone, but they were not safe. He drove nails into the wood with the bloodied hammer.

“ALL OTHERS ARE PATHOGEN.”

”KEEP THEM OUT.”

WIBBLED MIRRORED

Marisca Pichette

and why and why and why
i pleaded, imagined, made for myself—
too conceited to see the past brushed up against the future,
no room really in between the two,
their jostling arms clutched with fingers streaked
in blood i knew belonged to
no one.

phantom blood i conjured,
made, mixed together in a cauldron
to drown hypotheses in.
i stirred and stirred and asked my face why
glass is made to break in every way.

and break and break and break apart my eyes,
peeling back the lids to show me the blood i didn't see
before i was swimming—
climbing over shards of memory:
future, past encased in steel warped by too much fire,
too much heat and the sharp application of ice too late
to wounds that were never allowed to heal for me—
heal for you.

there's one year one month
one day to fix everything,
tie it together

with the very last shriveled vein.

Marisca Pichette is a queer author based in Massachusetts, on Pocumtuck and Abenaki land. She is the winner of the 2022 F(r)iction Spring Literary Contest and has been nominated for the Best of the Net, Pusbcart, Utopia, and Dwarf Stars awards. Her speculative poetry collection, Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair, is out now from Android Press. Find them on Twitter as @MariscaPichette, Instagram as @marisca_write, and BlueSky as @marisca.bsky.social.

CONTENT WARNINGS

To Be An Agent | While X-Filed: *racism, homophobia, death*

Drydock: *blood, body horror*

cops to each other: *burying people alive, violence against women*

Roadkill Dinner: *sexual assault (veiled), gore*

Blockage: *vomiting, disordered eating*

Swallow Me (W)hole: *body horror, gore, violent imagery, alcohol use/abuse, mental illness, implied suicide*

miscarriage: *blood, birth, pregnancy and miscarriage, body horror*

Cave Canem: *blood, murder, implied violence against women*

molar break: *gore, violence*

simply existing with trauma.exe in the background: *body horror*

Creator and Created: *suicidal thoughts, corpses, blood*

Homebody: *blood, injury, violence*

mirrored: *blood, visceral imagery.*