

# penumbra

speculative  
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## Ghosts & Monsters

*Prose, Poetry,  
and Art featuring*

Laura DeHaan • Jacqueline West •  
Charlie Winter • Donald Patten • Sage  
Early • Jordan Hirsch • Barbara  
Candiotti • Dana Beehr • Phil Emery •  
Ron Sanders • A J Dalton • Jennifer  
Weigel • Virgo Kevonté • Gerri Leen •  
Rina Song • Lynne Sargent • Sonali Roy •  
Ananya Kashyap • SJ Townend • Mahaila  
Smith • Carl Scharwath • Neil James  
Hudson • Victoria Ojo • S. R. Kriger •  
Patrick McEvoy and Andrea Montano



Shoe Tree by Warren Muzak

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We are always open for submissions of art, animation, and music! We are open for fiction and poetry submissions from 15 June to 15 September and from 15 December to 15 March each year. Please see our Submissions page (<http://penumbria.com/subs.html>) for details.

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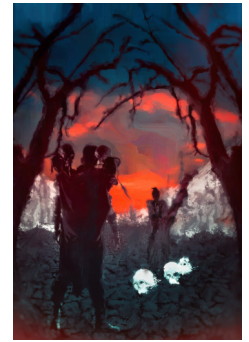
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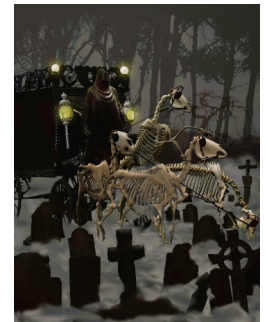
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cover: *Shoe Tree* by Warren Muzak



# From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

What would Gort do?\*

Watching in a whiplashing sort of way both the Artemis mission and the ... other things going on in the world, I find myself pondering this very question: If Klaatu and his erstwhile robot companion were to come to earth now, what would happen? Would it be the obvious, where militarism results in us firing everything we can at any alien visitors (because of course they must be demons, right)? Most current events would suggest this, whether Klaatu be the Michael Rennie version or Keanu Reeves, whether they believe earth is too violent to be allowed to contact other planets, or that we're creating an environmental disaster.

But then we do things like the Artemis mission, which from many accounts within the spacefaring community is a symbol of what we can do if we work together, in harmony, toward a difficult goal. It reminds me of the Apollo missions of my childhood, of the promise that humankind could be living on the Moon, or even Mars, by the time I grew up. That we could be doing those things because we worked together, had to work together to achieve them. And while I wasn't (and am not) naïve enough to think all the motives were altruistic (it was—and is—a “space race” for a reason), I think on balance our attempts to look beyond our horizons have been helpful.

Or maybe I am naïve, brought up on the ideals of *Star Trek* while

\* And no, this editorial does not follow the “theme” of the issue, but if I wait until June, Artemis will be out of the news, so ...



The hilariously out-of-sync release poster for *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). Almost none of what's being shown actually happens in the film.

minimizing its contradictions, “infinite diversity in infinite combination” while running around trying to destroy Klingons and Romulans. Artemis commentators were nearly as effusive about these missions leading to mining the moon as they were about togetherness, and there was an undercurrent of “we have to beat the Chinese to it”—so, space race all over again.

So, WWGD? I fear no one will say, “Klaatu barada nikto” this time.

Jeff Georgeson, Managing Editor  
*Penumbra*



# You Must Be This Tall

by Laura DeHaan

You're new here, right?

*Yeah, just moved in.*

Wanna go to the playground?

*Sure. Of course.*

It's *haunted*, though.

*By what? Dead kids?*

Not at first. They came later.

We didn't know something was wrong with the playground when the first kid died.

Well, he didn't die on the *playground*, exactly, so.

When the first kid got onto the swings,  
propelled himself higher, higher, *higher*

oh shit

OH SHIT

and WHEEE! away he flew, fifty metres maybe, at a neat eighty-degree angle,  
the same as his neck when they found him...

Well, that seemed a little odd, to have flown that far by himself.

The next kid, on the slide, I think

that's when we started saying, hey, something's not right.

Your average top speed on a slide, it shouldn't  
make you break your ankles when you reach bottom,

and it *really* shouldn't leave a crater,

it *can't*—but it *did*—hammer the kid into the dirt like a carny driving a spike into the  
ground.

Too late the kids on the merry-go-round knew something was off,  
spinning around at (a conservative) 500 rpm.

It took a week to find those bodies, nobody knowing exactly  
the trajectory of take-off when their sweaty little hands lost their grip.

That's not quite true.

They found Sandy pretty quickly, where she connected with the climbing net.

They're *pretty sure* it was Sandy, anyway. No one else

was wearing a sundress in that lemon-yellow with the white lace trim.

(*Pretty sure* it was a sundress. Lemon-yellow, anyway.)

(Some of it.)

*What the hell, says the new kid,  
that's bullshit, you're making this up.*

OH REALLY.

Come to the playground and we'll show you.

Not even at midnight. Daytime. Right now.

An uncomfortable shuffle. *Yeah, but my mother—*

Hey, I get it.

Just don't go by yourself.

You might get hurt.

...

*Okay, but only for an hour, all right?*

Yeah sure. An hour's plenty.

Little faces burning pink despite the rain clouds overhead,

Noses wrinkling in a sensory memory of

funnel cakes and roasting corn.

Stickiness underfoot, unseen offerings on hard-packed earth,

where upset tummies spilled their libations in relief

or sacrifice.

We'll start here with the talk tubes.

*Talk tubes? That's baby stuff. What's over—*

We grab their arms.

Don't wander off.

Stay here and put your ear against the tube.

We jog across to its twin,  
listening for the electrical sparks of bumper cars travelling in packs.  
Listen.

The new kid muffles the speaker with their hand before leaning in.  
No one's gullible enough to fall for that old trick.  
Doesn't matter.

Hi there, we whisper.  
AAAAAHHHHHHaaaaAAAAAAhhhHHHHHHAAAAHHHHHHHHH  
comes out the other side.

*Jesus!* says the new kid. *What the fuck? What the fuck?*  
*Was this built on a cemetery or something?*  
Nah, just an amusement park.  
It used to be popular, but, you know.  
Prices went up. Sales dropped off. People stopped coming.  
Everyone who could, moved away.  
The park died.  
The adults who stayed, they fought  
to get this place built.  
They wanted something for us kids.  
They try, you know. They do try.

The new kid edges around,  
looks at the swings, steel chains shiny and oiled,  
the covered slide howling from its plastic throat,  
the climbing net ...  
They stop looking at the climbing net.

*They oughta tear this place down.*  
They tried, you know.  
They sent a man in a bulldozer to take out the seesaw.  
Have you ever seen a bulldozer from underneath?  
mud falling from its treads as it's flung into the sky?  
the driver a second dot as he jumps from the cab in reckless terror?

the adults yelling RUN, RUN  
IT'S COMING DOWN  
and us kids huddling under the slide and against the poles of the swing,  
knowing we're safest in the playground, knowing  
the adults made a mistake?  
You'd remember it if you saw it.  
*So what's the sandpit?*

We think it's the Lost and Found, but we don't really know.  
We don't talk about the sandpit.

The ground starts to shake and there's the crackle of overhead wires.  
The new kid's looking at the sandpit, at a half-buried doll,  
not paying attention.  
We push them, hard, and grab their shirt lickety-split and pull them back  
from the bumper car as it whizzes past,  
hot dry wind whooshing through our hair,  
scorched rubber coating our tongues.

Watch your step! we joke.  
*Fuck off!*

They push us and we grab their arms, because  
the damn cars never travel alone,  
but one of them clips their leg and they're thrown against the slide.  
shit.

Roll under it! we yell. They can't get you under there!  
The new kid's crying.

*This place wants to kill you!*  
No it doesn't, it *doesn't*, really it doesn't.  
It wants *excitement*, that's all.  
It wants to have fun.  
It's trying to play.  
Are you not having fun?

*I want to go home!*  
Well ooh lah de dah.  
Too good for us, huh?  
Hey, wait. Don't leave.  
We've got plenty of time.

The new kid's limping to the edge of the park.  
We hurry over to give them a hand.  
They slap it away, and then  
curiously  
deliberately  
tap our shoulder and pat our head.

You're weird, we say.  
*I thought maybe you were a ghost.*  
Dead or alive, we're safest here.  
*I'm going home.*  
Hey.  
*What?*  
Can we come over for dinner?

The new kid looks over the playground again, at all of us  
hiding behind the equipment, emerging snail-like, turtle-like,  
ready for their response.

*I, I don't think so. We're still moving in.*  
Tomorrow?  
*I gotta go.*

And they run off-balance, fresh bruise on their calf, sunburn peeling their face,  
while the rest of us huddle alone in this place.

# Formative Years

by Jacqueline West

I'm still bleeding when I unlock the apartment door.

My knee is hopeless, black net tights sticking to the lacerated skin. The scrape on my hand had started to clot, but I rubbed it open while digging for my keys, and now a red glaze slicks the doorknob. I wipe it with my sleeve as I step inside.

It's not the first time this kind of thing has happened. The first time it's been this bad, maybe, but over the past five years I've been caught, thrown, spun around more times than I could count. All it takes is the right combination: Two teenage girls and a boy, tattered band T-shirts and cheap hair dye, braided laughter. I've eavesdropped on them at coffee shops, followed them through parks and down alleyways, sure that when they turn around, I'll see the three of us.

Lucy. Greg. Me.

Then they shift so I can see their faces, and they're just three strangers, and everything breaks like a shattering mirror. I'm left staring at nothing at all.

Every time it happens, I sit down to write a letter. That's what I'm supposed to be, after all: A writer. Really, I'm a shopgirl, a folder of shirts and a monitor of dressing rooms who sometimes writes letters in a ninety-nine-cent notebook.

*Hey, Greg.*

*I saw the three of us in Willard Park in downtown Cleveland today. Then the boy moved, and he had a nose ring and sleepy eyes and didn't look anything like you at all, and I ran away before they could see me staring.*

I tear these letters into scraps before I drop them in the trash.

It's always the same. Always the flood of love, and then the pit opening inside of me, sucking it straight down.

But today was something different.

It was just a glimpse: Three kids turning the corner ahead of me as I crossed the street. Everything was there. The ragged T-shirts. The pen-and-ink scrawls on their arms pretending to be tattoos. The sound of their laughter. I swear, I even caught the smell of Lucy's smoke shop incense.

Then Lucy turned toward me.

And it *was* Lucy.

It was Lucy as if she were dead.

Gray, sagging skin. Teeth gritted behind receding lips. Pits for

eyes, with something glinting at the bottom. Something that stared back at me.

I tripped on the curb and hit the sidewalk with one knee and one hand, ripping off layers of skin, sloshing my paper cup of coffee over the shoes of people passing by.

By the time I'd stumbled upright again, the three kids were gone.

Now I drop my coffee-stained shoulder bag on the apartment floor. I sink down in one of the mismatched chairs at the table, trying to shove my heartbeat back into its usual rhythm, and take a good look at my knee. The raw pink patch is still seeping. Strands of black nylon cling to the thickening blood. I peel them away one by one.

Today's mail, brought in by one of my roommates, is scattered across the table beside me. I glance over it as I blot my knee with a paper napkin: Flyers. Catalogs. Junk. And half-hidden under a takeout menu, an envelope addressed in jade green ink.

To me.

My fingers leave red streaks on the white paper.

Even before I open it, my heart has surged up into my throat.

This isn't a coincidence. The blood on my hands. The things I've been chasing. Or that have been chasing me.

Something's about to catch up.

For a minute, I just stare at the envelope, the San Francisco re-

turn address, my own name spelled out in the green ink. It's been five years since I've seen this handwriting, but I'd know it anywhere: The pretentious put pretty curl on the number 2, the slash of the letter y. I even recognize the ink. Lucy and I stole that fountain pen and bottle of green ink from an art supply store two towns over, because neither of us ever had any money, not even enough to pay for a shitty school lunch. And because your best friend's eighteenth birthday deserves a present.

*December 18, 2004.*

*Hey, Bree.*

*I saw the three of us on the street in North Beach today.*

Everything around me freezes. A pitch sharp as a needle hums in my ear.

*Then the girl in the middle turned around, and it was Lucy.*

*But it wasn't really Lucy. It was Lucy's corpse.*

Suddenly the page weighs a thousand pounds. I lean on the table to hold it up.

*I knew it wasn't real, it was just my own head, but now I can't think about anything else. So here I am, writing to you again.*

*I say again, because I've written to you before. About three hundred times. The more I write, the more my thoughts start to pull me in, and I start thinking about everything that happened back then, and I don't want to think about back then. So I stop. And then I burn the letters.*

*Everything is pretty good here. The city's beautiful. I've got a job at a cool design firm. I've met some nice people. I've been seeing one guy for about six months now. It's what I always wanted.*

Here the handwriting starts to change. The pretty curls flatten. The letters tilt and jag.

*Tell me it was worth it, Bree. Because now all I can see is Lucy's face.*

*We shouldn't have let her do it. We should never have left her there.*

*We shouldn't have.*

The writing changes again. I can practically see Greg pulling back his shoulders with a little shrug, shaking his choppy hair out of his face. I wonder if his hair is still long enough to do that.

*Okay.*

*If you're still reading this, I love you.*

*Be well.*

*-Greg*

I sit holding the letter for a long time.

*Tell me it was worth it.* I glance around the little apartment. Traffic growls outside. The smell of old orange peels hangs in the air. I clench the bloody napkin in my fist.

*Tell me it was worth it.*

Finally, I fold up Greg's letter and put it in my pocket. I don't take it out again, but I keep touching it, making sure it's there. Like it's a ticket I don't want to lose.

\* \* \*

I've never gone home for the holidays.

I've never gone home for anything.

There's no home to go to anymore, anyway. My grandparents are long dead. Mom divorced Daryl just after my high school graduation, and then moved in with a new boyfriend across the Kentucky border.

Now here I am, driving into Red Oak, West Virginia, under a foggy December afternoon sky, steering my roommate's borrowed car, with Greg's unanswered letter in my pocket.

*Tell me it was worth it.*

I can't tell him that. Not if I don't know for myself.

My chest gets tighter with every half mile. I feel it as I follow the road down into the holler: How hard this place still pulls at me. How easy it would be to stop pulling back.

Everything in town is just where I left it.

Chain link fences. Clapboard churches. Houses clinging to the slopes, paint peeling from the walls like burst blisters. Main Street is flanked by all the same signs. *Cheapest Cigs in WV!*

*Freedom Pharmacy. Smoke Meat, Not Meth,* says the billboard for the barbeque place. I pass the old mill, the laundromat, the liquor store where we used to steal bottom shelf wine, all of it tucked into the shadows of the blue-gray hills.

I don't recognize the few people I see. But people are the only things that change fast in a place like this. The skinny meth head sitting on the park bench might have once taken me to the eighth-grade dance. The teen mom pushing the stroller might have been the little girl who lived next door.

I turn at the end of Main Street.

Even after five years, I could find my way back to Lucy's house with my eyes shut. I turn at the base of the hill road, winding up into the ridges, past deserted trailers and collapsing barns, up another ridge, where the road narrows and the trees lean in and the pavement dissolves into mud.

Before our lifetimes, before the mining and the logging, these hollers must have been lush. The Appalachians are the oldest mountains in the nation. Old enough that soil and seeds have had more than a billion years to build up on top, covering them with living skin. Standing among them, you can sense it: Something under the layers of rock that reaches back and back and back through time. When I step out of the car in front of Lucy's house, I can feel it thrumming up through the soles of my shoes, like drumbeats underground. Something is there, alive, beneath me.

I want to run away.

But I need to see her before I can run again.

Lucy's house is still painted a powdery shade of toothpaste blue.

Its two cramped stories lean beneath their tin roof, walls blackening with mold and mud, windows dim. Lucy's mother died—lung cancer—when we were eight years old, and her father—heart disease—several years ago. That left just Lucy and her older sister Nan to keep up this place. It looks like they've stopped trying.

I knock at the screen door.

A minute goes by.

I knock again.

The inner door swings open.

Nan doesn't look shocked to see me. She just looks tired. Seeing me standing on her front porch seems to wear her out even more.

"What are *you* doing here?" she says through the screen door.

"I came to see Lucy," I tell her. Like there could be any other reason.

Nan's voice is hard. "Why?"

I can't explain it to Nan. Not what's happening now. Not what happened years ago. "I just—it just felt like time."

Nan lets out a deep breath. She pushes open the screen door and leans to the side.

I step in.

The living room, like everything else about this town, is un-

changed. There are the same saggy couches, the same crocheted afghans hiding the cigarette burns and food stains. The same baskets of fake flowers, their colors dimmed by dust. I turn back toward Nan.

She always looked a bit like Lucy, but sturdier, darker. She's wearing pink scrubs. Her brown hair is scraped back into a ponytail.

"Are you a nurse now?" I ask.

"LPN," she says. "Down at the old folks' home."

I nod. Working at the Pines is one of the only good options in this town, but saying *that's great* would sound patronizing. "How's Lucy doing?" I ask instead.

Nan's eyes narrow. She lets out another breath. Shakes her head. Her gaze flicks away from me for a second, and I see something awful on her face that she quickly smooths away again.

"You can see for yourself," she says. "And to answer your questions before you ask them: Yes, I've tried to get her help. She won't take it. No matter what I do. And no, I don't know who's selling her the shit or how she pays for it, but I can't be her babysitter every second of every day. If you have any other questions, you can keep them to yourself."

She points down the narrow hallway, toward the closed bedroom door that is still Lucy's, has always been Lucy's.

"I have to get to work," Nan tells me. "Lock up behind you when you leave."

She steps out the front door. I hear her car cough and grind to

life, and then the sound of tires crunching away down the steep hillside.

I wait for silence before I step into the hallway. There I pause again, straightening my clothes, dragging my fingers through my hair. I'm in my usual pretend-cool shopgirl look: layers of fishnets under a pleated skirt, an army surplus coat. I can almost feel the letter in my pocket tugging me forward, like a magnet, toward Lucy's door.

I tap twice. There's no answer, so I push the door open and lean inside.

Lucy's bedroom is exactly as it was the last time I saw it. Every frayed-edged picture of Kurt Cobain and Björk and Trent Reznor torn out of a magazine and taped to the walls, every stuffed bear, every cheap chain necklace still dangling around her wicker-framed mirror: It's all the same, just slightly faded, peeling, bleached by daylight. It's all still there.

Lucy isn't.

Because the person sitting on the bed can't be Lucy.

Lucy was pretty. The best looking of the three of us by far, with her sharp features and big eyes. She's the one police officers would smile at while warning us it was too late at night to be out on our own, the one gas station clerks would flirt with while Greg and I filled our pockets with chips and licorice.

The girl on the bed is someone else. Her face is craggy and sunken, like the bones underneath have started to dissolve. Her skin is gray. Even from the doorway, I can see the holes in her arms, the puncture marks and scabs and sores. When she looks

up at me and opens her mouth, I spot the gap of a missing tooth.

No wonder I saw her as a corpse. This girl is halfway there.

“You,” she says. And the voice is Lucy’s voice. High and soft, with a slight Appalachian twang. “You’re not supposed to come back here.”

“... Sorry,” I say, because I’m still too shaken by this, by *her*, to string words into a line.

“No,” she says, louder now. “*You’re not supposed to come back here.*”

“I wanted to see you.” And suddenly I know it’s true. I didn’t want to come here, to the holler, but I’ve missed her. I’ve missed her like a color that someone leached out of the world.

Gently, like this might hurt her, I sit down on the edge of the bed.

“See me,” Lucy says, voice soft again. She turns partially away from me, and I wonder if she’s trying to hide the gap in her mouth, or if it’s her eyes she doesn’t want me to see. They’re like two rain puddles in deep black holes. “Well, here I am.” She scratches her forearm. Flaking scabs. Old tracks. “I’m probably not what you expected.”

There’s something so sad and fragile and hopeful about the phrase. Like I might argue, tell her that she looks fine. That I’d have sworn it’s been days instead of years.

When I don’t answer, Lucy straightens up. She tosses back her stringy hair. Shifts a bony shoulder under her shirt.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” she says, one more time. “But as long as you are, tell me.” She angles slightly toward me now. She leans against the headboard, unfolding one leg so it nearly reaches mine. “Tell me everything. Tell me about living in New York City.”

“I’m in Cleveland, actually.”

The words fall through the air like bricks.

“What?” Lucy says, blinking, frowning, like I’ve just said something impossible. “But you always wanted to go to New York. You were going to be a music journalist there. You were going to go to all the shows, and meet all the bands, and write reviews and articles and biographies.”

“I couldn’t afford New York,” I say, like that’s all it was. “I couldn’t afford college, either. I stopped after three semesters.”

Lucy’s frown deepens. “What about your scholarship?”

“It wasn’t renewed.” It wasn’t renewed because my grades plunged. Because I stopped going to class. Because this place and everything in it haunted me. But I don’t say any of this aloud.

“Oh.” Lucy blinks again, hope fluttering in her eyes. “But—you’re still writing?”

It’s somewhere between a statement and a question. Like asking it will make it so.

“I’m a movie reviewer for an arts weekly. It doesn’t pay much.” I force a smile. “But I get free tickets.”

Lucy nods, although she doesn't smile back. "What about Greg?"

"He's in San Francisco, working in design. He's got a boyfriend." The smile gets easier now. "Sounds like things are good."

"Good," Lucy breathes. Relief and joy wash over her face. "Good."

For a moment, we're both quiet, thinking of Greg. Thinking of his brilliant artwork and quick hands. Thinking about him in San Francisco, far away from here.

"Lucy." I swallow hard. Force myself onward. "Even though Greg and I were ... we were so lucky that you pushed us to get out ... we shouldn't have left you here."

Lucy snorts a tiny snort. "Left me here. I *chose* it."

"No, I know, but I mean—" I'm doing this badly. It's coming out wrong, weaker than it needs to be to carry us both. "Lucy. What you're doing ... It's hurting you."

I look down at her arm, at the blood-marked skin.

Lucy folds her arms around herself. She pulls back her leg too, and I wonder what other marks she's hiding.

"It needs to stop," I say.

And Lucy laughs.

It's a genuine laugh. Lucy's old laugh. Bright and golden.

"It needs to stop?" She laughs again. "Listen to you. 'It needs to stop.'"

"It does," I say. "It *can*. If you leave."

Lucy shakes her head. She's still smiling brightly at me, with her cracked lips and missing tooth.

She glances at the old clock radio on her bedside table.

"It's time for me to go up there," she says. "Do you want to come and see him?" My mouth floods with nausea. "Him," I echo. "You can't call it *him*."

Lucy just keeps smiling. She swings her knobby legs off the bed. "You can drive me partway, or I'll hike."

I'm not going to fight with her. I'm not going to let her walk.

I stand up, and I hold out my hand, and together we head out to the car.

\* \* \*

There are abandoned mine shafts all over these hills.

But this one, at the top of Oak Knob, was ours.

The three of us would head up there when we had one of those stolen bottles of wine to share, or when our parents were mad at us, or when a gang of redneck guys was out looking for Greg or other freaks like us whose asses to beat. We'd climb up the long-overgrown trail, through the bracken, between the rotten boards,

and down into the mountain's mouth.

We'd hide in the tunnel, passing around a bottle or a joint or a cigarette, telling ghost stories. We never sensed the presence of any dead coal miners, though. What we felt was something much bigger. Much stronger. Much older.

One night, at the start of senior year, we'd been talking about how few people left the holler. About how few people even tried. About how there had to be some magical force keeping everything in place, just where it was.

I'm not sure who had the idea for the ritual, whether it was me or Lucy or Greg. I can't remember which one of us came up with the steps, who lit the candles or made the marks on the stone walls, who said we should cut off locks of our hair and fill a little cup with drips of our blood. I'm not sure if we really believed in it, either. I didn't, not deep down. Greg, maybe, with his tarot cards and his art altar. And Lucy ... who knows? There were things about her that I would never have guessed.

We arranged our little offerings, the blood and the hair and the candlelight, and we asked the spirit of this place if it would let us go. Then Lucy did something else that we hadn't planned. She shouted out that she would stay here, bringing it gifts, if Greg and I could get out for good. I remember her voice echoing away into the tunnel, down into the glittering black. Swallowed up.

And, afterward, that's what happened. Acceptance letters. Scholarships. A way out. For two of us, anyway.

So Greg and I left. We left her behind.

Now Lucy walks ahead of me up the steepest part of the path.

We left the car at the spot where the road ends, tapering into nothing. Young trees jut up from the places where the mine tracks used to be. It's late afternoon, and there's enough light in the sky that I can see everything: the crackling carpet of dead leaves, the bare oaks and maples and birch trees, the top of Oak Knob looming above us. It's a cool, damp day, and the wind twists between the hills like a whip.

I'm shuddering, and it's not just from the cold. My knees keep threatening to give out under me. But Lucy strides ahead on her bony legs until we reach the curve into the mine shaft, the heaps of brush gathered around it, the few last boards angled across its mouth like crooked teeth.

She looks over her shoulder at me. I'm several yards behind. Not moving anymore.

"You're not coming in?" Lucy asks.

I shake my head. Because that's all I can manage.

"All right," she says, unsurprised. "Probably better that you don't."

She ducks into the opening, her skinny body slipping between the boards, and the dark swallows her up.

She didn't even bring a flashlight.

And I just stand there.

Remembering.

I've told myself that I imagined it—the thing that came up from

deep in the tunnels that night. The huge, impossible shape that hulked out of the darkness ahead of us, a patch of thicker black against black. It had no face, but it was watching us. It was listening. I don't know if it breathed—if it even had lungs to breathe with—but icy air swept around it like an exhalation, trailing toward the three of us, snuffing out half of the candles. The others sputtered and shrank, afraid to burn.

I've told myself ten thousand times that it wasn't real. We were stoned. We were impressionable. We'd built this story for ourselves, justifying everything that happened before and after.

But those were always lies.

It takes what feels like forever for Lucy to come out of the tunnel again. When she does, she's moving more slowly than before. There are fresh wounds on her arms. Small cuts, trailing blood. She's holding her mouth strangely, jaw twisted to the side, and when she gets closer to me, I can see that another tooth is gone.

"All done," she says, with what's supposed to be a smile.

This is when I grab her by the arm.

I pull her down the hillside, skidding and stumbling. She doesn't resist, not even when I shove her inside the passenger door and jump into the car after her. I gun the engine and start to back down the hill, looking for a place to turn that won't send us end-over-end through the trees.

"Bree," she says, turning toward me. "What are you doing?"

"I'm getting you out of here," I tell her. Even though it's obvious.

"Bree," she says again. My name is just a sigh.

Finally the road widens slightly, and I get the car turned around. I'm barreling down the hillside now, trees lashing past in the thickening dusk.

I glance over at Lucy. Her skin is waxy. A thread of blood trails from the corner of her mouth.

This place is going to eat her whole. Blood. Skin. Teeth. Next it will grind through her sinews. Swallow her bones.

She's still giving me that little amused smile, like she knows something I don't know. Her eyes are steady. "I'm not leaving," she says.

"You're not thinking straight." I turn on the headlights, but that just makes the trees around me seem closer. Branches flash through the beams. "We're going. Together."

"I told you not to come back here," Lucy says, but I barely catch the words through the sound of the engine and the crunch of dead leaves.

And then there's a new sound. A deep, low drumming. A vibration strong enough that the steering wheel trembles in my hands.

"Stop the car," says Lucy.

I ignore her.

There's a deeper rumble, and then a crackling sound as something juts up beneath the tires, nearly sending the little car over the edge of the narrow dirt road. I clutch the wheel and bite back

a scream.

“Stop the car, Bree.”

I don't stop.

The next instant, a massive boulder crashes down from the hill above. In a flash of headlights, I see it thud right in front of us, so close that the whole car rocks, so close that the front bumper hits the earth. The boulder bounces onward, down the hillside. Snapping trees trace its path.

I throw the car into park. Adrenaline spears through me so hard, I think I might throw up. We were a half second from being crushed. Below us, in the hill, there's another rumble.

It's a threat.

I whirl toward Lucy. “Is it doing this?” I choke out.

Lucy is still leaning back against the seat, smiling at me. The trail of blood on her chin sparkles in the dashboard lights. “*I am*,” she says.

I stare back at her, trying to breathe.

“I'm part of this place now,” she says. “Don't you get it? Don't you see what it's giving me?” Her eyes glow. “When this part of me finally disappears ...” She holds up both bloody arms, like they're the sleeves of an old sweater, and gestures at her skinny body. “... I'll be part of something *so* much bigger. I'll be right where I belong.”

I stare at her gray face like I've never seen it before.

Maybe I never have.

When Lucy pushed us to leave, I didn't see what kind of plan she'd made for herself. I didn't see who she was becoming. I only saw the pretty girl she'd been.

“Lucy,” I say. Or I think I say. But I'm not sure my lips move at all.

“I'm going to get out of the car now,” she tells me, putting her hand on the door. “You keep on driving. Don't stop. Just go.” She shoves the door open. “And this time,” she adds, with a widening smile, “don't come back.”

She climbs out and slams the door behind her.

I wrench the car into drive. Then I streak down the hillside, veering along the twisted road, and the drumming of the mountain starts to fade beneath me.

I want to turn back, to catch a last glimpse of Lucy before she's gone.

But I don't.

\* \* \*

The letter comes a week later, while I'm packing my things for the move. Philadelphia isn't New York City, but it's closer. It's something new.

I recognize the handwriting on the envelope instantly. It's not slashing and elegant, like Greg's, but bubbly and rounded, and it's not written in green fountain pen, but blue ballpoint. Just

like always.

I rip it open.

*Dear Bree,*

*Thanks so much for the visit. It was nice seeing you again.  
Everything's pretty good here, same as ever. You know how this  
place is.*

*Say hi to Greg for me.*

*I love you.*

*-Lucy*

# Bones for Safe Keeping

by Charlie Winter

Bean saw the girl step out of the watery shadows at the edge of notice. She came with mincing, nervous steps and went immediately to the men. But though she tugged at the salt-stained hems of the men's jackets, though she gazed pleadingly up at the upper floor where the ladies lay on sharkbone couches, not even the sorriest sailor could give her what she was begging for. Eventually, the girl sat herself under the plank that Black Sam had nailed up, which read: *If ye know where ye are, ye shudnt be here!*

Someone had painted a grinning catfish halfway over the "here."

There the girl sat wrapped up in fine netting nothing like what fisherman used, her bare feet crossed at the ankles and tears pattering on the rabbit toy she clutched. Even as she cried, passersby put little nibbles beside her, or whispered sweet things to turn her mind from tears. She paid attention to none of them. She was too sunk in her sadness.

Bean stuck himself under the baccy table to sulk in petulant perpetuity. The arrival of the girl had bothered him in a mean, sly way that he didn't understand. He decided he wouldn't come out until the girl was gone even if it took a hundred years.

It didn't take a hundred years for his plan to fall apart. She crawled under with him within five minutes, rabbit dragging woefully behind. The netting rustled as she tucked her knees up.

The sight of her made his belly ache. He felt bad for hating that she belonged here.

"The men say my parents aren't here," was the first thing she said, doing her best to say it bravely. "But they won't tell me where here is."

Bean scratched the memory of lice. Barnacles stuck to his scalp scraped his pruny fingers. He'd been "here" a long time now; he'd be here for a long time yet. And though he meant to spit, instead his tongue chose mercy. He said, "This is a place of safe keeping, where we get tucked if no one back home finds what we left behind. Black Sam's the captain here, but he don't talk much."

"I don't want to be kept safe," she said. "I want to go home."

"Well, s'pose we all do. What's with the pretty?" Bean twitched the net. Already, his hatred was cracking. She was such a sorry sight. And he'd never been mean.

"Ma says it's to keep the biting flies off." The girl leaned her face against the rabbit, which dripped. They sat there in the lingering stink of salt.

A snuffle came from her.

It was such a strange, small sound and it had an explosive im-

pact upon young Bean, who had been twelve, once, before his dad's frigate had gone down and taken Bean with it. There was an echo in Bean's memories of a snuffle just like that and a girl who'd smiled just the same. Glittering in those memories were the stars above their beds upon the deck, and how their mama had strung netting above them too, to keep the biting flies away.

"Let's play a game," said Bean. "You're a ghost and I'm a pirate come looting. Do you know how to be a ghost?"

The girl gave one more snuffle, but the lure of play was stronger than even her darkest worries. "I shall go boo," she declared.

Soon enough, the two of them tore about together. Bean hollered as he felt a proper pirate should, and the girl woo'ed as she knew in her heart a real ghost would. The ranks of the drowned looked down upon the two children with their own smiles, cast by memories left beyond the sea. All of them were now bones in the ocean, but even bones remembered being otherwise.

All of them but one.

Bean and the girl eventually fetched back up against the wall where Black Sam's sign hung above. They collapsed in merriment, Bean holding the rabbit.

"What shall we do next, Flossy?" Bean asked without thinking.

The girl paused. "Who—" she went to ask, but coughed instead. Then, another cough, larger, and with the cough came a spilling torrent of brackish saltwater. Bean leapt up to slap between her skinny shoulders, but she grabbed his hand before he could. Words stolen by her blueing lips, her sodden, choking retches,

but her begging plain enough by the way she stared up at him. She was afraid. And she was alone.

Except for him.

As the dead gathered, Bean took the girl—bug net and all—into his bony, waterlogged lap. Even as he held her, he could feel her puddling away through the floor. Washing into the sea. Becoming a concept hard for him to grasp, made of salt and sun and fists beating her heart back into motion. She blinked up at him through storm-tossed eyes.

"You can't stay if they've found you," he said solemnly. "Only those that never get found stay here. But I'll be right behind you, Flossy. I just can't go until you go first."

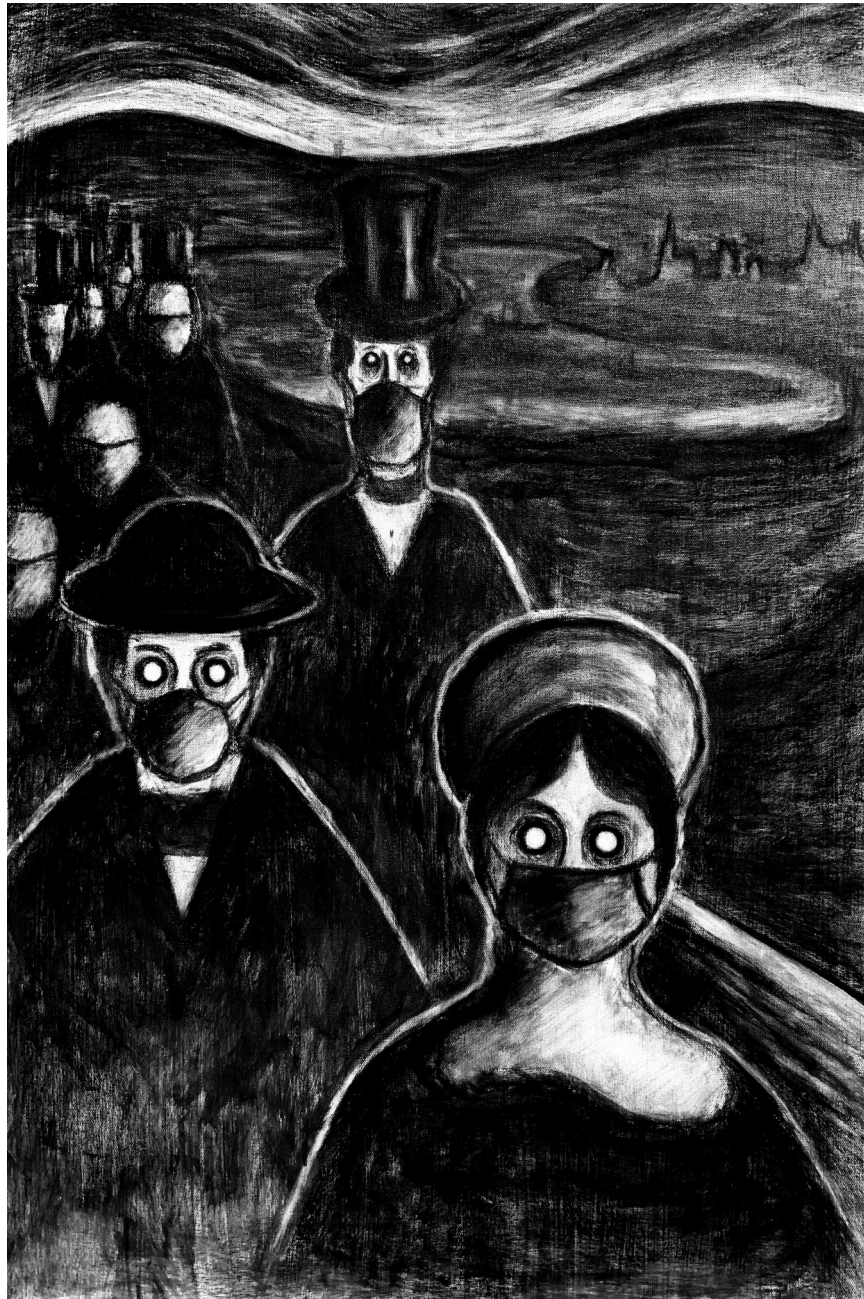
For a brief, thrilling moment, he felt the air balloon into her body in a way that made him yearn for his own starved lungs—and then she was gone. Nothing left behind but the bug net.

Bean curled his knees to his chest. He sniffled, once.

He felt more alone than before.

But Black Sam picked the bug net up, held it for a long moment, and then he draped it over Bean's shoulders.

"This'll keep the flies from biting," said the pirate, giving a smile that Bean realised meant here might be different now that they'd all seen the girl come and go. And Bean was comforted by knowing that Flossy might still be up with the stars and the flies, up where her bones would be warmed by the sun.



# COVID Anxiety

by Donald Patten

# Body Count

by Sage Early

25. My left hand is buried near a stream, under about six inches of topsoil. Ants and worms flock to my flesh, carrying tiny parts of me away when they leave. Above, bees float on lavender drafts and little green blades push their way towards the light. My skin is soft, softer than it ever was in life.

24. He called it His Garden, and it was beautiful but it wasn't His. The woods came right up to the back porch, and He'd put a fence around a small section. The fence always seemed ridiculous to me. It was a dividing line between two places that were exactly the same. The only difference between His Garden and the woods beyond was a vague idea of ownership. Squirrels entered via the uninterrupted canopy and trees dropped leaves across the border. Despite the fence, I always loved laying in the garden. Sunlight dripped through the trees like honey and woke the sweet-smelling soil. I never brought a blanket to sit on, even though He was angry when I came inside with bark imprinted into my back and dirt sticking to my sweat.

23. Today, if you walk into the back corner of His Garden close to the fence and you kneel down and you reach into the dirt like you're praying and dig and dig until your hands are raw and it feels like you're excavating your own flesh instead of the earth and sobs course through your body thick and uncontrollable if you do all of these things you might just might find the part of me that remains in the garden.

22. He touched me differently than I touched myself. Alone, I caressed my jawline, fingered the coarse hair on my belly and thighs. I thought about how much the feeling had changed in the last few years. It felt like light, like relief. His touch was heavy. He squeezed grabbed prodded me. Knew what parts of my body had give, which were solid. Sometimes I wondered if He felt things I couldn't, knew things about me I didn't.

21. He never saw my breasts. They're double-bagged, or incinerated or decomposed, disposed of with all the rest of the bio-hazard hospital waste. My surgeon was the last person to see them attached to me, sexless and fleshy. That was years before I met Him. After the surgery, happiness settled in the base of my brain and didn't leave. For months, every time I touched my chest or put on a shirt I thought how lucky I was to get to live in this body. A body of my own design.

20. We fought.

19. He always told me He liked my shoulders. I was glad. I'd been working out for years, since before I came out. I think that was one of my favorite things about Him.

18. There are so many things that can go wrong with your body. Tiny things, big things. A blocked blood vessel. A severed nerve. A bullet hole. A sawed off leg. A botched surgery. A disfiguration. People talk about trans people being trapped in their

bodies, but aren't we all?

17. I cried when I turned 18. I didn't know why. Because I was still alive, and because I wanted to still be alive. The feeling was disappointment. When you want to die, when you think you're going to die as soon as you can work up the courage to follow through, things are easy. Having a future to worry about is terrifying. I lived for seven more years after that. I died when I was 25.

16. One of my baby teeth, a molar, is wedged behind a baseboard in my parents' house. Nine years old, a friend told me that teeth were made of bone, and I took that to mean they were magic. I said a prayer and imagined that my tooth had spit its magic into the whole house, surrounding my family in golden light and ensuring nothing bad would happen, never ever ever.

15. I told a boy once that I thought my scars were ugly. He traced his finger along my thigh, looking at the patchwork of flesh. They were faded a lot, then, no longer shades of angry purple. "No, I don't think so. They're just, like, a part of you." He kissed me and I tried to believe him.

14. Three of my fingers are buried in the dirt at the base of our houseplant. Neither of us had ever been able to keep a plant alive, so when we moved in together I researched what species were easiest to care for, and bought a pothos. And it thrived. I put it on His bookshelf, and the plant yawned and stretched and drooped closer to the ground as the months stretched on. It survived everything we threw at it. It sagged and dropped leaves when He visited His mother for a month and I struggled to leave the bed. I dragged myself past the plant on the way to the kitchen one afternoon, and when I looked it in the face I saw myself. Unwashed, unmedicated, body slowly being poisoned

by the rotting thing inside of me. I poured a glass of water, drank half of it, and poured the rest into the pothos. We both made a full recovery when He returned the next week. I nursed us back to health, but only because He was there to motivate me.

13. While cuddling with the man who'd just taken my virginity, I mentioned that I'd started testosterone two months prior. "Oh, you're on testosterone," he said, eyes widening, "that explains why your vagina was so weird."

12. We fought all the time.

11. Andrew was the first trans man I fucked, sophomore year of college. It felt right. He was the first person who'd seen my body, really seen me, the way I wanted to be seen. As I touched him, I discovered myself. The comfort of solitude. Screaming, sighing, breathing into one another. Want extended beyond sex.

10. I got my first period while swimming in a river with my family. I cried that night. Some part of me had believed that I would never experience female puberty, that the talk my mother had given me didn't apply, that my body would simply refuse. I'd also been irrationally, impossibly terrified my blood would poison the fish. Years later, I wonder if any of my iron made its way into the ecosystem, if part of me is still in that river.

9. I have three stick-n-poke tattoos, all done by friends, all with needles meant for hormone injections.

8. I did drag once, for fun, for a charity event my friend was co-hosting. I convinced Him to come watch, and I was pleased at how excited He was. He hugged me afterwards and told me how sexy I was. That night, He asked me if I would ever consider having sex in drag. He persisted, and I agreed to try it

sometime. I put makeup on in our bedroom mirror one night as He watched me from the bed. “You don’t really need to do all that,” He came up behind me and rested His chin on my shoulder, “just, like, pretend to be a girl.”

7. We fought all the time. It was usually my fault.

6. I took my first dose of testosterone on my 21st birthday and went to a gay bar that night to celebrate. I’d been afraid to start testosterone because I thought it would make me less attractive. As it turned out, this was an unfounded fear. As the months stretched on, the deep, unnamable discomfort I’d felt my whole life started to fade. My confidence grew. I became a regular at the gay bar and relished in the new attention from men. One whispered to me that he liked pulling hair. I let him, because he was already doing it, and he left with strands woven around his fingers.

5. I felt strangely less human every time we had sex, like He was taking something from me. I told myself maybe I was into it, maybe I could learn to like the emptiness.

4. When I cut my hair short for the first time, I wanted to donate the excess. I’d read about charities that take hair donations for

wigs to distribute to cancer patients. The salon didn’t do donations, but she gave me the ponytail to take with me. I never got around to donating it. The hair sat in a drawer in my desk for months, until I moved out and my mom threw it away.

3. Good girl. Boy toy. God, you’re so hot. Yes, sir. You’re a good little bottom. Please, daddy, please. Such a pretty boy.

2. We fought all the time. It was usually my fault. The last fight I started was the last thing I ever did.

1. Once I was gone, my body was finally fully His. He cried, begged, caressed my cheek, apologized. Then He dragged me to the shed, laid me on the table, and picked up His saw. It was hard work. My body was disturbingly real, and panic jolted through His body every time He broke flesh -- He didn’t want to hurt me. He’d never wanted to hurt me. His arms ached as the blade parted skin flesh bone flesh skin. The smell and the sounds and the horror filled the shed, the remains of my body permanently lodged in His brain.

# Carrion

by Jordan Hirsch

Talons, sharp and keratinous, stretch  
toward me, inescapable in their descent.

They puncture the thin skin  
spread across my shoulder blades

as if to encourage wings of my own  
to sprout from the bone. When they don't,

this vulture, this stork of Hades,  
carries me up and through the wind,

navigating currents and eddies of air  
to the other side, beyond mortal men,

its own wings laboring to deliver me  
to a nest at the top of a tree—

not to hungry mouths waiting to feed,  
not to progeny praying for their next meal,

but instead, to a vast plain of bone, picked  
clean and ready to be used. Its beak

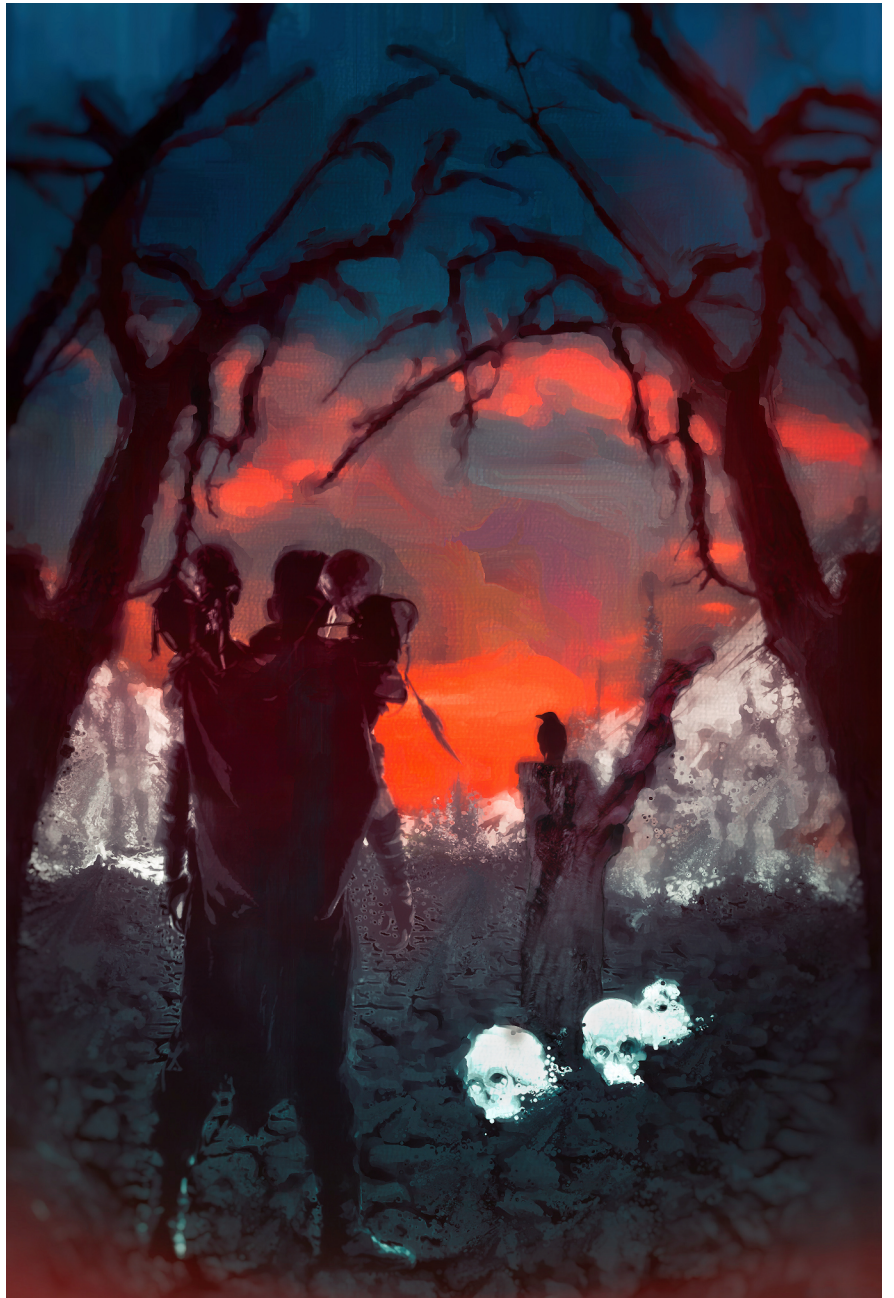
like a scalpel grafts skeleton to my back,  
carving carpals and phalanges to my scapulae.

Still sore, this bird of prey prompts me to the edge  
of death, and flexing my newly formed appendages,

I am ready to fly above the earth,  
to soar above the life that used to be mine.

# Fire Season

by Barbara Candiotti



# The House with White Walls

by Dana Beehr

*The Battle of the Bloody Stream. So this is my brother's resting place.*

Ana leaned on her staff, taking the weight off her aching leg, and looked out over the field to the forest line, hazy in the distance. Long yellow grass waved over the gentle rolling rise, and stands of trees clustered together here and there. The silver glint of a stream ran through the middle of the meadow and entered a culvert under the dusty road. The sun was settling toward the horizon.

She studied the field, trying to see that long-ago day again in her mind's eye. *The armies met there in the middle—right there at the Bloody Stream—the Flying Horse came out of those trees—and there were the Fire Eaters, the cannon, positioned on the top of that rise.*

She could almost see the massed armies; the distantly remembered battle-din echoed again in her ears. She slipped one hand down to touch the stock of the sidearm she carried with her, had been carrying ever since the war; half of a brace given to her and her brother by their parents, and now one of the few reminiscences she had left of him. *How many fell that day? Hundreds? Thousands?*

Her gaze was drawn to a slight bend in the stream that cut the field, with a low hill on the lee side. There she had hacked away with her surgical unit, sawing mangled limbs; there she had first

met the young enemy prisoner who had become her friend, who had shared with her the news of her brother.

The stump of her right leg ached where it rested on the peg she had been given after a Dragon ball had shattered her lower limb. She had been lucky that it hadn't struck higher up; she'd kept the knee and even a bit of the shin. Still, there were times she could *feel* the old leg, aching with horrible pain, as if ants were running up and down inside her calf. She clenched her fist on the staff and, setting her teeth, started down the hill.

It was rough going. The waving grass covered a multitude of sins. She found the first right away; her foot slipped and she looked down to see the gleaming white of an armbone. By the scraps of green cloth still around the wrist, she could tell it had been from the Central's forces. *Yes, the Fifteenth Infantry was stationed here, wasn't it?* she mused.

She pressed her hand to her breast where the prisoner's letter now rested. Her brother had fallen here, he'd said, fighting for the other side, the Centralists. *I was in his company, the man had written. Right by his side that day.*

She looked down at the arm, scuffed it with her foot, turned it over. Something metal glinted—a gold ring. She suspected this field had been pretty nearly picked over, but the ring was still something. She remembered the vultures that had crawled over the field after the battle, prizing fillings out of mouths, removing

watches, taking whatever they could find.

*Not my brother, she thought. But someone's.*

She hesitated, torn, over whether to just leave the ring where it was or whether to take it—she might be able to pay a finder to learn who it belonged to, so she could tell their wife, mother, sister.

*Finders are expensive; why should I spend my coin on someone else's pain?*

She started to move on, then stopped. *Someone* had to care about that person, and if she didn't, then who? If the man who had seen her brother fall had thought the same way, then she would never know what had become of him.

*I will remember you, if no one else does.* She stooped to claim the glint of gold. It took on a strange warmth as she closed it in her hand, and she tucked it away in her satchel.

The dead had lain in heaps like piles of rags or drifts of old leaves, so many that they couldn't be counted. She remembered too the appalling stench, the harsh cries of crows and buzzards, the rats creeping out of the very ground itself. Once she had seen one bone, she saw them everywhere: femurs, ribs, vertebrae, peeking slyly at her from tufts of grass, hillocks, roots of bushes or wedged between stones. She stepped over rusted bits of metal—swords, muskets, rifles. The blue sky shone down in incongruous beauty; an air of quiet seemed to lie over all, as if the battle five years gone had used up all the sound this place was allotted for a lifetime.

*I am trespassing, she thought, on taboo ground—sacred, or pro-*

*fane.* She had an overwhelming sense that she shouldn't be here; that she did not belong, that the dead did not want her here. *Leave us in peace, they seemed to say. We have done our time, we have passed our suffering and now want only to rest.*

“I've only come for my brother,” she said out loud, in response to that unspoken reproach. “Only what's mine. No more than that.”

She took out the letter and studied it. The young man had described the place clearly. *Stefan put his head right up and a dragon ball blew it clean off. He didn't suffer none, ma'am, believe you that.* And Ana hoped he was telling the truth, but she had written the same phrase herself, so many times that the words had become meaningless, and she was all too familiar with the reality it so often concealed.

*All the tears, Stefan, Stefan—all the arguments, all the anger—and for what? So that you could break our hearts by dying alone on a distant battlefield? A brief, terrible rage at the sheer waste of it all gripped her.*

She crested a small rise, glanced up from the letter, and that was when she saw it: a small, neat cottage, walls cleanly white-washed, surrounded by a split-rail fence, and with a carefully tended patch of garden. It was so perfect, smoke even rose from the chimney.

Ana stared. *That can't be what it looks like.* There had been no cottage here five years ago, when she had lost a limb on this battlefield operating under shellfire; she was sure of it. Yet the cottage looked as if it had been there for decades; the clean whitewash was cracked in places, and the logs had an air of weathering that could only have come from years out in the rain

and wind.

She shook her head, wondering for a moment if she were hallucinating. It was so *wrong*, sitting there, pristine in the middle of the battlefield—yet its very wrongness drew her. Slowly she approached the house, over ground she had seen churned to bits with shells and soaked with blood.

Up close, the cottage looked just as old, if not older—as if it had weathered itself out of the soil of the earth.

*I don't understand. Did I misremember or ... ?*

The world had gone silent. Her skin tingled in a way she remembered well, and the hair on the back of her neck rose. Her eyes went to the long low ridge across the field, where the cannon had been stationed five years ago, and a chill came over her; her memories whispered it would be an excellent spot for a sniper....

She shook it off. Nothing looked overtly sinister or threatening about the house; she just didn't remember it having been there five years ago. And she hadn't exactly been paying attention back then.

She looked up at the smoking chimney. *Someone is in there.*

*Go ahead, she thought. Knock. Perhaps—perhaps they can help you find your brother. And if they can't—then maybe they can at least tell you what is going on.*

Ana raised her fist and pounded on the weatherbeaten door.

The door swung open to reveal a perfectly ordinary-looking man.

He was perhaps in his late sixties or even early seventies. His hair was gray, his face deeply lined and weathered, his hands gnarled and twisted. Yet his eyes were a bright, keen blue that bespoke a clear, unclouded mind with a touch of humor and warmth.

“Well? May I help you, young miss?” And he smiled, almost paternally.

Ana faltered. “Why—Grandfather, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I—I was passing by your cottage and—Well, I was looking for my brother.”

“Your brother.” A faint frown creased his brow. “I'm sorry, miss but I haven't seen any young men around here.”

“No, it's not like that— “ She stammered, taken aback. “I—you see, he's dead. He was killed in the fighting here five years ago.”

“Fighting?” The furrows on his brow deepened. “I'm sorry but you must be mistaken. There's been no fighting here. Not in all the years I've lived here.”

Ana stared at him. “No. No, there was. I was there. I lost my leg—“ She indicated her wooden leg, struck with an irrational fear that her limb would suddenly be whole. Yet the peg was still there, concrete evidence that the battle had occurred. “The Battle of the Bloody Stream, between the Grassland and the Centralists?” she tried. “I was with the medical corps, and I was wounded right over there—“ She pointed.

The man's frown deepened further and a trace of concern entered his gaze. "Miss, I don't know what to tell you, except that I've lived here all my life, and my family before that, and there has never been a battle on this field for as long as we've known." He paused. "Are you sure you're all right? Would you like to come in, maybe get out of the sun?"

Ana was reeling. Her knees felt shaky. *What is going on? Did I fall asleep for a hundred years, like in the tales? Either I'm crazy or he is—* But the house, the weathered, ancient-looking house, belied her memory. She swayed and caught herself against the sunwarmed wall; it felt as solid and real as it looked. "No, no, I just— I need to sit down for a moment," she said faintly. "Too much sun."

"Of course," he said and directed her to a plank bench, splintery with years, next to the door. She sank down on it and leaned back against the wall behind her. The warmth of the wood came through her clothing. *It feels real enough.*

"May I get you anything?" he asked. "A cup of water, perhaps?"

"No, I'll be all right. I just need to get off my feet." She paused, then corrected, "Foot, that is," stretching out her wooden leg before her.

It was a feeble joke, but the old man obligingly chuckled. "Well, tell you what, young miss. You sit there as long as you want, and keep me company while I do some gardening, and if you need anything, just tell me." He picked up a hoe that had been lying by the door and went to his garden patch. The concern was still in his eyes as he turned his attention to the neat ridges of earth hiding his root tuber crop.

"You know, you're not the only one come by here, saying there was a battle years ago," he said. "Had a few others over the years. Not often but every now an' then. I tell 'em all the same, they're mistaken. Don't know why. Maybe there was another battle a few fields over?" He shrugged, glancing back at her. "Wouldn't know myself, I've never been more'n a dozen miles from home all my life."

Ana scarcely heard him. He dug the hoe into the ground, raking up small piles of earth around each tuber stem; she recognized them as bloodroot, a crop her mother had grown in the family garden. He saw her looking and pulled one out of the ground.

"Hungry?" he asked, offering her the tuber. "Some food might sustain you, missy." His eyes showed a gentle concern.

She waved it away. "No thanks."

"Suit yaself," he said, and bit into the dark red tuber, spilling juice down his chin. "My own are the best, sweetest in five counties," he added with a wink.

"I'm sure they're delicious," she said faintly. "I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?"

"You can call me Old Man Grady," he said, shrugging. "Not too many people around these days who even know my name, let alone want to speak to me."

"And you're *sure* there's never been a battle around here?" she asked. "Because I remember—I *swear* I remember—" She looked out over the field, seeing in her mind's eye the bodies, the shell craters.

“No ma’am,” Grady replied. “Been here as long as I lived. This house was here. You must have been mistaken,” he said again.

Ana was about to question him further when something caught her eye. Lying on top of a barrel near the door, half-hidden in a jumble of tools and junk, she’d seen the gleam of gunmetal.

“What’s that?” She leapt to her feet and pointed.

“This?” Grady looked confused. He reached into the pile and retrieved a pistol matching exactly the one she carried at her waist. As he held it up, her weapon in its holster seemed to burn. “B’longed to my great grandfather. He brought it with him when he settled these parts. I know I don’t care for it like I should, but ain’t got much call to use it these days—“

“No. That’s *my brother’s* pistol.” Proof—here was *proof* this was the right place. She swung toward him, demanding, “Where did you get it?”

A look of hurt offense came over Grady’s face. “Miss, I’m sorry, but I told you. ‘Twere my great grandpa’s. It’s been here for—“

“You’re *lying*.” Her voice rang off the walls of the house. “*Tell me where you got it!*”

Now the old man drew himself up, his expression hardening. “Ma’am,” he said coldly, “you don’t sit on my bench and call me a liar. Not on my own property.” He paused. “I think you’d better leave.”

Her own pistol burned at her side. Her entire body trembled with the effort it took to stop herself from drawing on him; her

muscles locked so tight it hurt. Wrapped in anger, she stormed off. Behind her, the house waited.

\* \* \*

*It was his pistol. It had to be.*

Ana stalked over the uneven ground, grinding her teeth in frustration.

She knew Grady was wrong, that there had been a battle here. She had *lived* it; her peg leg was proof. *That’s real. That’s not my imagination.*

As she gazed on the landscape, she knew in her bones that this was the exact site. She would remember it as long as she lived: a slanting field of waving grasses, trees crowding the edge thickly, a large creek running diagonally across it.

Suddenly she was *there*, hearing the shouts and cries, the echoing artillery fire ringing in her ears, and as she looked over the field, the setting sun washed it all red, as if the field ran with blood, the stream a river of gore. *The Bloody Stream*. The innocent-looking creek had taken on a distinctly reddish tint as the fighting continued, herself swathed in butcher’s leather, sawing and cutting and chopping frantically at a tide of shattered bodies that never seemed to lessen. She dreamed it sometimes, that she was surrounded by walls of bleeding, mangled flesh, trying to chop her way out with her simple butcher’s tools as the stench of blood filled her nostrils and her skin and hair clotted with it. Until the thud and whistle of an incoming mortar shell made her drop her weapons and look up, knowing without knowing how that in an instant there would be pain—

*No!* Ana wrenched herself out of the memory, driving her peg leg into the ground; the jolt helped her, centered her somehow. She staggered onward blindly, over uneven ground.

Then turned again and looked at the house behind her.

Night was coming on; the moon was rising. Moonlight washed the small cottage the hue of dry bone. The pale light accentuated the house's weathered, aged appearance, as if it had indeed been there since the beginning of time—but Ana knew it had not been there before.

*It could never have survived.* She knew that coldly, plainly. Shot and shell would have reduced it to rubble.

Something tugged at her awareness. She couldn't quite put her finger on it. Somehow, the cottage's corners, lines, and angles seemed subtly *wrong*, as if they didn't quite add up to being a house. Just for a second, the windows, the door, the thatched roof came together in a shape that resembled a giant crouching creature. A monster, ready to devour her alive ...

Ana shook her head at her own thoughts. *A monster of memory, perhaps.* But she couldn't escape the impression there was some other, essential reality to that house that her eyes could not detect.

"Have you seen enough, young miss?"

Ana started. Grady was coming toward her, breasting his way through the high grass. His limbs were angular and long, his features seeming even more craggy and weathered in the moonlight. *Ancient.* As if he had indeed been here for decades.

"What?" Ana studied him warily, an eldritch tingle running

down her spine.

"Well," Grady smiled again and his teeth gleamed very white. "Seemed like you were looking for something, so I wondered if you'd seen enough. Have you found it?"

"I don't know what I'm looking for." She took a cautious step back.

"You know as I've said before, others came through here looking for a battlefield. Men, women, the old, the young, from the Grasslands, from the Empire. And I told 'em all what I told you: I've always been here."

The lines and angles of his face seemed sharper, more pronounced; the hollows under his eyes deeper.

"You haven't though."

"I haven't?" It was so false, the surprise in his voice. It jarred like metal on her back teeth. "Well, that's news to me, child. Would you like to come in, to discuss it over dinner?"

Over his shoulder she saw the crouching, waiting house, windows like blank eyes, its open door a dark maw. And Grady, its angular occupant.

"What are you really?"

Teeth shone in the darkness. "What do you think?"

Ana shook her head. Her fingers opened and closed on her staff. Slowly she inched one hand to the sidearm she carried, the mate to her brother's. Her fingers brushed the stock. Her lips were

numb, cold. “Don’t tell me you’re human.”

“Do I not look it?”

“I was here. I was here at this battle five years ago and *you weren’t*.” Her voice shook with emotion.

There were far too many teeth in Grady’s smile. “Perhaps I was, and you didn’t know it.”

“No.” She glowered at him. “*What are you?*”

He laughed, a grinding sound, like stone on stone. “A cleaner, of sorts. A collector, you might say.”

“A collector?”

“So many things fall on a battlefield. So many good things waiting for someone to care for them, pick them up, keep them from going to waste. That’s why you came here, correct?” A cloud passed the moon, and Ana could not see his—its?—face, only the glint of eyes in the darkness. “You came here seeking one of the slain. Well—perhaps I came for the same thing. After all, not many come out this far to retrieve their dead. Someone has to look after them.”

Ana’s fingers were cold on her staff. She felt a chill down her spine but shook it off with an effort. “What do *you* seek? Bones?”

“Nothing so material.” The clouds whipped past; the moon emerged briefly to flash pale rays of silver just long enough to show Grady’s full face. *Not human. Wrong.*

“This place ... so much death. So much destruction. It’s all here,

trapped within the soil, like the remains of shells and spells, waiting for harvest. Pain, grief, fear ... I was *drawn* here, and even if I hadn’t been ... perhaps the place would have spawned me anyway. It is like that sometimes, don’t you think?”

He seemed thinner now—taller too—his arms and legs spindly angles, his eyes unnaturally large and bright. Or was it only her eyes playing tricks on her in the shadows and darkness?

Ana edged backward. Ice gripped her. “What are you? Drawn from ... where?”

“There is a realm beyond the land of the living,” Grady said. He gestured, and to her overwrought perception, the moonlight shone strangely off his fingers, as if he were holding daggers. “Events like this can tear a hole in the barrier between the real world and the underworld. Pain and suffering on this scale calls us as honey calls flies. Here ... here will I live, and more of those like me will come. Here, the feasting is ... rich.”

Ana’s vision seemed to *shift* suddenly. She could almost see it: a pool of darkness, spreading from the house, from Grady, reaching tendrils out across the battlefield. It was a rotting sore, a canker, consuming everything it touched. She knew it would spread, and spread, and keep devouring all in its path.

*Are there other places like this? Is he the only one?*

“I can feel *your* fear,” Grady cooed. “Bright and gleaming, a delicious fresh morsel. The fears of the battlefield grow stale after a time.”

He advanced on spindly, almost stilt-like legs. She staggered away, almost falling over the edge of a crater. Grady stalked

after her, sharp with menace. He moved with a calm, slow deliberation as if he knew—as did she—that there was no way she could escape him.

*I can't let him catch me!*

Moon and shadows, shadows and moon. Ana heaved herself up over the lip of the crater on her one good leg. Bones gleamed whitely in the darkness; a femur, a skull, teeth. The soldiers who had fallen here so long ago, fighting for their army, and what did it matter now who had won and who had lost?

She drew her sidearm and risked a look back. Grady was bearing down on her with frightening speed, dark against dark.

“Let—me—*feed!*”

Grady's eyes flashed bright, and the moon darted out from behind a cloud. Her blood ran thick with cold.

There was no longer anything human about his face. It was an abomination, its jaw opening wider than should have been possible, row upon row of needle-sharp teeth gleaming whitely within. With strength she didn't know she had, Ana tore her gaze away and thumbed the catch of her weapon.

Grady was fast, so fast; he swiped at her with a claw and strands of her hair stirred in the breeze. Her pistol was warm in her hands. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her peg leg caught on something and she sprawled backward; the spike of Grady's claw missed her head by inches. Another second and—

She raised her pistol and lined up the shot. Time had slowed to a crawl. She squinted, and then pulled the trigger.

The gun roared and kicked in her hands. She had aimed for right between Grady's eyes, but he had moved at the last second and her shot hit him square in the throat. A fountain of blackish ichor exploded outward in a spray of flesh and bone, and Grady collapsed to the ground.

Ana was shaking and trembling. The memories of combat rushed into her; she had not heard a shot fired in anger since the end of the war. She crashed to her knees for a moment, breathing hard, willing the world around her to stay in focus. *Is he dead? Is he really dead???* *He has to be, right?*

Slowly she got to her feet. She was a field surgeon, with instinct ingrained in her deeper than reason; she had to be *sure*. That strange weakness was still in her as she got to her feet, draining her limbs of strength. Reeling a bit, she staggered unevenly the few feet to the side of the fallen Grady creature.

His horrible, distorted features stared up at the sky above them, a second grinning maw splitting his throat where her shot had struck. White splinters of bone gleamed deep within the wound; she had seen wounds just like it right here, on this field, years ago.

That terrible sick lassitude overcame her and she sank to her knees beside Grady, unable to look away from that grotesque visage.

Yet as she watched—His features began to *change* somehow, to shift and run like wax.

*What on earth—?* She tried to scramble to her feet, to run, to flee, yet that horrible weakness clutched her in its grip. This was not simply nervous reaction; it felt like bleeding to death.

It felt like dying.

Icy fear swept her—and then drained away the next instant, pouring out of her like strength, like blood. Her vision was darkening, clouds crossing her sight, but not so much that she could not see the new face forming itself out of the wax of the Grady-thing's features.

*Her own face.*

*No—!* She tried to raise the pistol again but it fell from her water-weak fingers. She gulped at the air around her like a fish removed from water. Huge flowers of darkness opened across her vision as the life force drained from her body; and the last thing she saw before her own sight left her forever, was her own eyes opening in another's face.

\* \* \*

*Ahhh ... so nice.* This body was younger, more fit too, though it was missing one of its limbs, and even better was the rush of emotions, memories, fears that had poured into her with the other's demise. The spike of fear at the last moment—that was always the most delicious; the old terrors of the battlefield

would do for sustenance and were satisfying enough in their own way, but there was nothing quite like the same fear fresh.

*And such a pretty name as well ....*

Another's memory stirred in her mind and she reached into the pack of the body at her feet, extracting the gold ring the other had taken from the battlefield. A small smile crossed her lips; it had been this very ring that the Grady-form had come looking for a year or so ago. She tucked the ring away in her own identical pack and then leaned down and took the fallen pistol from beside the empty husk.

"A fine piece," she said. "It completes the set." The new voice was a little rough at first, but settled out even as she spoke. She turned back to the bone lair that crouched in the moonlight—how beautiful it was, in the middle of the place where so much blood had been spilled.

"A fine place," she said. "Such rich pickings. Others will come, looking for brothers, daughters, husbands, sons. And a nice young lady named Ana will be here to meet them. Perhaps she'll ask them to step inside her cozy house. After all ... I've always been here."

# Charts of the Sorcerer 1: Duel

by Phil Emery

The first embarked into what was still mist. Only the muted sun had a hint of crispness. Of course. The ink was not dry. His eyes smarted wetly from the familiar cold. His sight trickled through stained glass spiderwebs. Then he saw the other one.

This one sat on the ground which was yet unresolved into sward or sand or rock or pave.

“Ah,” said the first. The other made no response.

“Crownsnest Hoim,” the first introduced himself, “of the ghost galleon *Sorcerer*.”

“Gohn,” begrudged the other.

“Of?” probed Hoim.

“The wraith ark *Morrigan*.” His mutter a bitter murmuration of sorrows.

“Ah,” repeated Hoim impishly. “Two crowsnests, two ships, encountering each other on an endless voyage over an infinite sea. Rare but not unique.”

“Both charting lands by the pens of their ship’s map-maker,” Gohn engaged, taking a sip from a flask at his hip.

“Mine charts fabulous cities as various as pearl and amethyst,” advanced Hoim.

“Mine tainted wastes,” parried Grim, “sometimes ravaged, sometimes haunted.” He reluctantly rose to his feet. Hoim thought he glimpsed a hermaphroditic quality to the act. The pair maintained some paces apart as befitted the conventions of such meetings.

“What were you,” he said, “before you signed on the *Morrigan*?”

Gohn shook his head. “Though I think I remember dreaming of blood.”

Hoim gave a shallow mock of a bow. “Troubadour.” It was a feint, though he did sometimes fancy on the voyage that he heard distant snatches of madrigal. He envied Gohn’s voice, his brusque concoction of loss and anger and hopelessness. He secretly considered his own mouth a yawning solander containing nothing of truth or value. He stared at Gohn. Scar tells can be read, can betray a crowsnest’s vulnerabilities. Some used cosmetics, but these usually only made them more obvious. A tattoo is a better disguise.

Gohn returned the appraisal. “A peculiar jerkin.”

“Marrow scales woven into mail.”

“Invulnerable?”

“Perhaps.”

The mists still hung around the two of them. The ink still not dry.

“I wonder,” said Hoim, circling in the stalemate, squinting, “what will appear first. Perhaps a caravan, ingots of bronze, cakes of dates and sesame seed, bolts of cloth, bricks of salt ...”

“Ingots of curses, cakes of souls and witch’s gravewax, bolts of werewolf pelt,” retorted Gohn. But he offered his flask at Hoim.

Hoim shook his head, despite the chill.

“That’s a fine blade you wear,” ventured Hoim, toeing a luminal inflection between the conspiratorial and the meditative. “Is that handle kraken-skin?”

“Selkie,” reposted the other, stepping forward. “And yours is of a design I’ve not encountered before, though I’ve encountered many.”

And the duel began, or rather continued, by blade instead or

rather as well as tongue.

\* \* \*

In the eerie fullness of timelessness Hoim reembarked the *Sorcerer*. It was a tall craft, tiered with sail far into the sky, but those sails were now ragged and limp, its spars cracked, much of its rigging severed. Its bowsprit tusk spar was shattered. Hoim swayed unsteadily on the gnarled deck as if it rolled under him and watched the ship’s map-maker approach him. Her vestments billowed pneumatically as she shambled across the ship-worm-crusted timbers, headscarf bowed as if into some pitiless gale rather than the becalmed stillness shrouding the ship.

Her eyes went to the wound below his chest, apparently deep and ancient, but still not dry.

Her eyes flickered up to Hoim’s. “Mortal?”

Hoim shrugged. “And now?”

“We repair,” she pronounced, with weary skeletal inevitability, “and sail on.”

# Hither

by Ron Sanders



# The Archaeology of Yarn

by A J Dalton

... strange skeletons  
of dwelling places perhaps  
peek up through the sands  
like hidden leviathans  
or predators crouched in ambush  
... we dare not come closer  
to these psychic graves  
for an old madness lingers there  
and no good can come of it  
though their ancient pain still calls  
... we avoid the stone-carved footprints  
that lead towards the awful depths  
and vast chambers  
of their necropolis  
where they restlessly demand new worship  
... insatiable were their lives  
until all was simply exhausted  
maybe we do follow them  
in some ways then  
and their kind is come again ...

# The Snow Queen

by Jennifer Weigel



# Return to Foreverland

by Virgo Kevonté

It was sunset when I finally reached my brother and his little coterie of tree goblins. I was so winded from the trek uphill that I collapsed from sheer exhaustion. I could barely hear the electric gossip among the woodland fauna overhead. Shirt matted to my chest with sweat, I stared up through the gum trees at the raspberry sherbet sky and cursed Foreverland. Hundreds of “star buggies” (the tree goblins’ term, not mine) celebrated dusk approaching with jittery dances in erratic orbits. I slapped the ones that landed on my face away, wiped the guts off on my jeans. Night was coming and I was still no closer to bringing my brother home.

I stood up clumsily and picked off the gum tree balls clinging to my damp shirt. One of the tree goblins slid a gnarled gray finger to his lips in a gesture of silence. I flipped him a *different* finger to express my appreciation for his gesture.

The mountain’s breeze, choked into a whisper by the forest behind me, tickled my ears. At the edge of a nearby clearing, my brother scouted a smattering of tents below, one stockinged leg propped up on a boulder. He was squinting through an eyeglass when I finally had enough energy to approach him.

“I’ve been looking *everywhere* for you, Maleek,” I said.

Maleek lowered the eyeglass and faced me. He was wearing black ankle-banded trousers, a white shirt with billowy sleeves,

and a half-laced-up collar. His mid-length twisties had grown into shoulder-length locs ornamented with rings of every kind of gemstone.

“The castle library, the courtyard, even that damned *dungeon*,” I spat. “—I searched everywhere for you. We *need* to talk.”

“If you truly sought Prince Maleek, then why did you look everywhere he wasn’t?”

This clever little rejoinder came from the goblin to Maleek’s right, dressed in a plaid sweater vest. His yellow-eyed companions chortled.

“I’m about to look for my foot *up your ass*,” I said.

The goblins flinched, not from offense but from confusion. Any slur or vulgarity from the real world had this effect on Foreverland’s denizens, and I had begun to relish it. They might seem all cute, pointy ears and beseeching yellow eyes, but those gator-skinned assholes had been masterfully sabotaging my efforts to bring Maleek home all weekend.

The goblin mentioned something about the “the Hobgoblin King” and a “talisman” and soon they’d forgotten I was there. As one goblin suggested how best to infiltrate the camp below, I sneered at his gray hand on Maleek’s back. It wasn’t the manicured hand

of a girlfriend ushering my baby brother through a noisy restaurant to meet her parents, or a tailor's hand graciously directing my brother to turn about for further measurements for a graduation suit— hell—it wasn't even the dexterous hand of a piano player pushing my brother forward for photos with the quartet my father had made him join all those years ago. No, it was the withered, liver-spotted hand— more of a claw, really— of a fantastical creature, ostensibly pushing my baby brother deeper into a fantasy land of redundancy and purposeless illusions.

“You know,” I interrupted, eyeing that goblin's black-and-orange checkered sweater vest. “Something that's bugged me for years— how do you goblins have the wherewithal to cover your chest, but none whatsoever to cover your *lower half*? Don't you scare away little goblin children, or something?”

The goblins fixed me with another bemused stare.

“It's 2007. How about you invest in some Sean John pants. FUBU. Hell, even a powder-blue velour tracksuit with the word 'juicy' on the ass would be better than—” I squinted at the goblin's unclothed midsection— “What fashion statement are we going for here, *dumpster troll*?”

Before my brother could chastise me, an arrow whistled between us.

“Down, my prince!” the half-dressed goblin screeched, diving for Maleek. More arrows whipped past, slicing through bark and biting into wood. Maleek dropped behind a tree in a sway of locs. I did the same, my heart kicking like a jazz drummer letting loose during an encore solo.

“There are too many of them, my prince!” another goblin

shouted.

“Too many arrows, or archers?” Maleek shouted back. He was grinning a wild grin. I wasn't. I knew from experience that arrows don't do through-and-throughs or subtlety. Wherever arrows bite, they plant a flag and leave a scar.

Moments after the arrows stopped, I could still hear our panicked breaths. Right as the sweater vest goblin stood up, Maleek yanked him down hard.

“Either the hobgoblins pause to flank us or pause to clothe their arrows,” he snapped. “Either way, stay *down*.”

“They'd prepare fire arrows?” the goblin echoed, his luminous yellow eyes widening with fear. “But fire here would burn everything all the way down to Treegoblintown!”

“Fear not,” my brother said through gritted teeth.

I leaned past the tree providing me cover to say something, but before I could, Maleek curled over, wheezing. His labored breathing deepened into guttural, violent grunts. At first I thought he'd been struck, but then I saw air shimmying off him in hot pearlescent waves, like heat radiating off asphalt in the middle of August. Even when Maleek, our old neighbor Ashanti, and I had fought the Wizard King all those years ago, I'd never seen magic like this. When the striating muscles of white light had reached their peak, the foliage around Maleek's body burst into flames. I shielded my eyes from the light blast with my forearm but when I lowered it, my brother was gone.

“Christ,” I swore, sitting up behind a tree. “He can *teleport* now?”

“Not exactly,” came Maleek’s voice from everywhere and nowhere. “It’s invisibility, dear brother.”

I rolled over and squinted in the direction of Maleek’s voice. It was like looking through thick, weathered glass: everything behind him looked mildly distorted.

“Turns out, dear brother, the secrets of the infamous white magic guild are for the taking— *if* you can drink a guild member under the table.”

“You’re *drinking* here now?” I gasped. “Have you lost your mind? You know what that does to us.”

In response, a bough several yards up ahead of me shook, its licorice green leaves drifting to the ground. Another bough shook. Then another, and then Maleek was gone. I’d lost my brother again.

\* \* \*

That night, high up in the canopy of Treegoblintown, the tree goblins held a massive feast celebrating “Prince” Maleek’s retrieval from the Hobgoblin King’s talisman. From Maleek’s table I watched tree goblins crash goblets in jovial toasts and burst into the chorus of random songs. Light flickered madly as beer suds sloshed from the inebriated choir’s mugs into the oil lamps on the tables. Maleek and his yellow-eyed coterie waltzed about the wooden hall, shaking hands while I sat alone in a tiny chair before a seductive plate of food I dared not sample. I wondered how I could have ever loved a place so wild. No part of Treegoblintown was designed for the feet, temperament, or knees of a tall man in his late twenties with college football injuries. No two stairs were the same height or width. Some

floors, like the one in the banquet hall, were so warped that if you placed a ball in the corner of the room, you could finish your meal before the ball finally stopped rolling. Zip lines and clotheslines hung everywhere, threatening to trip up anyone, tree goblin or human.

When my brother returned to our table, I let loose. I called him “childish, selfish, and delusional” for indulging in this fantasy for this long. I reminded him of the progress he could be making back home.

“So you say,” he said. “Yet, you never speak of your or Ashanti’s life. Could it be because there’s nothing to talk about? That there’s no life in your lives?”

True, the last couple years hadn’t gone as planned for either of us. Ashanti was single and still working as a verbal punching bag at a dying retail chain and rewrote her GyrlsWithPockets Fashion Line business plan on the weekends. As for me, I was a law school dropout, an underemployed office manager with enough student debt to rival that of a small Caribbean country.

While I thought of a response, Maleek brought his spoon to his glass for what would be a long, nap-inducing toast.

“... And a special thanks,” Maleek said, “to my eldest and only sibling, Andre, who’s always looked out for me.” His face soured. “... Even as he tries to take me away from you all now. Know that he’s only doing what he thinks is best.”

The glare of no less than two hundred angry yellow eyes burned my face and ears. I flashed a half-smile to the goblin crowd.

After Maleek’s toast, every goblin in the banquet hall grabbed

me (in a less than figurative manner sometimes) to reprimand me for attempting to “repatriate our greatest ally against hobgoblin tyranny.”

When I finally tracked Maleek to the nondescript treetop chamber where he’d presumably been sleeping, I was livid. I shut the door behind me and bolted it closed. Maleek turned, obviously shocked. He demanded to know how I got up there.

I scoffed. “Have you forgotten who taught *you* how to climb a tree?” Maleek’s face remained puzzled.

Apparently, he had.

“You’ve lost your mind,” I said, shaking a finger at him. Floorboards creaked as I walked up to him. “All this Foreverland food is rotting your brain; you know it destroys memories, yet you feast like you don’t even *care* if you get home or not.”

“I’ve already told you this is my home.” Maleek’s smile was swallowed by an expression I’d hoped to see more of: recognition, albeit faint. The lamps around the room cast shadows that made his smile appear gaunt. “And besides—”

“Maleek, Ma is dead.”

The twitch of recognition I’d seen before was a full-face spasm now. He rubbed the balls of his hands into his eye sockets.

“Ma is ...” He rubbed his face harder. “No, you’re lying. It’s another lie.”

“She passed in her sleep. It was probably better that way. The dementia ...” my voice trailed off. The silence would give her

more dignity than my description of her last few months ever could. Below us, a fiddle whined, accompanied by idle chatter.

“That ... is truly regrettable,” Maleek said, his tone flat. Whatever familiarity I’d seen in his eyes had gone as quickly as it had come. “I’m sure you must be devastated.”

Before I’d returned to Foreverland, I had given some thought to how Maleek would respond to our mother’s death. I had planned for anger, despair, fear, guilt, maybe even a little vitriol, but not indifference. I don’t remember what he said after that, but I do remember having to connect the dots for him. Our mother had filed a missing persons report on him with Sacramento PD. I was in dire financial straits at a time when I needed to take over our mother’s mortgage.

“We emptied your room, Maleek. Your clothes, yearbooks, that stupid Beanie Baby collection, it’s all with the Salvation Army now.”

“And this concerns me ... how?”

“Goddamnit.” I grabbed Maleek by the arms and spoke through gritted teeth. “Ma’s house has been in *probate*, which means it will be sold. Selling the house means no furniture. No furniture means *no mirror above the bathroom sink*, Mal. No mirror? No *portal*. You’ll be stuck here *forever*.”

“I’ve already told you,” Maleek said, explosively shrugging off my grip, his eyes as dark as the obsidian locs that framed his now stern face. “My home is here.”

“How, when we don’t know what *this place* is?” I said, throwing my hands up. “*Foreverland* isn’t even its name. It’s just what

Ashanti called it after you discovered it.”

“Foreverland is as real as your world. Its denizens dream, live, and die just like anyone else. They have volition just as strong as yours— or do you need some time with a certain rogue to remind you of that?”

Heat rushed to my face at the mention of Myrona, an old Foreverland flame.

“Maleek, I’m leaving with you *now*,” I said, exhaling anger. “And I’m *past* done asking.”

I folded up my sleeves. Reaching into the satchel I’d brought with me, I produced my only means of prying my delusional brother from this fantasy. Maleek looked down at the rope coiled in my hand.

“The Lasso of *Kturoman*?” Maleek laughed. “Do you even remember how to use that relic?”

I wrapped the magic rope around both of my hands, now balled into fists, and pulled it taut. The rope snapped, then crackled with ancient arcane energy. Maleek’s face grew serious again in the dark, cerulean light.

“You and Ashanti. So sure you know what’s best for me. So sanctimonious.”

Maleek took off his shirt, revealing no less than four different white magic tattoos. My mouth went dry. As if drinking and eating wasn’t bad enough, he’d let them inject Foreverland liquids directly into his skin. This fight was not going to be like the slap-arounds I used to give when he didn’t do his dishes or give

me the remote. Nonetheless, I still had two inches and thirty pounds on him; I knew it would be enough.

“You know,” Maleek said, bouncing on his heels. “I always knew I’d have to defend myself against someone attempting to drag me back.” He grinned. “And I had always hoped it would be you.”

\* \* \*

On a routine excursion in Foreverland when I was sixteen, a poisoned arrow to the chest had left me at the mercy of a tree goblin village elder and his potions. After a night of nightmarish fits and vomiting, I regained my strength. I thanked the elder before I left, but was shocked when, upon reaching the golden meadows that held our portal home, I saw no sign of it. Even the sparks around the golden portal, which hissed like a basket of angry cobras, were lost to my ears. This was how we discovered how Foreverland liquids affect our minds.

Ironically, things got worse after Ashanti found me and pulled me through the portal. The strange time distortion between the two realms meant that I’d only been missing for two days, but the Foreverland potions had done their damage. The face of the portal hadn’t been the only thing lost to me: six months of AP class lectures, homework, even my locker combination, virtually all memory for a half year was gone. When my father saw my final exam grades, he exploded.

Up until then our parents had tolerated our spontaneous disappearances and aloofness, probably by chalking it up to childish irresponsibility, but after I’d failed that term my father surmised that his eldest (his lawyer) had succumbed to recreational drug use. Andre Cartwright Sr.’s response was immediate and perva-

sive. He stormed up to my room with the kitchen trashcan. With a rage that had grown increasingly common in my teenage years, he tossed my CDs in the trash. The Gin Blossoms. Outkast. Brandy. If he thought drugs inspired it, I heard it crash into the large aluminum bin.

“*Jagged Little Pill?*” he growled, holding up an Alanis Morissette album. “Is that what you’re on?” I flinched as the CD crashed into the mound of waifish female guitarists and young rappers.

Ashanti told me later that even though they lived across the street, her family heard everything: my father’s hollering, the crash of the plastic cases against the trash can, Maleek’s sobs, begging everyone to just be happy that I was back.

My mother, for her part, leaned in the doorway, arms crossed, her expression neither condoning nor condemning; she knew not to engage my father in such a state, but I was a teenager who felt unjustly persecuted.

“I’ll have no addicts under my roof, boy!” my father growled as another CD crashed into the trashcan.

“Oh?” I remember saying, feigning confusion. “Did you already throw out those heroin addicts in your vinyl collection, or are we headed downstairs after this?”

I don’t think anyone, my father included, expected the open hand that blurred around and sent me crashing into my dresser. For a solid minute, I actually saw stars: large colorless phosphenes that flickered light.

What came after— the mandated family meetings on Friday

nights, the forced matriculation at community college while my friends enjoyed their summers at fun camps— I blamed on Foreverland and vowed to never return.

Years later, my mother tried to explain the powerful fear that drove my father to keep his kids on the “straight and narrow.” He was preparing to send his son out into a hostile America, she said, a country that devoured Black bodies and chewed up Black dreams.

I thought it was pointless rationalizing until the deaths of Kendra Jameses and Amadou Diallos. For Maleek to have seen the same things that I saw made his return to Foreverland that much more of a betrayal. His willingness to live in an imaginary world disrespected our parents’ sacrifices and was why I had to bring him back by any means necessary, even if it was against his will.

\* \* \*

The afternoon after my fight with Maleek I woke in half a body cast somewhere in Treeregoblintown. I hadn’t just failed at retrieving my baby brother; I was shedding tears in a fantastical tree clinic staffed with goblins after being walloped by my kid brother. I laughed in spite of myself.

I thought about the world my brother was leaving behind as I lay shirtless on a cot two sizes too small for me. I clutched my side as I attempted to sit up and let out a piteous whimper instead. It felt like someone had sown broken glass just below my lungs. I shifted, groaning as broken bone cut into more flesh. Massive tree leaves were plastered just above my torso with a thick sap.

*Goblin gauze.* Another one of Ashanti’s phrases. We’d needed the magical leaves more than once, but never from fighting each other. It posed no severe threat to my ability to grasp the real

world, but angry tears welled in the corners of my eyes.

The room remained empty except for a goblin who came and went, wearing, of all things, a white lab coat. *A goblin in a lab coat*. That was how far down the rung I'd been kicked.

That night, I hobbled over to the windowsill and spied on a drinking hall's festivities from my treehouse room window. With all the celebration going on, I surmised the rest of Tree-goblintown must have caught wind of Maleek's recent victory over the Hobgoblin King.

"The best view of any banquet is always from the guest of honor's table, Andre."

I spun around as fast as my injuries would let me. Though it had been years, I recognized the plum leather jacket and pattern leather buckles immediately. Though most rogues have those haunting violet irises and a penchant for theft, I was relieved to speak with a humanoid clothed like an adult.

"What are you doing here, Myrona?" I asked.

"I was in the neighborhood, pawning some troll relics," she said. "Now, are you going to continue to gape at me or offer me some of that gob-weed?"

Though her charm hadn't changed, Myrona looked different. She'd removed the gold stud piercing from her left nostril and a stream of silver hair framed her tawny face. I must have recoiled when I saw it because she pointed right to it.

"Don't act so surprised," she said. "I am, after all, as mortal as you are."

"I thought things didn't change here," I muttered.

"Funny," Myrona said. "That's what your brother says about your realm."

"Pithy," I grumbled.

"We change," Myrona said, gesturing to the shock of grey in her hair. "You don't. For instance, you still refuse all sustenance—even gob-weed—regardless of the amount of pain you're in."

I retreated to my cot, grumbling to myself. Somewhere below us, the end of a stage dance kicked up a rancorous applause: the real festivities had started.

Myrona sat next to me. She leaned over me, her dark purple eyes probing mine, her expression souring.

"Andre," she rested a hand on my thigh. "Why has Maleek locked you in this room?"

"I'm stuck here?"

She held up an iron key, grinning.

"Well, *were* stuck here," she corrected, twirling the keys around her index finger. "Got it off the goblin guarding your room." When she saw I was dumbstruck, she chuckled. "Andre, love, you know I could steal the tusk off an elephant."

"Like I said, some things *never* change."

Her eyes slid down to the leaves stuck to my abdomen. Her at-

tention there brought my pain to the forefront of my mind.

“You and Maleek have always had your issues, but I don't ever remember it *ever* being this bad. Now, what happened?”

I would have denied it then, but in that moment, you could have lit a match simply by holding it between us. There was a stillness in that space that can't be replicated anywhere in the modern world. I looked into those cool, indigo eyes, eyes that held no judgment, no anger, just concern.

I told her everything.

\* \* \*

Laughter rang out of Myrona, sonorous and accusative. It filled my nondescript room with a warmth and familiarity I hadn't known I'd missed.

“You're crazy,” Myrona said, as she tried and failed to regain her composure. “Attacking a white magic user with the Lasso of Kturoman— even a novice like Maleek—was brash. He could have *killed* you. I can't believe you acted so recklessly.”

“Yeah?” I groaned as I pushed myself up. “Well, if you had a baby brother—” she raised a silencing finger to indicate she wasn't finished.

“—But Andre, I understand even less why Maleek has forsaken your realm and mother's palace.”

“*House*,” I corrected.

“A *house* is a four-by-four building with a ceiling and *bathing*

room, no toilet required,” Myrona corrected. “But you—you sleep on cushions in towers you did not build.” Myrona shook her head. “Silver fountains in every other room. Lamps burn in wooden roofs that never catch fire. Ceilings blow winds in defiance of the weather itself. Lightning crackles inside the walls—” she glared at me. “At *worst* that's a palace and at best? A *wizard's tower*.”

I scoffed. “You don't understand—”

“I *understand* actions of the heart,” Myrona said with a dismissive wave. “That your brother would sacrifice a king's life to dwell among us ... Andre, doesn't that mean that his heart is indeed here?”

“By staying here, he's stealing a cousin, nephew, and uncle from a family. He's robbing a community. He has a heart for helping people? Good. California's got plenty of soup kitchens and homeless shelters, trust me.”

“And what about you?” Myrona asked, her hand sliding over mine. “Where's your heart?”

My face burned with emotion and I pulled my hand away. A confluence of old emotions I thought had died long ago burned my chest hotter than any anger, radiating to all my extremities. I told myself that it wasn't real, that *she* wasn't real.

“Look, I don't expect the *Thief of Lakarsha* to understand this,” I snapped. “But people depend on us. *Family* needs us.”

“How much help do they need if water flows *up* inside of walls and children run around with magical flat apple boxes?”

“What?” I asked. “Flat apple boxes?”

“Yes, *flat apple*,” she parroted condescendingly, as though I had been the one butchering the names of modern inventions. “It’s a white, flat, magic box that reanimates the spirits of its owner’s favorite bards—”

“White *apple magicbox*?” I shook my head in confusion. Then, I narrowed my gaze at Myrona. “Wait, I never said *anything* about *iPods*.”

“Why, sure you did—”

Her supposedly random visit at a time of vulnerability suddenly seemed far less serendipitous.

“—Maleek told you to come here, didn’t he?” I said, struggling to sit up. “You’re working for him.”

“*Work*? For someone besides *myself*?” Myrona scoffed. “I’ve never acted on anyone’s interests but my own.”

Contempt darkened her eyes to something between plum and brown. Soon, the amorousness gave way to a new heat: anger. Myrona had always been manipulative, but colluding with my brother was unforgivable.

“Out,” I said, pointing at the door.

“Andre—”

“I said *leave*!” I shouted as loudly as my broken body would let me.

She stood and regarded me with surprise.

“Fine,” she said, in a deceptively cool tone. She slammed the

key on the small table next to me and turned for the door.

“But we’ll see each other real soon.”

I had no patience for Myrona’s doublespeak and duplicity. I didn’t know why Maleek had sent her to my room and I no longer cared. If he wanted to play dirty, so could I.

\* \* \*

Once I was back in the real world, I met Ashanti at a burger joint in downtown Sacramento. Though the restaurant was next to some fancy boutiques, downtown construction that had been going on forever made the place nearly inaccessible by car or foot. It was one of Sacramento’s hotter days, so we traded drinks and burgers for iced smoothies and sandwiches. The industrial grunge of the half-finished buildings across the street was a welcoming replacement for Foreverland’s redundant greenery.

Despite the weather, Ashanti still wore men’s sweats. Her micro-braids hung just a foot from her waistline. Ashanti frowned as I hobbled to the table.

“Oh God, what happened?” she asked, her tone more accusative than concerned. She only grew more disdainful as I updated her on recent events and my new plan to rescue Maleek.

“This isn’t about Maleek,” she said abruptly. “This is about you being a control freak. You were so used to shouting Maleek around, but now you can’t and you don’t know what to do.”

I scoffed as Ashanti sipped her smoothie, something optimistically purple with lots of berries and a childish name. A server, young, casual, delightfully not goblin, approached our table and

asked if we were ready to order. I told her that we'd grab her when we were ready. Ashanti watched her leave before her eyes cut to me.

"Let's say this crazy plan of yours works," she said. "Let's say that Maleek *doesn't* notice that you swapped his water for water from this world the whole time. Let's say Maleek *doesn't* discover all the bottles of real water you've hidden around him as you replace his bottle each night. We know Foreverland water saps your memory and kills access to the portal, but we don't know if it works the other way around, do we? But if it's successful—and Dre, that's a huge *if*—you manage to drag Maleek back here, you will have a *lot* of explaining to do—"

"I'll catch him up on the years he's forgotten—"

"What about the time that he has missed?" She leaned over the table, whispering, though I doubt anyone would have heard us over the ruckus from the booth behind us.

"You're going to have to explain how that imbecile who lost the popular vote became president. You're going to have to explain *two* simultaneous American invasions, Dre. *Two*."

"Please," I said, dismissively. "Maleek was *not* political."

"Doesn't matter," Ashanti said, with a dismissive wave. "You'll still have to explain the Cedar Fires, Hurricane Katrina, that God-awful tsunami that killed all those people in Indonesia—Christ, he's going to think it's the *end times*."

"Let me worry about one thing at a time, please."

"Luther Vandross—dead. Rosa Parks and Lionel Hampton,

dead. Christopher Reeve—Jesus Christ, Andre—*Superman!* Dead. Your mother ..."

Her voice trailed off. Behind us, the table of unruly children with far more energy than home training burst into laughter.

"Well, if this world is so bad, then why aren't you *swashbuckling* it up with *Prince Maleek*?"

"Sure, I've thought of it," Ashanti said. "But it's precisely because this world sucks that I'm sticking around. My clothing line might never make the world a more comfortable place for women. But if I just *give up* and leave I'm just helping the status quo stay just that."

"That's what I tell Maleek."

"Maleek is different. Always has been."

"Yeah, he's my *brother*."

"That never stopped you from neglecting him before," Ashanti said. "Always called him *weak* ... demeaned him."

A toddler, probably from the same boisterous table behind us, ran past us clenching a solitary fry in his hand. He fell, got up, grabbed the half-eaten fry that'd slipped out of his hand onto the floor smeared with who-knows-what, took a bite, and continued running as he chewed.

"Do you know why Maleek didn't tell you when he'd discovered Foreverland?" Ashanti asked.

"He was scared I'd rat you out to our parents."

“No, Dre,” Ashanti said. “It’s because Maleek didn’t want to ruin the only escape from the bullies in his life—including *you*.”

For the third time in as many days, I was speechless. Me? A bully? I laughed. Ridiculous. Halfway into my explanation on why she was wrong, Ashanti rose, fumbling around her pockets, grumbling to herself.

“This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have come.”

She pulled out a ten and insisted on paying for her drink. I stood quickly, trying to pacify her in calming tones, but was still reeling from what she’d insinuated. Surely she didn’t think *I* was the reason Maleek had retreated into Foreverland.

“You know, you two inherited a lot of good from your parents, but neither of you have ever behaved well when you feel slighted.”

“Hold on Ashanti—”

“—Give Myrona my best if you must return to Foreverland, but Andre?”

She fixed me with a steely gaze.

“Stay *away* from Maleek.”

\* \* \*

The upstairs bathroom of my mother’s house had ebony doorframes and lavender-striped walls. Above the toilet was a picture of Cannonball Adderley, saxophone in his pudgy hands, eyes closed, his face clenched in an expression that looked as

though he was holding his breath rather than blowing it into the shapely brass instrument that obscured the bottom half of the picture. A painting of legendary conductor Dizzy Gillespie hung in the bathroom downstairs. Like my father, my mom loved all the jazz brass titans, not just the hard bop legends like Adderley and Gillespie. She saw something poetic in a black man breathing life into a quintessentially American instrument. “Just as we breathed life into the American economy, into the American revolution,” she loved to say. A public school English teacher for forty-one years, the barrage of facts never stopped even as dementia destroyed her mental faculties.

“Did you know that Monk Montgomery was the first musician to tour with the bass guitar, Andre? That and the saxophone are the only true musical instruments invented by Americans.”

Dementia is funny that way. She addressed me with one of my father’s nicknames more times than I could count, or didn’t recognize me, and then quite arbitrarily, she’d astonish me with these moments of astounding clarity.

Her biggest episode of recollection happened at a brunch at a casual dining Italian spot, of all places. In the middle of a banal conversation, she looked up from her angel hair pasta as she’d done so many times, but this time familiarity burned through the haze. For the first time, I felt as though she was really looking at me, instead of at an illusion.

“Take care of Maleek,” she said. “Despite what everyone thinks, he’s not as strong as he believes.”

This was over a year after Maleek stopped appearing even for obligatory family functions. Rumors of drug usage swirling in family circles had widened into maelstroms, yet this was the

most significant clue I'd ever gotten as to the level of my parents' suspicion about where their children had really disappeared off to. She hadn't said "pray for your brother" or "forgive your brother" as she was wont to do, but rather, "look after him" as though I knew where he was. Perhaps she had known all along, though it'd be impossible to figure out how. It certainly didn't take much to paint my brother as an addict: musically inclined, idealistic, aloof. He always had a vacuous look at family get-togethers, as though he'd been woken mere moments earlier to a room of strangers.

"He was a preemie, you know," my mother continued. "Your father insisted we were too old for one more." She shook her head. "Babies like that never truly adapt to a world as cruel as this one. It's why we were harder on you; we knew he'd need you."

It was hard not to roll my eyes; it's every parent's nature to overestimate their children's influence, just as it is natural for new parents to marvel over their macaroni necklaces and hang up their crayon scratchings on the fridge.

"You know your father and I fought over the name, but settled on "Maleek": it's Arabic for *king*. We knew what awful things people were going to call our son, and we just wanted to make sure that he'd be called great things, too."

This level of introspection baffled me. Even before the dementia, she had never been that transparent, especially with decisions involving my father.

I ordered more raspberry lemonade for myself, breadsticks for her, and caught up with the woman I hadn't seen in years. She told me how much she missed Dad, asked if I'd updated my

voter registration, and reprimanded me after I told her that "voting doesn't matter." It felt surreal at first, but I quickly grew accustomed to having my mother back, a woman who smiled often but laughed rarely, knew all the lyrics to every Motown song on the radio but never sang them; a woman who, despite marrying a disciplinarian and earning a reputation at the local high school for being a no-nonsense AP Lit teacher, lost all inhibition around candy corn. I got too comfortable too quickly, and after I excused myself for the bathroom, I returned to an empty booth.

She died a week later.

In her upstairs bathroom, I gripped the sides of the sink and stared at the mirror that had stolen so much of our childhood, this thing that had cursed us. I made a vow to my dead mother that I wouldn't return through that mirror until it was with my brother.

\* \* \*

I found Maleek some distance away from Treegoblintown on the bank of a river, hunched over a net of flapping fish. Weeping willows shaded the bank and I almost missed him in the overgrowth of cattails. When he saw me, his eyes narrowed and he stood.

"Truce," I said, throwing my hands up. "I don't want to fight, Mal, I just want to share the last days I can with my baby brother in peace. "Look," I said, holding up a thermos. "I even brought you a present. It's a thermos."

"I know what a thermos is, Andre," he said.

He stepped out of the tree's immense shade and eyed the powder

blue canister I gave him with suspicion.

I explained how the double-walled, vacuum-insulated technology kept all liquids cold or hot for twelve hours. Rotating it in his hand, his shrewd eyes rolled from my little Trojan horse to me. He twisted off the lid and peered inside its stainless-steel stomach. Frowning, Maleek pulled out a small white packet and waved it around. I explained how manufacturers stuck silica gel packets into nearly everything to prevent moisture from damaging goods. He tore the bag open with his teeth, seeming more concerned with the small turquoise beads spilling out than my explanation.

“You’ve never given me a gift,” he said flatly.

I shrugged. “All the more reason to take advantage of my last opportunity.”

This didn’t seem to sell it. Maleek continued turning the blue container this way and that. I held out my own thermos.

“Look, I’ve got my own, see? It’s magenta.”

As difficult as it had been to convince my brother I’d meant no malice, it was far more difficult to switch his thermos at night. We shared quarters in the same goblin treehouse, so I had to hide a backpack of thermoses with real world water in a ditch a fifteen-minute walk from his chambers. That meant every night, I had to walk half an hour in the dark to switch out his thermos with one of the identical thermoses filled with real tap water.

Gradually, the real-world water began to take effect. He grinned with faint recollection when I recounted his favorite aunt making self-deprecating jokes after burning a sweet potato pie the

previous November. On one of our river adventures, I called a beaver we saw paddling “Daggett.” He laughed so hard at the obscure Nickelodeon ’90s reference, I thought he’d fall off the boat. Maybe it was the crisp air or maybe it was the real-world water, but his spirits were noticeably lighter.

Once after a water rafting excursion, as we sat swinging our legs off a riverside boulder, I asked Maleek if he missed anything from home. His list was staggering.

“Sloppy taqueria burritos, lo mein, fried rice—anything with soy sauce, actually. Oh! And mosquito repellent—not a food, but it’d make outings to Lake Lipidipi far more enjoyable.”

He paused, his eyes moving searchingly. The fidgeting, the furrowed brow, the wince, it was cognitive whiplash from a person returning to themselves too quickly. Similar expressions preempted my mother’s brief reprieves from the fog of dementia. It finally felt like I was getting somewhere.

And then I ran out of real water.

Whatever recollection he had accrued would have to be enough to help me persuade him to return home.

The morning after we returned to Treegoblintown from the river, I asked him one last time to return with me. He rolled out of his bed and began to get dressed.

Maleek spoke, his voice as cool as the river we’d canoed down a couple days prior.

“The other day I had an insatiable desire for some New York style cheesecake.” He shook his head. “Probably couldn’t have

even told you what it was before you last left. But since you've been back, it's *all* I can think about." He pulled up his pants and fastened his belt. "I don't suppose that's a coincidence."

When he faced me, his eyes were clear, focused, and laden with grief.

I sat up on my haunches and eyed my brother as he began putting the pieces together.

"Do you really think these pervasive thoughts are going to help you win me over?"

Fists balled, he took a tentative step toward me, and then another much slower one.

"What ..." he said, his voice hoarse. His legs quivered as they locked themselves in place. Already the magic was working its way up from his hips.

"Take a look at your belt," I said.

Arms visibly shaking, he twisted the belt upward in their loops, and frowned at the strands of rope stuck to the insides of his belt.

"Is that from ..."

"The Lasso of Kturroman?" I asked, finishing his sentence. "Yes."

He rolled his eyes. "You are so *unoriginal*." He glared at me, completely bound by the rope's magic. I let him tire himself out before I held up a scarf.

"Now, are you going to come quietly, or do we need this?"

\* \* \*

We reached the prairie where the portal was at sunset. Winds rustled the long golden grass around us and when they stopped, I heard nothing: not the hoarse roar of traffic, not a bullfrog's croak, not even the chirp of a cricket. The silence was almost stifling.

I unloaded Maleek from the carriage, shouldering him like a rolled-up carpet, and winced at the stench of livestock. I'd done my best to steal a faster cart back in Treegoblintown, but the only empty I could find was the farmer's cart.

After laying Maleek beside the cart, I pulled out the eyeglass I'd taken off him and began looking around for the portal. Its edges were as golden as the prairie in which we stood, so the trick was to catch sight of the portal's top half against the blue sky. Unfortunately, I'd arrived a lot later than anticipated, and the sunset colors bleeding into the sky from the horizon did me no favors.

"She's really dead, isn't she?"

I lowered the eyeglass and glanced back at my brother. Straw stuck out of his locs, and under them, a face like that of a son of a recently deposed king waiting his turn at the executioner's sword.

"Yeah," I said, quietly. "Ma's gone."

My brother buried his head in his arms and wept.

Perhaps too late I saw how cruel my plan seemed. To unlock a

lifetime of Christmases and family gatherings and board game tantrums and chicken-noodle remedies and Take-Your-Son-To-Work Days only to tell him that he's an orphan? It was a hell of a thing to do.

Maleek had managed to pull his knees to his chest and was resting his arms on his knees. The magic lasso's hold was beginning to wear off.

"I know it's all hitting you at once, but you'll feel differently once you're back home, Mal."

"Oh, dearest brother," Maleek said, pity slowing his cadence. "It is not I who will return home today."

I returned to the eyeglass with an unshakable feeling that his retort and my sudden inability to find the portal were related. He continued speaking, babbling mostly, his mind warped by dueling realities hostilely juxtaposed.

"We all deserved more than a hamster wheel of bills, mind-numbing entertainment and afterlife promises. Even Dad. He deserved more."

Hearing him mention our father greatly disquieted me, almost as much as the finality in Maleek's tone. I could not remember an instance of my stomach turning so abruptly. In fact, I couldn't remember an instance of me even being sick at all. *Ever.*

I lowered the eyeglass and turned to Maleek.

"Mal, what have you *done*?"

He looked at me with world-weary eyes, and a wry grin appeared under the spill of ebony locs.

"I assure you, brother, *I didn't do anything.*"

If he hadn't switched my water while I was switching his, then who'd done it? I kept my thermos on me at all times, even using the satchel that held it as a pillow while I slept. The thought of one of those simpleton tree goblins deftly pulling my thermos from under me as I slept to swipe out its contents was so risible that I scoffed.

Night came. The magic of the lasso had completely worn off, but my brother made no attempt to subdue me even though my back was to him. Arcs of radiant cosmic energy streaked indigo across the sky. The sky's palette complimented the golden aura of the portal, yet I still couldn't find it, couldn't even hear the goldenrod crackling sparks.

"It's around here somewhere," I said to myself.

I only had to stay patient and vigilant. I'd find it soon enough.

# A Bargain's a Bargain

by Gerri Leen

Rumpelstiltskin and I stare  
At my sleeping husband  
He breathes but lies unnaturally still  
"I wish this were not so peaceful,"  
Rumpel says, and I understand why  
His wife and children's deaths  
Were brutal, and ordered by this  
Man who locked me in a room  
To spin straw into gold—or die  
I wept at first, but then I began  
To make bargains

"Everyone believes I have  
Bested you," I say as I take his hand  
Rumpel smiles, his idea: the last  
Prize, my son and Rumpel's name, servants  
Seeking high and low until one  
Oh so conveniently finds him  
Dancing and singing and his name  
Is part of the lyrics  
It was easy to spread the word  
That in anger Rumpel tore himself apart  
When I bested him

"I hope for your sake the child takes  
After you, my dear" and I hear the  
Fondness in his voice, the care he

Now has for me commingled with  
The idea that vengeance finally  
After so many years, awaits  
I hand Rumpel the pillow and he  
Holds it over the hated face of  
My husband, the king  
The struggle is brief, the king has been  
Sickly—from poison provided  
By Rumpel, administered by me

"How does it feel?" I ask Rumpel  
Even as I draw my knife  
"Like my life is complete—nothing  
Else left to do" and there is true  
Peace in his voice, in how he sits  
Until I reach around and slice his  
Throat from ear to ear, his blood  
Turning the white pillow scarlet  
He dies without another sound  
Falling onto the king, linked in death  
Just as surely as in life

All around me I feel a mist that wavers  
Between blistering and freezing  
Sense hands on my shoulders  
This was who answered my prayers  
This is who I have made the bargain with

"The sacrifice is accepted, royal breath  
Snuffed out, royal blood spilled"  
A king and the rival for the throne  
A rival he deposed, killing his family, but not  
Rumpel, even if he thought he had  
"And I am free?" I ask, wanting to  
Wander, wanting to be free of men  
Who would trade, trick, and kill me  
"Yes, but not as you imagine  
Your Royal Highness"

Then the spirit screams in my voice  
And guards rush in  
The knife drips in my hand and  
For a moment I am frozen  
Then I find my voice  
Blistering-freezing energy pushing it  
"He killed the king, he would have  
Gone after the prince next—our  
New king" I drop the knife and  
Put my hands over my face, crying  
Because I never asked for any of this

But then I see my son, carried in by  
His nanny, safe and free of both these  
Greedy and vengeful men  
The nanny curtsies to me, a deeper one  
Than she gave me as Queen Consort  
"Your orders, Ma'am?"

My next words will set the tone of the  
Years between now and when my child  
Ascends, so I nod as thoughtfully as I can  
Then ask the guards to take care of the  
Body of the king and the body of his rival  
He would have been my son's rival too  
How long would my boy and I have  
Lived if Rumpel were alive and  
A claimant to the throne?  
"I must clean this blood off me"  
I reach for the knife to clean too—because the  
Life of a Regent is fraught with perils  
Who knows when I may need it again?

# So That We May Remember

by Rina Song

Mom never let me touch the tapestries as a kid. She worked on them every spare moment she got, sitting at the loom while boiling rice for dinner, picking out yarn colors while dressing me for school. When I came home, she'd have thread tangled in her hair.

"Grace, *tuō xié*," she'd say, taking off my shoes. "And don't touch the loom."

Mom mostly wove scenes from China, her homeland. Her work was filled with clouded mountaintops, horses running through golden wheat, ruby-roofed cityscapes swarming with people. On my sixth birthday, she gifted me a tapestry of my own. I watched with bated breath as she unrolled it.

It was the simplest image Mom had ever made: a brown field, bare except for a tiny hut and some chickens. I said nothing, fearing punishment, but Mom must have sensed my disappointment. She sent me to bed early, tucking her gift over me like a blanket.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself on a straw futon surrounded by packed dirt walls. A woman sat nearby, weaving at a loom much like Mom's.

"Where am I?" I asked, frightened. "Where's Mom?"

The woman ignored me, working the loom like a farmer at the plow, pushing on the wooden lever to press the threads into place. At last, she cut the cloth free and turned to me.

"This is for you," she said in Mandarin. "Happy birthday."

As my fingers brushed the tapestry, there was a flash, and I woke with a gasp. I was back in my bedroom in New Jersey, with its box spring mattress and drywall. Mom hovered over me.

"Mom! I had a weird dream. I was in a house made of dirt. There was this lady weaving just like you. She seemed to know me."

"That must've been Grandma," she chuckled.

"Grandma?"

"You see, Grace, these tapestries are magical." She pointed at my birthday gift. "That is the hut I grew up in. I took the memory of my own sixth birthday and wove it into cloth, to be passed on through dreams. Our family has practiced this art for generations. I'll teach it to you someday, as Grandma taught me."

And so I came to learn of Mom's most closely guarded secret.

Uncle Bao probably didn't believe in magic. He wasn't my real uncle. I didn't even know my real father, who Mom had left behind in China. Uncle worked in construction and often picked me up from school, leaving me to do homework on the sidewalk until his shift ended.

One such day, a man approached me. He had a lean face and wore a dark cloak. The effect looked strange, like a wizard from my picture books.

"Are you Grace Tian?"

Mom had told me not to talk to strangers. I focused on my spelling worksheet.

"I'm looking for Lian Tian. I heard she weaves wonderful tapestries, and I'd like to buy one."

The man smelled like smoke, and I found his gaze hard to meet. I leaned over, gripping my pencil.

"Why don't you answer me, little girl?"

Panic bubbled in my chest. I edged away, and his gaze followed me like that of a predator's. Suddenly, Uncle called my name. When I looked back, the stranger had vanished.

I told Mom after dinner that evening. "Someone was looking for you."

She frowned. "What did they look like?"

"He had a black cloak and smelled bad, like burning eggs. He asked about your tapestries."

Mom interrogated me for details, growing paler with each answer. Then she leapt up from the loom.

"I must talk to Uncle Bao," she said, and hurried away.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, I came home to an apartment full of cardboard boxes. Mom said we were leaving. Uncle Bao argued and pleaded, but she was adamant, and so we moved from our sleepy little neighborhood to Harrison, a wealthy suburb forty minutes out from Manhattan. I'd never seen so many cars or people in my life, bustling through grids of asphalt and white picket fence. Mom stopped letting Bao drive me. Instead she sent me on the aging school bus, armed with a rickety cell phone for emergencies.

Our new apartment only had one bedroom, but the rent was much higher. It took Uncle a month to find another construction job, which was a ninety-minute drive away. He didn't come home until dinnertime, and left again before I awoke for school.

Then one morning, the crew was understaffed, and Uncle tried to lift a hundred pounds of bricks by himself. A disc in his back slipped, leaving him crippled on the asphalt and ending his construction career. We won some settlement money, but something in Uncle had soured permanently. He began drinking more, and his words turned bitter—always aimed at Mom's cooking, or the clothing she wore that day, or the noise I made getting ready for school. *Noisy brat*, he called me.

"He's so cruel," I cried to Mom. "Can't we get rid of him?"

"Don't say that," she murmured. "He keeps us safe. Who else

would take care of us?”

“You can,” I protested, but Mom shook her head. She hadn’t looked for a new job since we moved. Instead she spent entire days at the loom now, studying notebooks as she worked. She had dozens of them in her closet, filled with spidery handwriting.

“These hold historical events that your great-aunts and grandmothers recorded,” she said. “But ink fades and those memories will eventually disappear. This is our family duty, to preserve stories before they are forgotten.” Calluses dotted her hands, making them resemble those of a far older woman.

I hated what had become of Uncle Bao, but I loved Mom’s stories. She wove images of burning palaces, warring armies. In class I doodled junk ships in battle, imagining myself as Ching Shih, the pirate queen.

I met Theo and Bella shortly after we moved. I was in the school library during lunch, reading a copy of *War Stories in Ancient China*. Someone tapped my shoulder. I looked up to see two kids, a boy and a girl.

“What are you reading?” the boy asked. He had dark, close-cropped hair and wore a green Minecraft shirt. His friend peered owlishly over his shoulder, her hands hidden in her oversized hoodie sleeves.

“Uh ... it’s about the Battle of Yamen. This general, Zhang Shijie, accidentally burns down his fleet and loses the Song Dynasty’s war against the Mongols. The pictures are pretty good, except Zhang looks too heroic. He actually cried like a baby when he realized what happened. I saw it myself.”

“Uh ... alright,” the girl said. “Are you studying for a test or something?”

“No,” I replied, confused.

The boy coughed. “Well, I’m Theo and this is Bella. We’re playing Smash Bros. on my new Switch, but we need a third player. Wanna join?”

And so we started hanging out. Theo and Bella were Chinese-American too, and sometimes Theo invited us over for dinner. His house was huge, with a new flat screen TV and a basement room just for gaming. Theo’s dad was a dentist and liked telling funny stories about his drugged patients at work.

One day, when I got back from school, I heard shouting in the apartment. I ran upstairs to find Uncle standing in the doorway, holding an empty bottle. Mom faced him from the living room, her face stony.

“This move has ruined our finances and my health,” he snarled. “We’ll be thrown out on the street. Isn’t that enough for you, you stubborn witch?”

Mom’s voice was level. “Grace and I are not going back. It’s not your decision to make.”

Uncle swore and stepped towards her, raising the bottle. Panic flooded my thoughts. I leapt between them and brandished my ratty phone.

“Stop it! Don’t come any closer or I’ll call the police.”

Uncle Bao stared at me for a long time. Then he walked off, and

I never saw him again.

“Are you okay?” I asked Mom. She didn’t respond, but her eyes were red and puffy as she led me inside. We spent the rest of the night in silence.

\* \* \*

The next day, Mom called a handyman to install a heavy bolt on our door. Drilling sounds filled our apartment. Afterwards, Mom heaved the metal beam shut with a grunt. She looked ridiculous.

“Mom,” I said finally. “Are you scared Uncle will come back?”

She gazed at the giant bolt. I doubted she’d gotten permission for it. Then she sighed. “Well, you’re old enough now to understand.”

We went into the kitchen, where Mom grabbed a pot and began boiling rice for congee. She often made it when I was sick. “Bring me that tapestry there, next to the vase,” she said.

I obeyed. The tapestry looked very realistic, almost photographic. It showed a Chinese village square, perhaps from the 1960s. A pile of burning books sat inside, with columns of smoke spiraling upwards like messages to heaven. In the center stood a green-suited soldier, his face a mask of grim duty, aiming his gun at a kneeling man.

“As you know, we weave the tapestries to preserve history. But there are those who want things to stay buried. Some of them came after us in China.”

Mom passed me a bowl of congee.

“We lived in a small mountain village in Shanxi province. Few travelers visit there. But one day, several men broke into the house. They wore strange cloaks that flowed and shifted as if woven from the shadows themselves.” She shuddered. “They were looking for tapestries. One man beat your grandmother’s hands and arms with hot coals so that she couldn’t weave anymore. I still remember the way it smelled ... I managed to escape with some possessions, but I never saw my family again. I fled China soon after.”

I gasped, horrified. “What’s so important that people would come after you and Grandma to hide it?”

“There is a certain Chinese politician vying for the open Central Committee seat this year. He’s spent the decade gathering support within the CCP. But his family has a long history of involvement in the country’s social and military conflicts, sometimes committing unspeakable acts to further their agenda. I believe he paid the shadow men to hunt us down again and erase anything that could hurt his chances.”

Mom was scaring me. I didn’t know what to make of her story. Sweat beaded on her forehead, her expression twisted like a madwoman’s.

“What are we going to do?” I asked.

She squeezed my hand.

“You were right. I am strong enough to protect us both. This is our family’s burden to bear. But you’ll need to help me. Be a good daughter and listen to me always, okay? In this world, we can only trust each other.”

I swallowed more congee, feeling it warm me from within.

“Okay.”

“That’s a good girl,” Mom said, and kissed the top of my head.

Learning more of Mom’s secrets changed me. I felt myself standing taller, like destiny weighed upon my shoulders. I took a job at the neighborhood bodega, restocking sodas and potato chips to cover the bills. Mom wouldn’t leave the apartment anymore, so I went with Theo’s mother to buy groceries. These shopping trips filled me with guilt. She thought Mom was sick, and against my protests would always pay at check-out. Meanwhile, Mom labored at the loom with renewed urgency. I wondered if she felt the shadow men would burst in any day now.

I still saw Theo and Bella during study halls. I hadn’t told them Mom’s secrets. I knew I didn’t belong to their world, one without magic or tortured family missions. But I lived for those moments, joking about teachers we didn’t like or the new boy Bella was crushing on, just to keep the illusion going.

Until Theo told me they weren’t going to study hall anymore. They had a conflict.

“Test prep class?” I repeated. “Why? The school year just started.”

Bella stared at me. “Uh, the SAT? We’re seniors now, the college prep hunger games started months ago. Didn’t you know?”

“Oh,” I said blandly. “Already?”

Theo elbowed her. “Of course Grace knows. She just doesn’t need that stuff ’cause she’s not a dumbass like you.”

I laughed as Bella sputtered, but still felt queasy. At home, I found Mom at the loom as usual. I took a deep breath.

“I want to go to college.”

She shook her head as if warding off a fly. “What? Where’d you get that idea?”

“Theo and Bella.”

Mom frowned at me.

“Your friends are smart and ambitious. So are you, *bǎobǎo*. But you’ve a duty to uphold. What would college give you?”

I thought about the promises in the brochures Bella had shown me: new social circles, unlimited opportunities. Freedom.

“I could start a career and work a real job. Provide a better life for us.”

“What’s wrong with the life I’ve given you?”

This was where I messed up.

“It’s not *my* life,” I blurted. “Can’t I choose for myself?”

I regretted it immediately. Her face darkened.

“I didn’t have that luxury at your age. I didn’t *choose* the family destiny hanging over my head. You’ve inherited a great honor, and you should be grateful.”

She said something else, but for the first time in my life, I didn’t

want to listen. I couldn't stand it any longer. I turned and walked away, leaving Mom's words dangling between us.

\* \* \*

I cornered Theo at his locker. "I need help. I want to go to college."

He furrowed his brow. "Is this a joke? I gotta get to class."

"No." I stammered, and the truth came tumbling out. "Look, no one in my family went to college. I didn't realize I wanted to until you guys talked about it. But I don't know where to start, if I can afford it, or if I can even get in anywhere."

Realization slowly dawned on Theo's face.

"Well," he said finally, "Rutgers University has an agreement with the community colleges. You spend two years getting an associate's degree, then you can transfer in guaranteed. It's straightforward if you keep your grades up."

"What, really? You think they'd take me?"

"Yeah, it's just community college. Don't worry about it, I'll even help with all the paperwork."

I felt a warm rush of gratitude. Maybe things would turn out alright after all.

That feeling didn't last long. That evening, Mom came to my bedroom. A pit grew in my stomach. We hadn't really talked since the argument.

"Grace, *guòlái*. It's time to begin."

I blinked at her dark silhouette. "What?"

"Your first weaving lesson. Didn't you want to learn?" Mom's hair stuck out at odd angles. She looked like she hadn't slept in days.

The guilt knotted further, twisting in on itself. I *had* wanted to, once. But Theo was supposed to call soon and go over my college application.

"No," I said. "I have to study for my history exam this week."

"I thought you were excited to start. Isn't this more interesting than schoolwork?"

"I'm behind," I lied. "It's just not a good time."

Mom looked surprised, but walked off. As the door closed, my gaze wandered to the bedroom wall. The birthday tapestry still hung there, with its little hut and flock of chickens. I couldn't shake the image of Grandma's spirit residing within that fabric house, watching me.

In May, Theo got accepted to Princeton University. I'd also gotten into community college, so we got dinner downtown to celebrate. But while he kept going on about Princeton's student dining clubs, and the Gothic architecture, all I could think of was Mom's disappointed face.

"You'll be fine," Theo promised me as I poked at my food. He always made me feel foolish for doubting.

But it came crashing down when I got back to the apartment. Mom answered the door wordlessly, holding out her phone. The acceptance letter from NJCC flashed on the screen, and my heart sank. I must've left my email logged in at some point.

“You applied to college?” Mom’s voice shook. “Why?”

The jig was up. I summoned my courage. “I told you I wanted to go. Theo helped me.”

Mom slapped me across the face.

The sound seemed to echo forever. As I dropped to my knees, numb with shock, Mom yanked me inside and screamed.

“You stupid, foolish girl! What did I tell you about listening to me? How could you betray your own mother like this?”

Every word felt like a red-hot whip across my back. I couldn’t recognize the stranger before me, screaming, raving.

“When you’re done with school, you will stay where I can keep an eye on you. You will not leave my sight, speak to anyone, or even breathe without my knowledge—”

At that last sentence, something inside me finally snapped. I snatched the phone from Mom’s fingers. Taken aback, she cowered against the wall.

“I will do no such thing,” I said, surprised by how steady I felt. “You can’t choose for me. I *will* go to college. After this summer, you’ll never see me again.”

\* \* \*

I called Theo, and his parents let me move in the next day. I never found out what explanation he gave them. Maybe they’d gotten enough hints about my family’s finances over time. That summer I stammered through mealtimes, fumbled with the laundry, and generally tried to stay out of the way. I wondered if they could sense my shame from running away. That I was a bad daughter.

Mom texted sporadically, first demanding I come home, then accusing me of betrayal. I’d become physically ill until Theo pried the phone from my cold hands. Every night I had the same dream: faceless figures breaking down Mom’s door, their cloaks of darkness extinguishing the sun. The sizzle of burning flesh played against my eyelids, over and over until Theo shook me awake, my face covered in tears.

The college semester started. I did well enough to transfer to Rutgers for the spring semester. On the day Theo and I were supposed to leave, a backpack appeared on his doorstep containing the remaining clothes I’d left at home. Buried at the bottom was my birthday tapestry, the one with the little hut on it. I winced and stuffed it back in. I’d had enough of Mom’s guilt-tripping.

His parents dropped us off at the train station. Theo hugged me and promised to visit over the weekend. Then we parted ways, and I boarded the train to New Brunswick.

When I stepped off the train, I found myself in a red brick jungle. Suddenly I was one of thousands of new faces, and a single wrong turn left me wandering campus for half an hour. After my first two-hundred-person lecture, I stumbled into the bathroom and threw up.

But gradually, that panic faded. Bella was my roommate, and she introduced me to her friends in the campus hip-hop dance crew. They visited during my work-study shifts in the dining hall, bringing gifts of pizza and conversation. Late at night we traded stories of home, argued whether Los Angeles really was nicer than New York. I could almost pretend my old life was fading away, like a bad dream.

The week before finals, Mom texted me. She wasn't angry. She just said she'd been feeling dizzy, and was leaving the apartment for the first time in years to see a neurologist.

*But don't worry about me, she said. Enjoy your studies. Love, Mom.*

It sent me spiraling, the guilt eating my thoughts as I laid awake at night. Would Mom be alright without me? Was I at fault, for making her worry and causing her health to collapse? My mind warred with itself. In my worst moments I thought she was faking it, weaving more stories for sympathy. Then I felt horrible, and the cycle of guilt would restart.

I tried to lose myself in school. I picked social work as my major and did an administrative internship at a juvenile detention center. The following year I helped some of the inmates apply for college themselves. In this at least, I could be proud: I'd rejected the future Mom had set for me, but still chose to build a better, kinder world for others.

\* \* \*

I stepped off the bus, wobbling under the weight of the grocery bag. It was now my junior year, and the fall semester was draw-

ing to a close. The sun was setting; a brisk November gust bit at my nose, and I hurried down the street. Theo was waiting for me at home, and I thought longingly of the red-braised pork dish we would soon be making. It would be our first cooking night after moving in together.

As I rounded the corner, a block away from the apartment, something felt off. The wind had stopped blowing. Everything lay oddly still and silent. My skin prickled as movement flickered in the corner of my eye. A man-sized shadow, drifting by the lampposts across the street.

The shape was gone as soon as I blinked, but anxiety was already thrumming through my veins. Like a ghost from long ago, I heard Mom's voice again in my head, recounting stories of the shadow men. Burnt flesh. Murder.

I sprinted down the street in blind panic. Before I knew it I'd reached our front door, and the sight snapped me out of it. What was wrong with me? This was the real world, not one of Mom's horror stories. I gathered myself and opened the door.

The first thing I saw was Theo's frightened gaze darting back and forth over his duct-taped mouth. He huddled on the ground, his hands bound by rope. As I glanced up, I made eye contact with the man standing over him.

He had a perfectly ordinary, human face. But his cloak shuddered like a living thing, its edges wavering and insubstantial, and the smell of smoke filled the air. The worst part was his smile, eager and hungry. I recognized that look, and I felt it again, the raw fear of a young girl on the sidewalk.

“Hello again, Grace,” the man said. “My, how you’ve grown.”

My tongue felt numb. “What do you want?”

“No time for pleasantries?” He tilted his head. “I tracked down your mother, but her poor neighbors tell me she’s in a care home now. Too sick even to accept visitors, apparently. So I had to come to you, the last of the history-weavers. Do your family a favor, and put this tired legacy to rest.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The tapestry, girl.”

I shook my head dumbly. The man sighed and pressed his boot into Theo’s shoulder. There was a crunch. Theo gave a little groan that shot through my stomach.

“I-I’ll get it from my room. Just don’t hurt Theo anymore.”

The man smirked, knowing, as I did, there was nowhere for me to run. My legs felt like jelly. Theo was in danger because of me. Mom had found the courage to run when the book burners went after her family. I couldn’t even keep my hands from shaking as I climbed the stairs.

I searched my bedroom aimlessly. I hadn’t spoken to Mom in years—I didn’t have anything to offer the man. Then in the back of my closet, I found a ratty old backpack. It was the one Mom had given me for college, three years back. A bitter taste filled my mouth. After all the misery Mom’s legacy had brought us, I’d never see her again.

I squeezed the bag, and something soft inside it gave way. Con-

fused, I pulled out a bundle of cloth. It unrolled, displaying a blocky brown shape sitting in a field. A sliver of morning sun crept over the shape’s roof. Chickens poked in the grass, oblivious to my grief.

As I looked down at my old birthday tapestry, the idea struck me.

I walked downstairs with the bundle of cloth. The shadow man had been waiting patiently, and his eyes glittered with greed.

“Hand it over.”

“No problem,” I said, and threw the tapestry over him.

The man yelled a muffled curse and clawed at his face. I hurled myself at him, shoving him to the ground as he writhed and tangled himself further in the cloth. He lashed out with a kick, and I fell back against the wall.

He finally freed his head from the tapestry, staggering back to his feet. He’d just reached for the gun at his belt when a peculiar change came over his face. First there was a look of confusion, then pure anguish while the tapestry worked its magic. I felt every woven memory flashing through him, forcing into him the weight of our family’s pain. Somewhere, Grandma’s heart was breaking too. The man finally sunk against the wall, sobbing.

I hurried over to Theo. His face was stark white, but I managed to hoist him up. We staggered out of the apartment into the cool evening air. I let the door slam shut, leaving only the sound of crickets.

“I don’t know how long that’ll hold him,” I panted. “We need to

call the cops. Theo, give me your phone, I can't find mine—”

He slapped my hands away from his coat pocket. Stunned, I took a step backward. Theo swayed, pale from the effort.

“Don't touch me.”

“What's wrong?”

“Are you serious?” Theo snarled. “Grace, who is that guy? Why'd he break into our place? You-you're not with the *mafia*, are you?”

I opened my mouth. Theo looked so hurt, so confused, and I wanted to explain so badly. I owed him that. But the only words that would come to mind were the ones Mom had said over the kitchen table, so many nights ago.

*This is our family's burden.*

“I'm sorry,” I said at last. “But I can't tell you. It wouldn't be right.”

“Nothing? Nothing at all?”

I didn't move.

Theo's face twitched, like he was ready to fall apart at any moment.

“After all these years,” he said. “I let you sleep in my *house*. But I don't know you, Grace. I don't know you at all.”

Then he limped down the sidewalk, and I watched as the last of

the sun's rays disappeared over the horizon.

\* \* \*

“So he just walked out on you after it all happened?”

Bella looked glum as she swept up remnants from a shattered glass. We were cleaning up the mess left behind, first by the shadow man breaking in, then by the police barging in once I'd placed the call. Bella still wore her dance practice gear.

“Don't take it out on him,” I muttered. “His arm got broken. I'm sure he'll come around eventually.”

Bella frowned. I didn't like the look she gave me, searching my expression, trying to pick it apart. “Tell me again what happened with the home invasion. Did you know the guy?”

“No.”

“Yet he was looking for something, you said. Something you had.” Bella bent to pick something up. It was the tapestry, still lying in a tangled mound where the police had tossed it.

“I told you, I have no idea what he was talking about.” I pinched my temples. A headache was beginning to worm its way through my skull.

“But that makes no sense. He targeted your apartment, tried to hold Theo hostage, and you don't know why? Do you think you got mixed up with someone? Had a run-in with some criminals you didn't know about?”

“Does it matter?”

“Well, maybe you left something out.” Bella fumbled with the tapestry. It was knotted up well and good.

“Why would I do that?” I muttered.

“Because you hide stuff from me and Theo all the time. Like everything between you and your mom.”

My blood turned cold. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do.”

“What’s this got to do with the break-in?”

“Nothing! We’re just worried about you!” Bella growled. “You flinch whenever we ask about your mom, you stopped hanging out with us because you were working at the bodega twenty hours a week, and you made Theo help with your entire college application in secret! You came to class with that bruise on your face! Did you think we never noticed?”

A flash of rage came over me. “That’s none of your business,” I snarled, and lunged for the cloth bundle.

She yanked it away. My fingers snagged on the corner of the tapestry at the wrong moment. The thread came undone with a wet rip, and soon a giant hole appeared in Mom’s work.

I froze as the tapestry drifted to the floor. The little hut was torn in two. There was a moment of silence as I stared down at the gap, an awful void hanging in time.

“I’m so sorry,” Bella choked. “Maybe we can fix it—”

“Get out!” I dropped to the floor, grasping desperately at the fallen cloth. “Why didn’t you listen to me, you clumsy moron? Don’t you realize I might never see Mom again? This stupid tapestry could be all I have left of her. She’s sick, she might never weave again, she ...”

I trailed off as tears bubbled up in my nose and throat. All around us were the pieces of the wrecked living room. Bits of splintered wood cut into my knees. Bella’s lip quivered as she stared at me, her eyes huge and glassy. I was reminded of Theo’s face, terrified and white as bone.

I’d lived my life like it was a little hut in the mountains. When others peeked through the windows I closed them off and locked the door. I could see how the rest of it was going to play out, cold and distant and lonely.

Just like Mom.

I sank to the floor. Arms wrapped around me. It took a moment to realize they were Bella’s.

“Take your time,” she said.

I took a deep, shuddering breath. Then I told her everything.

\* \* \*

Gravel crunched underneath the Uber’s tires as we pulled into the driveway. Even from here I could tell the yellow paint on the residential home’s doors was peeling, SUNNY DAYS HOME CARE barely visible in sun-bleached letters. I thanked the driver, retrieved my backpack, and made my way up the sidewalk.

Inside it smelled suffocating, a mix of potpourri and Lysol. The bored teenager at the front desk directed me upstairs. I walked past rows of identical doors, my heart pounding. Bella had spent hours rehearsing this moment with me, building up my courage, but there was no replacement for the real thing. At last, I reached the end of the hallway. After what felt like an eternity, I pushed the door open.

Mom had lost some weight. Two pillows cushioned her thin body from the wall, and her hair, tied in the familiar haphazard bun, had gone almost entirely gray. In the six years since that fateful summer, the version of her I remembered was gone, replaced with an old woman.

She jumped as I entered. “Grace, is that you?”

I nodded, setting my backpack down by the bed. “Hey, Mom.”

Shock flashed over Mom’s face. She sat up and squinted, as if she couldn’t believe I was really there. I tentatively stepped forward, holding my arms out.

“Where have you been?” Mom exploded. “After disobeying me, running off with that boy, and disappearing off the face of the earth, you dare come back now? Didn’t you ever think about how that affected me?”

Reality slammed me like a hammer to the face. This was who Mom had always been, angry, combative. How could I expect anything else?

Then I realized Mom was sobbing.

“I was so worried,” she continued. “After you left, I had no

company other than myself, no one to talk to. All I could think about was how I’d forced you, my only daughter, out of my life. I didn’t think you’d ever come back.”

Silence hung like fine china on string. I wet my lips.

“Well, when I first heard you got sick, I was still angry. I was scared of what I’d say if I came to see you. Then I was ashamed, and the shame grew every year until I felt like I could never come home again. Now so much time has passed. It seems like I never know how to fix things until it’s too late.”

Mom smiled, tired and sad. “That’s what growing older feels like, doesn’t it? Every day you wake up with that voice in your head, saying you’re running out of time. There’s always something you should be doing, something missing, but you don’t know quite what. Never mind that for once. Tell me the history I missed.”

So I told Mom about my years at Rutgers, the pains of finding an apartment in New York, and the frantic, caffeine-laced pace at my consulting job. She laughed when I told her about when Bella found a rat in her closet shortly after we’d moved in, and the years seemed to fly off her face. But a question weighed on my mind.

“Were you okay living on your own?” I asked. “Did the tapestry hunters ever find you again?”

Mom sighed. “I moved between apartments as often as I could, given my health and the trove of history I was guarding. When I grew too weak, I hid the tapestries somewhere safe, sold my loom and other possessions, and came to this care home. They didn’t go after you, did they?”

“No,” I said, not wanting her to worry, but she narrowed her eyes.

“I can still hear it in your voice when you lie.”

Guilty, I looked away, but recited the story of how the shadow man had come after Theo and I in college. Mom turned stark white.

“I knew bringing you into the weavers’ legacy was dangerous. At the time I was so desperate to replace the family I had lost and give you a more stable life than the one I’d had. If I could do it again ...”

“It’s okay. I’m not angry about that anymore.” I paused. “Well, I still am, sometimes. But sometimes I think I understand your side, too. Anyway, I wanted to ask a favor.”

I reached for my backpack and pulled out a bundle of cloth. Mom’s eyes flashed with recognition at her old handiwork. Her face fell when I revealed the little hut, split in two by the jagged hole. As Mom looked on, I brought out a sewing kit.

“You gave this to me to take away for college. It saved my life. I don’t know if the magic still works without a loom, but ... I’d like you to teach me how to fix it. If it’s possible.”

“Ah! Of course.” Mom beamed. “Yes, the principle should be the same. Come here, let’s put this piece of history back together.”

Mom talked me through the process of pulling apart the threads at the edges, how to whisper my intent and story into them as I bound them back together, and how to feel for the magic when everything locked into place. The hours flew by, and when it was done, the shadows in the room had lengthened into great dark fingers. As I finished the final knots, Mom grew silent. When I looked up I saw that she’d fallen asleep, her thin chest rising and falling underneath the blankets.

There was still work to be done, I thought, but there would be time for that tomorrow. I folded the tapestry gently over Mom’s body, turned off the lights, and slipped out of the room.

# Unabashed Appetite

by Lynne Sargent

Blodeuwedd,

so oft reimagined  
I wonder how many share your frame:  
if you take after Galatea,  
or are entirely your own.

How many of your ripples  
have taught young girls to love  
the monster that the world,  
that men, made of them,

to lasciviously lick their talons  
to revel in the strength of their crushing grip

to love leaving feathers,  
not flowers in their wake

to claim the night and all they can rend  
with each incarnation,

each hungry, pretty mouth.

# In the world of snow

by Sonali Roy



# Alakhani

by Ananya Kashyap

Serpents stir the forest mire  
as they twist through the bamboo grove.  
Tick, tick tita'pa't,  
the ground pulls at your heels  
each step deeper into the earth,  
closer to fire and brimstone.  
And somewhere  
beneath the mushroom's shadow  
she waits – watching sagaciously,  
her breath held too long, waiting.

A motley little crowd of men  
have arrived and slipped away.  
They never hear it –  
her quiet laughter, light as spores  
it dances, whirls, spirals,  
twists and slips past their ears until –  
there it is.  
Closer this time.

A phantom's feet do not touch the earth,  
it frolics through the clay.  
You feel her tap, but when you look,  
there's nothing but the air.  
A tingle climbs up your spine,  
But wait!  
It all slips away.  
Good night.

You wake, tangled in mud,  
not knowing where you ended  
or how the day began.  
Somewhere, faintly, a titter –  
but when you turn,  
she's gone.  
You never really met her.  
But you know she was there.  
And you know you'll never be the same.

*Alakhani is a female spirit that lives in a bamboo grove, hiding under a small plant about 8 inches high. This plant is called "alakhani bah" in Assamese, meaning the cell of Alakhani. She is a playful spirit who loves to go on adventures. Whenever she comes across a man, she possesses him.*

# My God, What Has Happened?

*-Princess Diana's final words, Pont de l'Alma Tunnel, 31st August, 1997.*

by **SJ Townend**

Mikki was sure her parents blamed her for her little sister's drowning. But hadn't it just been the water's fault? The water had been too deep, or perhaps too cold, and her sister had been so very small.

After the drowning, Mikki was made to take meals in a separate room. Her parents no longer bought her extravagant birthday gifts and stopped letting her have friends over for tea. Mikki knew. Mikki felt it, their condemnation, like a pressure building up behind her eyes every time she tried to breathe.

Shortly after her eighteenth, Mikki told her folks she was applying to study at Sorbonne University, three hundred miles and a Eurotunnel away, and would only be returning to the family home in London for a few weeks each year. Mikki wished to escape. It was time to move on.

"I'll be leaving just after the '24 Olympics have finished," she told them one Sunday after Church.

"You'll need to apply for a student visa," was the only comment her mother made.

\* \* \*

And it wasn't Mikki's fault either, was it, the most improbable event she witnessed during her first week in France as she walked parallel to the River Seine on her way back to her student digs after a long afternoon of solitary sight-seeing and museums and a trip up the Eiffel Tower?

The evening was warm but heavy with rain. Fastening her belt a little tighter around her waist—she was glad she'd worn her Mackintosh—Mikki marched on as cars streaked past her like restless ghosts, not stopping, as if oblivious to the outside world. And as a silver Audi sped by a little too fast, a little too close, it delivered a surge of groundwater all over Mikki, which caused her to look up and swear.

Mikki was unsure whether to believe her own eyes: it couldn't be, could it, our late Lady Diana, walking down the central reservation? But Mikki knew that sometimes dark things *did* happen, odd things, awful events that don't fit into reality or align with one's desires or needs.

After steadying her nerves with a mindful breathing technique a bookish crisis counsellor had shown her years ago, she ran closer to offer help, stepping over drifting discarded paper cups demarcated with the Olympic rings and the occasional pollution-stained memorial teddy bear. On coming face-to-face with

the dishevelled woman who moved like oil on water, Mikki realised it really was her. She gasped, took off her rain jacket, and draped it over Diana's shoulders. The princess said nothing though, nothing at all, just stared up and off, into the distance, with her chin dipped bashfully to her chest.

After escorting Diana to safety at the side of the road where she collapsed onto the rain-slick pavement, gasping for air as the rest of the city held her in its indifferent embrace, Mikki dialled 112 from a pay phone, and, in broken French, alerted the authorities.

Yes, the woman was away from traffic now, no, she wasn't drunk or on drugs, and, yes, yes, she was sure it was Diana, Princess of Wales, alive, if a tad bloody and scathed. Yes, it was without doubt the same Diana who'd crashed into the Pont de l'Alma Tunnel in a black Mercedes-Benz and died nearly thirty years ago.

The gentleman on the end of the phone asked Mikki to remain at the scene—an officer would be dispatched shortly—but as the sound of sirens screamed louder and blue light bounced off the looming infrastructure, Mikki panicked. She told Diana—blood-slick, bruised, and vacant but very much alive—to keep the coat. “Just wait here, someone is coming to help.” Mikki's words came out staccato, too fast. Then she apologised and deserted Diana there, at the roadside, and through heavy rain, ran all the way home.

The next day, Mikki was glued to her television. Rolling news displaced regular programming on every channel. Each channel, each feature, showed at some point the same clip: Diana standing in front of the hospital, her bandages stark against her pale skin, her delicate, limp hand acting as a shield to the flash-

ing lights as hundreds of cameras clicked at her in disbelief. She was alive. She remained silent, but she was miraculously, impossibly, alive. The headlines screamed of angels and miracles.

\* \* \*

The Pont de l'Alma Tunnel had been closed to traffic ever since the officers had gently bundled Diana into a bulletproof, unmarked vehicle the night before, yet the place was still littered with media: hungry journos all hopeful to interview someone, anyone, who had a firsthand account of what had happened. Shots of the tunnel broke up inane ramblings from religious zealots and old footage from when Diana had been alive the first time. The tunnel, now taped off at either end and guarded from outside from every possible angle, became out of bounds to the public as investigations began to unfurl within. Stories and interviews from people who had known people who had known a person who may well have witnessed what had happened the night before were spewed out all day, along with the same clip of the Princess standing outside of the hospital.

Later that night, twenty-four hours or so after Mikki had abandoned Diana at the tunnel's mouth, new footage was shared over every television network. This footage was not the same rehashed three minutes of a lost, undead Princess standing outside of the hospital. It was fresh.

Captured on camera this time, another Diana emerged, another drifting Queen of Our Hearts. The nation watched on, astonished from many different angles, as a second Diana gracefully walked out of the tunnel's portal.

Out she walked with the same unkempt elegance as Mikki had witnessed the night before, her eyes wide, but vacant, as though

she had just awakened from a dream.

“Diana?” the thick crowd of reporters whispered, then shouted.

But Diana Number Two, her figure an uncanny echo of the first, said nothing.

The world convulsed with shock. Journalists shouted questions, their voices rising above the rain which continued to fall. “Who are you?” news anchors asked, and the cameras clicked and flashed, capturing the ethereal figure standing silently before them.

The press swarmed the scene, of course they did, before this second Diana was taken away with a heavy police and army escort, and the world gasped again.

In the twenty-four hours that followed, the world paused, and the city trembled, though it was hard to truly say why. Diana was surely not a threat to anyone, but the world knew that the dead usually remained dead—Jesus, Son of God, had been the only other person known to resurrect. And although Diana symbolised many things to many people, Diana wasn’t Jesus, was she? Diana surely couldn’t be a relative of the Lord.

A sense of something unwelcome settled in the air. But no one dared to speak of it aloud.

\* \* \*

By the third evening, there was not so much a sense of global disbelief, but more an inkling of international fear. Mikki hadn’t left her bedroom where she’d remained gripped by the screen. From her digs, she watched her television as a third Diana ap-

peared. Princess Diana Number Three, her hands trembling, her blue eyes wet around the edges. And, just like the others, this Princess too remained silent and held out her hand in calm protest and turned away from invasive microphones and intrusive questions thrust in her direction.

To the rest of the world, perhaps, according to those interviewed in between rotating footage of all of the new Dianas, the Pont de l’Alma Tunnel had become less a piece of infrastructure and more a wound, leaking out something awful, shelling out grief and memories of grief, the cobblestoned road running through it sleek with an unknown, hidden purpose. Mikki, quietly, watched on, breaking only to glance at a treasured photo she kept by her bedside: her and little sister years ago, held forever together, smiling, in an ornate filigree frame. But Mikki wasn’t smiling now. And Mikki wasn’t upset. She just felt empty inside.

By the fourth night, disbelief and a scratching of fear had given way to utter dread, according to the media. From her room, wrapped in her quilt, Mikki stared at the news feed as another Diana appeared from the tunnel. This one also looked weak, as she stood there in the rain, as all the ones who’d come before had, and her tears came harder than the rain, streaking her face like delicate fissures. She also spoke to no one. She didn’t need to. Her presence was enough to silence the crowd and drain the last of the light from the wet night sky.

Each night, another Diana. Seven by the week’s end. They were multiplying like reflections in a broken mirror, each one carrying unbearable weight. Each new Diana seemed to reflect a different aspect of grief: the calm acceptance, the silent rage, the trembling sorrow, and the hollow stare of one who had seen too much and had no way to process it. In their eyes, the sadness of

the world began to see itself.

The phenomenon continued. Paris became a mausoleum. Bouquets of wilting flowers clogged every public space; under the shelter of the entrance to the tunnel, candles burned until wax puddled in the gutters. The city drowned beneath the collective mourning of a world that had forgotten how to stop. Mikki barely left her room apart from brief trips to the shop through the rain to purchase food. She watched her television all day and night, did her best to speak to no one. She just lay there, eating processed snacks, trying to stay hydrated, following the news.

And, of course, more news rolled in, from all corners of the globe. Nations erected monuments in Diana's honour; children in far flung villages the other side of the planet recited Diana's name as though it were prayer. And all the while, in Paris, and in every other country, the rain never ceased.

Like the nightly appearance of a new Diana, the rain became a constant presence—impossible to ignore and impossible to escape. It soaked into every stone, every human soul, carrying with it the load of the unbearable loss of the original Diana and the spiralling confusion of her frequent nightly reappearance.

News anchors stumbled over phrases like divine intervention and second chance. People spoke of fate, of destiny, of forces beyond comprehension. But the city of Paris did not speak. It never did. It simply endured. No one knew why it was happening. People only stared at the new Diana each night, and clung on to a world where the certainties of life, and death, felt suddenly, inexplicably fragile.

All the time, Mikki remained tight in her room, not crying, not

really sleeping, just numb, and just watching, always watching, as the rest of the world dipped into a mass, hysterical period of lament. The presence of the Dianas reflected back every sorrow humanity had ever carried. People wept openly in the streets and strangers clung to one another in grief. It was as if the entire world had become a funeral procession that never ended.

Alongside deep sadness and fear, a strange, solemn global unity developed. Nations paused their wars and communities embraced. But grief is a double-edged blade, and with a new Diana appearing each night, soon it began to cut too deep. The constant sorrow grew unbearable. The mourning, like a swollen river, began to overflow its banks and the beauty of grief curdled into resentment.

\* \* \*

A year passed, three hundred and sixty-five Dianas had walked out of the tunnel, but only the first hundred or so had been blue lighted away. Around this time, Mikki was kicked out of university and returned home to stay again with her parents. They'd moved her belongings into the tiny bedroom and there, she lay in her bed, as she had done in Paris, only leaving her room to gather enough sustenance to keep her body functioning. Like a ghost she operated, drifting from her room to the kitchen and back. Continuously, she followed the news. To her, and many others, it became an obsession.

The French police didn't have space for any more Dianas and the British government took a long time to decide how they should react. Over two hundred Dianas wandered aloof around Parisian streets and alleys, and each evening, from the tunnel which had had to be reopened for "financial purposes," another princess drifted out.

“Enough,” whispered the people, eventually. They’d given up trying to find a cause and the question of how was this happening shifted fully to why. *The tunnel and its produce make us all feel so bad.*

It began slowly, with whispers in government halls and editorial rooms. The Dianas were too many, their presence too overwhelming. “Send them home,” the Average Joe yelled. They were disrupting life, pulling the world into an endless metaphorical night, so laws were passed. The Dianas were rounded up and deported, herded into a detention centre, *Camp Diana*, on the outskirts of London.

At first, there was outrage from more liberal-hearted folk. Protests erupted, voices cried out for compassion. But soon, even those voices fell silent. The world yearned for normalcy, for a life where they could laugh without feeling the weight of a thousand tragedies pressing on their chests.

And of course, the camp became a prison, a place from which the Dianas were not allowed to leave. Each new drifting princess, no longer a media fascination, was deposited and left there and, over a period of time much shorter than you would think, forgotten about; forgotten by everyone except a few folk of aristocratic descent and Mikki. A distant noble had initially taken in the first Diana, Diana Number One, but, in a one-off news’ conference, he’d declared the situation unsustainable: “Diana, if it is indeed Diana, never speaks. Taking her in has created ‘insurmountable tension’ between my wife and me.” The word “divorce” was bandied about by the press for a fortnight or so, which at least gave brief relief from the coverage of the Tunnel. The wellborn kept away from media attention after that, choosing to barricade themselves into various grand buildings up and down the country.

In their military-run base, the Dianas stood behind iron bars, each in her own numbered cell, their collective eyes still wide with that same haunting mixture of decorum and sorrow. They did not age. They did not die. They simply existed, eternal embodiments of grief, waiting for a world that no longer had room for them.

And the world moved on. Monuments were taken down, streets renamed again. The Dianas were a relic of a time no one wanted to remember, and when a new Diana emerged from the tunnel, she was met not with cameras and bouquets but with the same cold silence with which she greeted the world. Passersby averted their eyes, hurried their steps. People stopped going near the Pont de l’Alma altogether. The tunnel became a dark scar on the city, a place avoided in hushed fear. The rain still fell there though, every day and night, but it felt colder, more deliberate in its descent. The news channels turned their attention to other stories, of re-emerging wars and political unrest and local burglaries and the side-effects of injectable weight loss drugs, as if trying to help the world forget by wrapping them up in some other pain. But still, the Dianas kept coming.

\* \* \*

But Mikki remembered Diana, her Diana, Diana Number One. And Mikki had grown to feel responsible over time for abandoning that first Diana. What if she’d handled things differently? What if she’d stayed, and had managed to get Diana to talk? Maybe *she* could have found out why this was happening. Maybe things wouldn’t have turned out the way they had— Yes, Mikki thought of that first Diana for most of her waking moments. But when she slept, fitful nightmares filled her head: dark dreams of never-ending rain and her little sister.

One day, on a whim—or perhaps guided by some unseen force—or perhaps triggered by the sad iced bun with a solitary candle in the top that her mother had brought up to Mikki’s room the night before to celebrate her twenty-first birthday—Mikki woke up and too declared, “Enough. Enough of whatever this is,” and decided to make her way to the forgotten camp.

For a few quid, in an attempt to generate revenue to keep the facility operating humanely, one could take a trip inside. Not that anyone did, other than the occasional bored tourist wanting to get out of the perpetual rain.

But Mikki sensed a calling, so off she set, out into the rain.

\* \* \*

As she entered the large tatty building, taking note of the internal layout from a map at the entrance and paying the machine her small fee, she realised she hadn’t really spoken to another person other than her mother and father for weeks, wasn’t even sure if she could formulate proper sentences. What was she going to say to her Diana, when their eyes finally met?

The cells were arranged in descending order, with the most recent Diana the first one she encountered. But this wasn’t the Diana she needed to visit; Mikki felt this in her heart. Mikki snaked her way down the long ground floor corridor as fast as she could. The Dianas watched her with their solemn eyes, unblinking, unchanging. Some of them gripped and shook their iron bars. Others turned away and tossed themselves like graceful leaves onto their identikit basic beds as she walked past. Mikki felt the weight of their gaze, the unbearable sorrow that radiated from them like cold light. Most of the Dianas, ageless and unyielding, stood behind their grills, close to their grills,

with eyes as steady as the rain that continued to fall outside. Their silence was palpable, a language of grief Mikki recognized intimately, and she wasn’t quite sure, herself just numb inside, exactly how this all made her feel.

She made her way up each staircase and along the dimly lit corridors and followed the faded signage, until on Level Twenty-Three she found the Diana she was looking for, her Diana, Diana Number One.

Mikki stood and looked at Diana, still lost for words, quite unsure what to say. She hadn’t thought this far ahead, hadn’t come prepared with a speech. She just knew she had to be there, had to visit her Diana.

Diana #0000001 moved closer to Mikki. Diana’s body, pressed against the bars, was so frail, a fractured artefact, and her sad, sad, face was a pale echo of something both divine and human.

“I see you,” Diana Number One whispered, her voice as gentle and tender as a sacred hymn. Mikki inhaled sharply and took a step back. A solitary tear rolled down the Princess’ drawn cheek. “You’re safe, my darling girl. I’m not going to hurt you—how could I? Trapped here, behind these cruel bars.” Mikki stepped in again closer and placed her hand up against Diana’s raised palm and touched Diana’s fingertips with her own through a gap in the metal rails.

“I’m sorry,” Mikki said, and then it came to her, what she needed to say. “I’m so sorry I abandoned you, on the roadside when you needed my help.”

Mikki felt grief rise within her, a tide she had kept at bay for too long. Tears streamed down her face as she broke contact with

Diana's hand and fell to her knees. And in that moment, she thought she understood, perhaps: The Dianas were not a curse but a gift—a reminder that grief, though painful, is also a testament to love. Grief is what is left to remind us of connection, of the spaces left behind.

Diana said nothing else, just drifted back over to her narrow bed where she lay down gracefully, like a swan. Then she turned her back to Mikki and sighed.

“Thank you, Your Royal Highness,” Mikki curtsied as she spoke, “for your thoughtful words.” Then Mikki, tears webbing down her face, turned her own back on Diana and made her way out of the building, only to find it still raining outside. But as the rain fell, to Mikki, it felt lighter, as though the sky itself had learned to let go.

\* \* \*

That night, a creature of habit, from her bedroom, Mikki clicked on the news. A new story came at eleven pm, live from Paris, from under Alma's Bridge. The rain had finally stopped and no Diana had emerged from the tunnel that evening. No Diana, after nearly four years. “Could this mean no more harbingers of sorrow?” the news anchor posed, a broad grin upon his face. “Have we finally seen the last of miserable old Lady Di?” Mikki hadn't stopped crying since she'd returned from the Diana detention centre, but paused from her sobbing to stand up and switch the television off. *It's over*, she thought, exhaling slowly as she got back into bed. Maybe she'd get some rest that night. Maybe now the bubble of her own grief had been burst open, she could finally reach a state of dreamless sleep. How soft Diana's palm had felt against hers, how encouraging the sound of the Princess' voice had been.

Mikki thought back to the dank night they'd first met, at the tunnel, in Paris. The image of the tunnel which had been on the television every day for years and had haunted her ever since, though still dark and ominous in her mind's eye, perhaps now held the promise of passage.

\* \* \*

The next day, Mikki set off to the lake a few miles from her family home. She wanted to say goodbye to her sister properly, and now seemed like a good enough time, the right time, seeing as how for the first time in years the rain had ceased. She hadn't visited the spot since the drowning, all those years ago. Perhaps Mikki was ready to face the world again? Perhaps now, she could find some direction, a purpose, despite the grief she now felt and would always feel? Maybe, as something to focus her energies on, she could campaign for the release of all those poor Dianas? *There must be space in society for them somewhere*, she thought, *especially now the situation has come to some sort of conclusion, been ringed off, contained?*

The lake looked the same as it had nearly fifteen years ago: vast, bleak, cold. She sat by the water's edge on top of a knitted blanket with a Thermos of tea and a packet of gingernuts and looked out. “Goodbye, Lilliana,” she whispered, and then the right words came to her again, “I'm sorry.” And there, out in the centre of the large body of still, grey water: a scruff of wet hair, a face, a neck, a chest. Her sister, Lilliana's chest. Out of the water, towards Mikki, her sister rose, her eyes lit like blue stars, her skin pale like the clouds. Lilliana was soaking but dressed exactly as she had been—the red sundress—all those years ago, before the pair of them had set off for a picnic by the lake, before Lilliana'd had a tantrum and had insisted on going swimming and had fought Mikki off in her attempt to hold her back.

“Lilliana? Lilliana?! Is that you?” Mikki stood and strode out with open arms towards the water as her sister moved, like oil, oil through water, through and out of the water, towards Mikki.

“It is you. Lilliana!”

And it was Lilliana, Mikki’s eight-year-old sister, it was, it really was. Lilliana. Lilliana, bruised and vacant, her blue eyes wide, looking up at Mikki hazily through thick black lashes, as if she’d just awoken. But Lilliana did not speak. Lilliana’s head tilted downwards slightly, her chin dipping bashfully to her chest as if she had something to hide—

Mikki waded in, took her sister’s hand, and led her out of the lake and back to the grass, the both of them shaking greatly. On the lake’s verge, on the blanket, Mikki took off her jacket and draped it over Lilliana’s shivering shoulders and sat at her sister’s side. Lilliana still said nothing. But Mikki wouldn’t dare leave her sister’s side; wouldn’t leave her there, again, with the silence of the water, to sink back into the water.

Mikki hugged her sister. Shaking, crying, shocked, Mikki felt she was being gifted a second chance. And she wouldn’t run away, scared off by splashes and screams as the water pulled her sister under again, like she had done all those years ago.

Mikki promised Lilliana she’d sit and wait, right there, until her sister became silent no more. She’d remain by her side even if her sister never spoke again, like she hadn’t last time, when Mikki had watched on, watched on, watched on, from the back of her mother’s car as three firemen dragged Lilliana’s body—lifeless, limp, and blue—out of the lake.

Mikki would stay by her sister this time. For as long as it took

for the water on her skin to dry and for the words to flow again from her mouth, which she hoped they would, because this time, her sister was breathing. Lilliana had a little colour returning to her cheeks, Mikki was sure she did; was certain, wasn’t she, that she could see a hint of pinkness there below Lilliana’s eyes, on her otherwise wan visage? They sat there together, side by side. “I’m sorry,” Mikki said. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Mikki apologised until her throat and her own words ran dry. *Lilliana’ll speak eventually though, won’t she? Surely she will, just like Diana had done*, she thought.

With the blanket huddled around them, the sisters sat there, by the lake, until the sun sank and the moon shone. And Mikki sat there with Lilliana until the sun rose the next day, until the balled sun judged down on her like the light at the end of a tunnel. She promised herself she’d wait an eternity to hear her sister speak, and in a way, she already had.

The tea long drunk, and the biscuits gone, Mikki noticed how tired, how vacant her sister looked. Perhaps she needed more food, and warmth? Perhaps now was time to go home and break the news, the good news, yes, Mikki was certain it was good news, to their parents. As Mikki looked at her watch—nearly twenty-four hours had passed since she’d first arrived at the lake—the Heavens opened and again, the rain began to fall. “Come on sis,” Mikki said, her words draped with hesitance, “let’s get you back to Mum and Dad’s.” They’d understand. Surely, they’d understand and be glad that Lilliana was back. Lilliana nodded slowly and as Mikki helped her up from the ground, Lilliana pointed out to the water, to the centre of the lake, as a scruff of wet hair broke its rain-dappled silvery skin; a scruff of wet hair followed by a wan face, a neck, a red-clad chest.

Time slowed down for Mikki. Her breath caught in her throat as

Lilliana Two, with empty blue eyes, her small body bruised and scathed, waded towards them, out, out, of the water.

\* \* \*

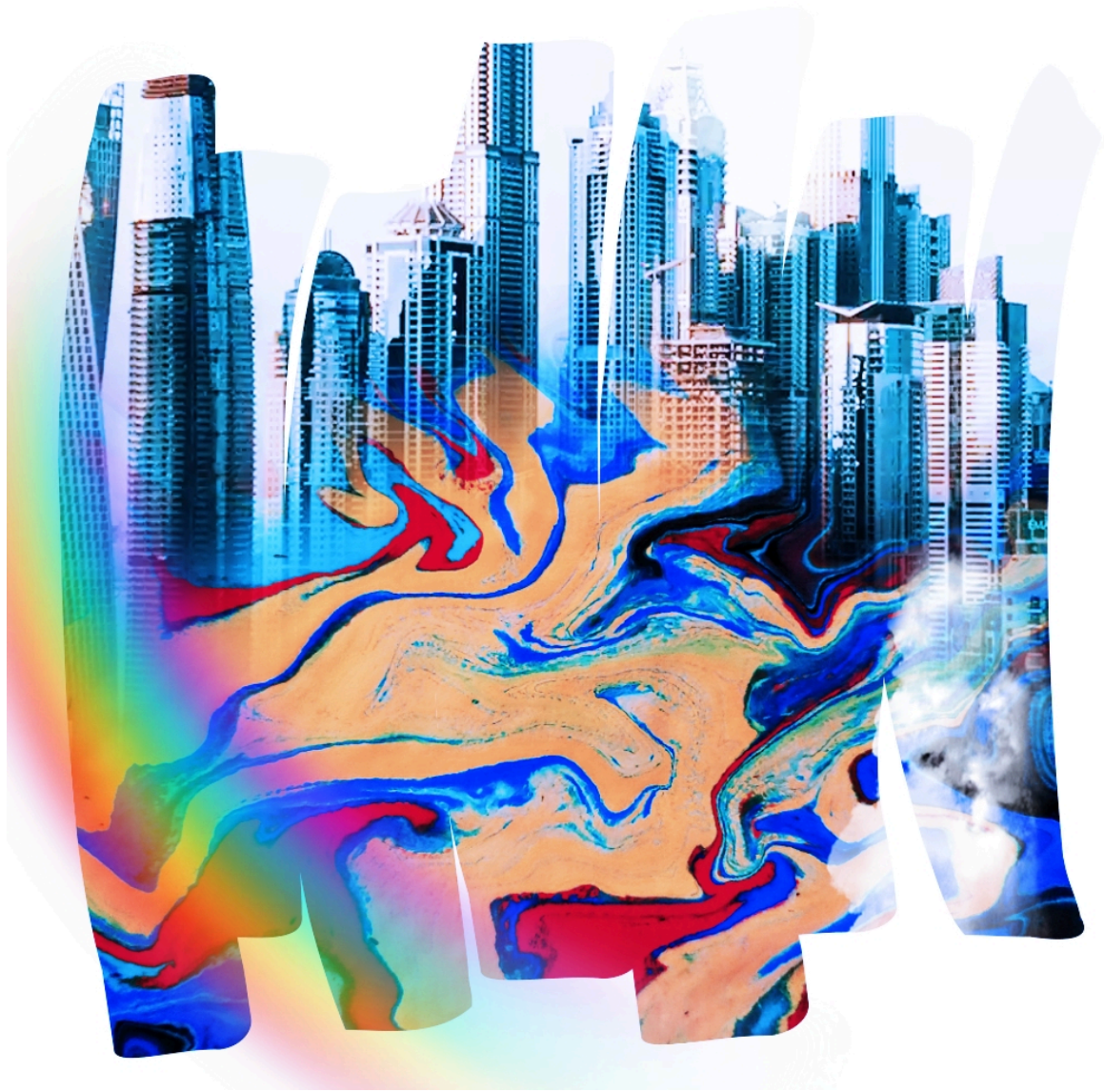
And that evening, beneath the Alma Tunnel in Paris, where shadows murmured and rain water once more sang, another Diana emerged. This Diana carried a candle which retained its

flame despite the harsh precipitation, and her figure floated forwards like a sigh through mist. She moved, a secret born of moonlight, drifting past a mother who, with eyes as wide and as grey as the sky, turned to her child and whispered, "Do not look, my love, do not let your gaze meet with the illusion," and bade the child to turn toward the horizon where the world was safer, where reverberations of the dead lost before their time had not yet come to harrow.

# In the wake of this decay

by Mahaila Smith

The lake blooms with gasoline seams,  
flames catch on islands of lard and lint.  
The art of this place disintegrates, microfungi  
take over our limbs, our obligations.  
Contamination like breathing,  
pinches our nerves, unbidden.  
Passenger, new growth, infection.  
Let in the air, please,  
indoors becomes intoxicating.  
Spores suffocate the familiar world.  
Clinging to ceiling fans, attracted to light.  
Rooms spin at neuralgic speeds.  
Hands slip in punch bowls,  
broken glass slicing an open palm.  
Stumble through brimming corridors and  
crowded hospital waiting rooms,  
through uneven stitches to staunch the bleeding.  
Through beds, behind closed doors, calling out for anyone.  
A warning passes through message boards,  
sidewalk chalk, graffiti on homes.  
Whispered by those, fearing it is already too late.  
A last request, please,  
  
stay outside.



**Cacotopia** by Carl Scharwath

# The New Air

by Neil James Hudson

At the time I met Roshina, we didn't even have a body. Ellia Kazbadi was missing, but we didn't know if she was dead or had just defected. Either way it was serious.

I did not want a partner on the case.

"As you are fully aware, Ellia was working on new air at the time of her disappearance," said the suited figure in front of me. "All endeavours in this area, whether scientific or criminal, are subject to cross-national co-operation."

I looked at her through her face-plate. I already knew Roshina was a senior figure in the High Resenberg police; too senior for my liking, as if they already knew more than they were letting on. I saw what appeared to be a scar on her left cheek; her hair was dark, but I couldn't see how long it was, and the helmet wasn't clear enough to show any other features. I already wanted to rip it off her face and see how she coped with some real air. "There's a treaty you intend to honour?"

"If you are referring to shift in the air border, this is clearly a natural phenomenon. The territory remains yours, even if only we can breathe in it."

"That's rubbish. Everyone knows you've been working on electrostatic manipulation. You've found a way of moving the air around--further into our territory."

"Come, Inspector. Balaria has also been working on such a device. But that is not our concern. I have warned you of the dangers; perhaps we should return to the matter in hand."

I wished I had a helmet myself. She would always have the advantage over me, hiding her face within a protective hood, whereas I had to display my every reaction. I tried to control myself.

"Ellia Kazbadi," I said. "Thirty-four years old, single as far as we're aware. Senior lecturer in Comparative Biology at the University of Balaria; with a nice sideline in Biochemistry. She made her name improving emergency procedures for people caught in Resenberg air; dozens of people owe their lives to her. Then two years ago she shifted her focus to new air."

"At which point we appointed a High Resenberg advisor to work with her," said Roshina.

"As you say, such investigations must be cross-national. Two days ago her advisor, Gravia Dolinda, turned up to work to discover all Ellia's work destroyed, and Ellia herself missing. She alerted us immediately, but we've found no trace of her. In Balaria."

"You have my assurance that she has not sought asylum in High Resenberg, nor do we know of her presence in our country, legal or otherwise. It may be that your security services intervened, if

she was close to going public with her research.”

I wished I could read her face. I had no idea how far she was putting on an act. I suspected she knew exactly where Ellia had gone. “More likely yours,” I said. “Your own scientist is unharmed, after all.”

“I think we should speak to this Gravia first,” she said, and I could not think of a reason to disagree.

\* \* \*

Gravia too wore a breathing suit, which made it difficult for me to tell the two women apart. When we arrived, she was packing various mementoes into a cardboard box.

“You’re leaving us?” I said.

“The project is over. Ellia may be alive, but with her work destroyed, the university has closed the project.” She spoke with a thicker Resenberg accent than Roshina, with shortened vowels and without diphthongs.

“You were working with Ellia on new air.”

“Supposedly.”

“You don’t believe in the concept?”

Gravia put her hand to her helmet. It was the gesture of someone who did not live in a suit full time; she had expected to straighten her hair or scratch an itch, and had not expected to find the face-plate in the way. “All our research suggests it’s impossible. The respiration systems of Resenbergians and Balari-

ans depend on two different gases. Simply mixing the two together can keep a subject alive for about half an hour, but after that the impurities in the air, necessary for the survival of one race, become a fatal toxin to the other. This was thought of as insurmountable, until Ellia discovered the secondary respiration system.”

I momentarily concentrated on my own breathing. As far as I could tell, I had a single set of lungs, taking in a single air. I could not conceive of the idea that I might have a dormant system in reserve.

“It is redundant, like the appendix, yes? But Ellia believed that the system could be switched back in the presence of the correct mix of gases. And the system was very similar in both races. If the gases could be identified, Resenbergians and Balarians could breathe the same air.”

I breathed out sharply, aware once again that I was displaying my feelings far more than the other two. Roshina asked, “Did you ever feel any pressure to stop your work?”

Gravia shook her head; her helmet moved far less than she intended, but the gesture was still clear. “The university gave permission for the project. My government gave permission for me to join. If anyone wanted to dissuade us from the research, they could have done so more subtly and at an earlier stage.”

“What do you think happened to her?” I asked.

“I think she is in High Resenberg.” I could only guess what expression had passed on Roshina’s face. “She was a friend of my country, Inspector. I am sure she loved her own, but she would often tell me she had the wrong lungs. We frown upon such talk

here, but I think your ways are more lax. I think she simply walked out of her old life.”

“And how near were you to completing your work?”

She gave a small laugh, an expulsion of Resenberg air that stayed within her suit, to be recycled to something she could breathe. “The new air. It is, how shall I say? A bullshit.”

We thanked her for her time.

\* \* \*

Later that day I found out for myself how the border was moving.

Sometimes I kept away from it, taking a slightly longer route home. But today I wanted to walk along the edge. I wanted to watch where the air met.

The two airs did not mix, and specific environmental features kept them apart; local features caused an updraft and a temperature differential that had proved highly robust in forming an atmospheric border. There were always small variations, but it was around the southern edge of the agora. Resenbergian air was slightly darker than Balarian; I could usually tell it by sight if I was paying attention. It also had a slightly different scent; the Resenbergians called it sweeter, but I thought it smelt of compost. I also had the sense to carry a detector with me, and besides, you could tell if you were breathing the wrong air.

But the first sign I had that something was wrong was the crowd. Usually the agora was filled; now people had gathered in the northern half, staring at the air as if it were a rival football

team. Some shouted anti-Resenberg insults; I noticed that the few suited figures in the agora stood apart from the Balarians.

There were always small variations where the two air systems met; sensitive detectors displayed the exact position of the air border. But this was more than the effect of the currents. This was a deliberate encroachment of our territory.

Ignoring the alarm that went off on my tablet, I walked into the thicker air. I could smell the rot as it entered my nose and lungs; there was no doubt that I was breathing the wrong air. Nonetheless, this was my country. I felt that I had to walk to the border, the real border, just to assert the boundary that was in force.

I walked further in, holding my breath against the foul odour. I reached down for my inhaler, ready for an emergency blast of Balaria. I fixed my lips around it and puffed.

Nothing. My inhaler was empty. I turned round, looked at the crowd. No one had come any nearer to me. Involuntarily I found myself breathing in. My lungs were already beginning to protest; this wasn't air, this wouldn't sustain me. I knew I had to get out of the agora but found myself collapsing to my knees. The toxins were already making their way into my system.

Suddenly I felt hands under my armpits, and a strong suited figure pulled me back to my feet. I tried to walk as she dragged me away, but I probably did more harm than good. “Idiot,” I heard her say, and knew it was Roshina.

She dropped me heavily into a chair in a café on the edge of the agora and went to buy us coffees and a blast of clean air. The

barista looked with suspicion but took her money.

I felt recovered enough to speak. “You knew this was going to happen.”

“I knew you needed keeping an eye on. I told you, this is an atmospheric phenomenon. We are studying it closely.”

“I bet you are.” I inhaled deeply, then started on the coffee. I knew I should thank her, but I said nothing more.

“Let us leave the declarations of war to our governments. What did you think of what Gravia said?”

“I agree. The new air is nonsense.”

“I meant about Ellia.”

I collected my thoughts, sipping at the coffee again. Being near the border this café often had Resenbergian clientele, drinking through the filters in their helmets. There were none here now. “I agree about that as well. We’d know if she were in this country. I think we should look in High Resenberg.”

Roshina nodded. “I will make the arrangements.”

“What did Gravia mean about frowning upon talk of friendship?”

She put down her mug and closed her filter. “Have you wondered why you have been paired with a Superintendent Commissioner rather than a mere investigating officer?”

“Well, it had crossed my mind. In the past I’ve worked with an

Inspector Devan.”

“Mr Devan made some poor career choices whilst in your country. We may frown upon friendship, but in matters of security we frown very hard indeed.”

“Oh. Where does that leave you?”

“Do not imagine for one second that I am being friendly.”

I didn’t.

\* \* \*

This time I was better prepared when I entered Resenbergian air. We crossed through an official border station, where the air was properly measured and I did not find myself poisoned through my own breathing. For a few minutes, Roshina and I were both in suits. I had to put mine on before it was safe for her to take hers off. Only outside the building, after a technician had taken the air readings, did she remove her helmet, shaking her head to allow her hair out. It was shoulder length, but she seemed to be older than I had realised. Her scar was deep, blemishing what might have been an attractive face, but I did not dare ask her how she had gotten it.

“Your helmet suits you better than mine suited me,” she said.

I looked at her through my face-plate. “I find it stifling. The sooner I’m out of it the better.”

Roshina turned up the corner of her mouth, a gesture I had not seen before. “It can be arranged.” She led me away from the border station. “We will collect your papers from the police sta-

tion, then I will show you to your room. I take it you will want to visit the university tomorrow?”

I nodded, then realised that my helmet would not have moved so much as my head. “Yes. Ellia visited there often, didn’t she?”

“The arrangement between the two states was mutual. Although most of the work took place in your country, exchange visits here were part of the deal.”

“Did she have contacts with anyone else while she was here?”

“We didn’t spy on her.”

I didn’t believe this. “She didn’t meet with any unificationist groups?”

Roshina stopped and stared at me, ice in her eyes. “We do not have such groups. They are purely a product of your own decadence. We are proud of our national identity.”

“There must be someone.”

“Let me tell you something, Inspector. We do not want new air in High Resenberg. The air border is our only defence against you. You have the wealth, and the ambition. We know that if the new air were released and you could cross the border at will, we would quickly become merely another of your subject states.”

“You’ve built your own empire.”

“Only as a defence against yours. As a Balarian, Ellia already had many enemies. As a researcher into new air, our whole

country was her enemy. We offered her protection, but we did not guarantee her safety. Nor do I guarantee yours.”

We got into a marked police car. As we drove off, I was highly aware that a small crowd of people were staring at me in silence. Roshina made no move to disperse them.

\* \* \*

The mood at the university was unpleasant. The university was near the border, a foolish move that its founders had hoped would promote understanding between our two nations. I saw a picket on the furthest edge of its playing fields; protestors had converged on the grass, many wearing breathing suits, the others hanging well back.

The air border had moved again, into High Resenberg, annexing the outskirts of the campus.

“It’s fortunate that you haven’t poisoned the air in the buildings themselves,” said Roshina as she surveyed the scene, apparently looking for danger.

“I thought you said it was an atmospheric phenomenon?”

“And you said it wasn’t.”

“Well. Now you know how it feels.” In fact I was glad that we had fought back. I had suspected that if High Resenberg had developed electrostatic manipulation, we would have the same technology. And ours seemed to be stronger. Yesterday Resenbergians had danced in our agora; now they could not breathe in their own university. If we had to push the border back for our own security, so be it.

“You should not spend much time here,” said Roshina.

“I’ll be out of here as soon as I’ve spoken to Gravia again.”

“I meant the country.”

Gravia had returned to High Resenberg soon after our interview. She retained her place at the university and had made a smooth transition to her old post. She seemed surprised to see me. “It is not safe for you here.”

“Are you sure it is safe for you?”

“I am working on a way to protect ourselves from poison air. Society approves.”

I wondered if Gravia did not believe in new air through knowledge, or as a political stance. “Where did Ellia stay when she visited here?”

“With me. Balarian visitors need escorts. You should be aware of that.”

“She had no contacts with any extremist groups?”

She shook her head, a little too much. “I never let her out of my sight.”

I could read her gestures better now. She was hiding something. “I want to see all your work on the subject. All your notes, correspondence, results.”

Roshina was good, but I was aware that she stiffened, that there was the tiniest intake of breath. Gravia said, “Ellia’s work was

destroyed.”

“But yours wasn’t. This was a cross-national project. You’ll have your own copy here.”

I noticed Roshina give a slight nod. Gravia opened the drawer on her desk and took out two small storage sticks, which she handed to me.

“That’s all?”

“That’s a lot.”

“Thank you.” I turned to Roshina. “Perhaps you could escort me to my room?”

“Be careful, Inspector,” she said. “My protection may not be good enough. These are ugly times.”

I bowed to Gravia, and I made sure that Roshina went ahead of me.

\* \* \*

As I studied the sticks in my hotel room, one thing slowly became obvious about the project. Ellia was the junior partner.

She was bright, and clearly capable. She had designed most of the experiments and done most of the actual work, but it had been Gravia who had proposed the directions of the research, made the hypotheses, and suggested which results were promising and which were dead ends. For someone who did not believe in new air, she seemed very keen to discover it.

That discovery had not been in sight. Ellia had not been removed for stumbling upon the secret; the research was no nearer a result than when it had started. I could not understand why it had been put to an end so suddenly, either by herself or by persons unknown.

I was interrupted by a knock at the door. I went to answer it and found the hotel manager, standing in front of two large men. From their aprons I assumed them to be kitchen staff. I felt immediately threatened.

“It is with some regret that I must ask you to leave our premises,” said the manager. He was a small man, his face hidden behind a black beard. I saw no trace of regret on his features.

“I’m booked here for a week,” I said.

“You will receive a full refund.”

“But why? I’ve not broken any rules.”

“I fear that I cannot guarantee the security of my property so long as you are a guest.”

The larger of the men behind him began to move forwards.

“I’ll pack,” I said.

\* \* \*

I was not sure where to go. I did not want to call Roshina, for fear of making myself look as if I was completely unresourceful. But I also doubted that any other hotel would take on Balar-

ian guests. This was a cosmopolitan area, near the border, and the hotel had been chosen because of its friendliness to our people. If the mood had changed, it had changed everywhere.

Fortunately I had travelled light and carried only a single bag. I wandered for a bit and made my way into one of the parks, where I hoped I could keep out of the way while I decided what to do next.

I saw a figure on a bench ahead of me, slumped over. I hoped it was a drunk, and that he would cause me no problems. As I approached I saw that he was wearing a breathing suit, and I was relieved that there was another Balarian here.

As I was about to call a greeting I saw that the face-plate was smashed, and the suit had been torn open.

It was impossible to assist while I was in a suit myself. There was too great a risk that I would cut my own suit on the broken glass, and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was out of the question. However, I soon convinced myself that I was far too late. He had been murdered hours ago and left here, to be ignored by the local population. Belatedly I realised that this was just as well; if his attackers were still around, I had made myself their next target.

I rang Roshina on her private number. “I’ve found a body,” I said. “A Balarian body. In Antika Park.”

“The authorities have been alerted,” she said. Her voice over the airways sounded as if it had come from inside a suit.

“You are the authorities.”

“Your authorities. The body is one of yours; your own police

will have to come and collect it. When they dare.”

I felt cold inside. “Roshina, are we at war?”

“We have never been at peace. I have arranged for your visa to expire tomorrow. This is for your protection, do you understand? I would prefer you to leave our country intact.”

“I see.” I knew that I was no longer safe. But I also knew that a young woman was missing, and it was my job to find the truth. “I’d like to speak to Gravia once more before I leave. Apart from anything else, I need to return the sticks.”

“Okay. I grant you that.”

“Where should I go in the meantime?”

“Out of sight.”

She hung up, and I looked for a corner of the park in which I could hide.

\* \* \*

I did not sleep, and I was also very aware of being unwashed when I met Roshina at the university the next day.

The students were still protesting. “We will not be able to control them for long,” she said.

“Perhaps the air border will move again.”

“It might be best if you told me what was on your mind, Inspector.”

We walked across from the grounds of the car park. “Gravia was the senior partner in the research,” I said. “She told Ellia what to do. But every time, it was a dead end. She wasn’t there to help, was she? She had no intention of inventing new air. She was there to stop Ellia from doing so.”

Roshina shrugged. “Perhaps that is for the best.”

“But she couldn’t have done it. She’d have no idea what would work and what didn’t—unless she already knew.” I looked directly at her. “You’ve already got new air, haven’t you?”

She stared back at me, as if she was trying to find my eyes through the face-plate. “This is ridiculous. If we had invented it, why would we not use it? Why keep it a secret?”

“That’s the problem.” I resumed walking. “Unless—” Everything suddenly became clear to me. “We’ve got it as well. Good God, it’s the ultimate deterrent. If either side uses it, the border dissolves, and the nations unite whether we like it or not. It’s like the nuclear button, but the other way round. Instead of mutually assured destruction, we have mutually assured peace. And both sides have such a vested interest in the conflict that—”

I did not see the blow coming. It didn’t hurt, of course; didn’t even touch me. But in less than a second, she had smashed open my face-plate.

I turned to her, about to cry out. She held a knife in her hand, and expertly slit open my suit.

“Some secrets are not for discovering,” she said. “I tried to warn you.” I sat down, wanting to conserve my breath. From my side she removed the emergency inhaler; I had no spare air.

“Please,” I said.

“Your authorities will be informed.”

I could only watch her walk off as the poison air entered my lungs. I choked immediately and tried to hold my breath. I had had no warning, had not been able to hyperventilate or even breathe in before my air supply was cut off. I had only a minute or two.

The students no longer seemed to be watching. I knew none of them would try to rescue me.

I still had my phone, but there was no one I could ring. No one from Balaria could get here in time to save me; no one from High Resenberg would try.

I climbed to my hands and knees, still trying to think of a plan. Again I found myself unable to stop breathing in; again my lungs screamed at the toxins I inhaled. I felt my lungs tightening up, asthma as a defence against a mortal threat. But I had nowhere to go. I remembered Roshina saving me and knew she would not do so again.

But then there were arms beneath me. I felt myself placed in a fireman’s lift as a strong figure carried me towards the university buildings. I was too weak to resist, and I thought I was under water. I realised this was a hallucination, and that I was falling unconscious.

I woke to a hissing sound. Groggily I opened my eyes. I recognised the room; I recognised the figure of Gravia sitting opposite me, looking at me with no real concern. I realised that the hissing was coming through vents in the walls. Gravia checked some readings on her laptop, then nodded with satisfaction.

I took off my broken helmet and could only stare at her helplessly as we both breathed the same air. It smelt a little artificial, but I knew that it was as good for me as it was for her. We breathed new air.

It was a minute or so before she spoke.

“We grew fond, Ellia and I. But one of us always wore a suit. It was futile. Do you understand?”

I could only nod.

“She visited me here. I did not expect her. She said she had the wrong lungs. She wanted to kiss me, Inspector. That is all. She did not know about this room. I could not get her here quickly enough. If I could have breathed her air back into her lungs, I would have done. But she died in my arms.”

She was better at hiding her emotions than Roshina.

“I hid her body,” she continued. “You will not find it. I did not wish to be frowned on.”

I nodded again.

“I do not wish for your company, Inspector. I will find you a new suit. Then you must leave. Roshina will not want to leave a job half-finished.”

I still said nothing. I only continued breathing, more softly now. This was not Balarian air, but I breathed it nonetheless.

\* \* \*

I returned to Balaria alone, always looking behind me, terrified of the knife slitting my suit again. But I returned, and now I can breathe again, without a helmet.

I reported Ellia as having died through misadventure. She had an estranged mother to be informed, but no further family. There was little grieving on this side of the border.

My superintendent accepted the report. “And there is no evidence that she was anywhere near discovering the secret of new air?”

I shook my head. “I’m inclined to agree with her co-researcher,” I said. “I don’t believe this air is possible.”

But I know otherwise. I know that our governments have stockpiled the air, could release it today, chase away the poison air and replace it with an air we can all breathe. No one need ever have the wrong lungs again.

For now, things are stable. The border returned to its usual place; clearly we are both using electrostatic manipulation, but neither side quite dares to provoke the other. The threat of the new air keeps us both in place.

But I have made a vow to Ellia.

I do not care what changes I have to make in my life and career. I do not care what risks I take.

No politician will ever use new air. Our warring governments will never release the gas that can bring about the peace we all dread. The rulers of Balaria and High Resenberg will never finally think the unthinkable, and press the button that forces our hateful nations to face each other, with no advantages and no defences.

I will.



# The Watcher in the Vortex

by Victoria Ojo

# The Wedding Speech You Weren't Asked to Give, for the Couple Who Didn't Invite You

by S. R. Kriger

One of you could get bitten by a snake.

(To be clear, I don't mean one of you in particular. Either of you could be bitten in this story. There's a big difference, so I want to make sure you understand. It's important. I'll start again.)

One of you could get bitten by a snake.

It's happened before. You get married, you're happier than you thought possible, looking forward to your idyllic life together (because at weddings, you aren't thinking of mortgages or caring for aging parents or exactly when the dishes should be done), and, BOOM. Snake.

Of course the practical-minded among you might be poised on the edges of your seats with words like "Antivenin!" or "Hospital!" or, worse, "Statistics!" You might think that even if a snake should bite, gods forbid, it can't have any lasting effect.

You are wrong. Sometimes, despite the best preparation, the most assiduous prevention, snakes bite, and that's that.

Someone is in the Underworld, and someone else, moments ago broadcasting the most joyful music of their life, is struck silent. It happens. Believe me, my sources are impeccable.

So there you are. Either stuck in the darkness for eternity or on your knees on the solid crust of the Earth, wishing you knew how to get down below. Neither sounds very appealing, to tell the truth. And I wouldn't be bringing up such sad circumstances on this, your wedding day, which is supposed to be a joyous occasion, only, you know, it can happen any time. Even today.

That's how the story goes.

If you're the one in the Underworld, all you have to do is wait. No planning required. If you're the one stuck up here, though, watch out. It's all up to you.

That's not fair, you may be thinking. Why me? It's not my fault they got bitten by a snake. Why is all the responsibility mine?

(Because, you know, just because you love someone doesn't mean it's always easy.)

I know, I know. But snakes don't understand “fair.” Snakes don't understand many things, and it happens that biting is one of them and fairness is not, and that's the way it is.

But there is a piece of good news, something you weren't expecting. It's one of those secrets that everyone knows but nobody thinks to mention, which is why it can still be a secret. Come here, and I'll tell you, very quietly. It's one of those things you shouldn't speak too loud. Are you both listening?

Anyone can go to the Underworld.

It's true. Oh, yes, that's supposed to be the heroic part of the story. The great artist's gift charms the three-headed dog, woos the ferryman, carries him all the way to the throne and melts even the god's stony heart. Perhaps we want it to be difficult, the province of only the most talented. How much more pleasant it is to be able to say to yourself, I am not good enough to try.

Because the Underworld is an unpleasant place, even if—no, especially if—you visit of your own accord. And what waits for you there is the most difficult part of all.

You will make your descent, stumbling down through the darkness. You will tame the three slavering jaws and the six huge, rolling eyes. You will lift your chin as you glide across the river, and the king's gaunt head will bow in acquiescence when you make your request.

And you will see each other again, and you will feel that the snakes have lost.

Until you learn that you can't look back.

It's not about trust, exactly. Oh, I know they say it is. They say it's hard to believe the one you love is there without sneaking a glimpse to make sure. And “trust” is the word you'll berate yourself with when you're tempted.

But the way there is always more perilous than the way back, which is what makes it easier. When you don't know what danger will next befall you—snakes, hounds, oblivion—there's no chance to think. To feel. And those two things may be the most difficult of all.

Because as the ground slopes uphill, your mind and heart begin to wander. What's the point of all this walking? You never considered what would happen after you found each other. You didn't make dinner plans for the night you got back or think to make the bed in preparation for your exhausted return. Will you get home from this miraculous journey to find dirty laundry in the hamper?

Is there a point in cleaning them, when the world is full of snakes?

The thoughts, the weariness, will drag your feet. Because the second secret is, it would be easier to look. Not because you are sorely tempted, but because, if you do, the bed can stay unmade. The house can be a mess. You won't have to resolve arguments like, “I descended to the Underworld for you, and you can't do this one thing for me?,” and resolutions can't follow silently as you lead the way. They have to be coaxed.

But there is a third and final secret.

There are many who have gone before you and succeeded.

They don't feature in the stories you've heard. Failure is a story for everyone; success is a story for the heroes alone. Stories of failures end; stories of successes don't.

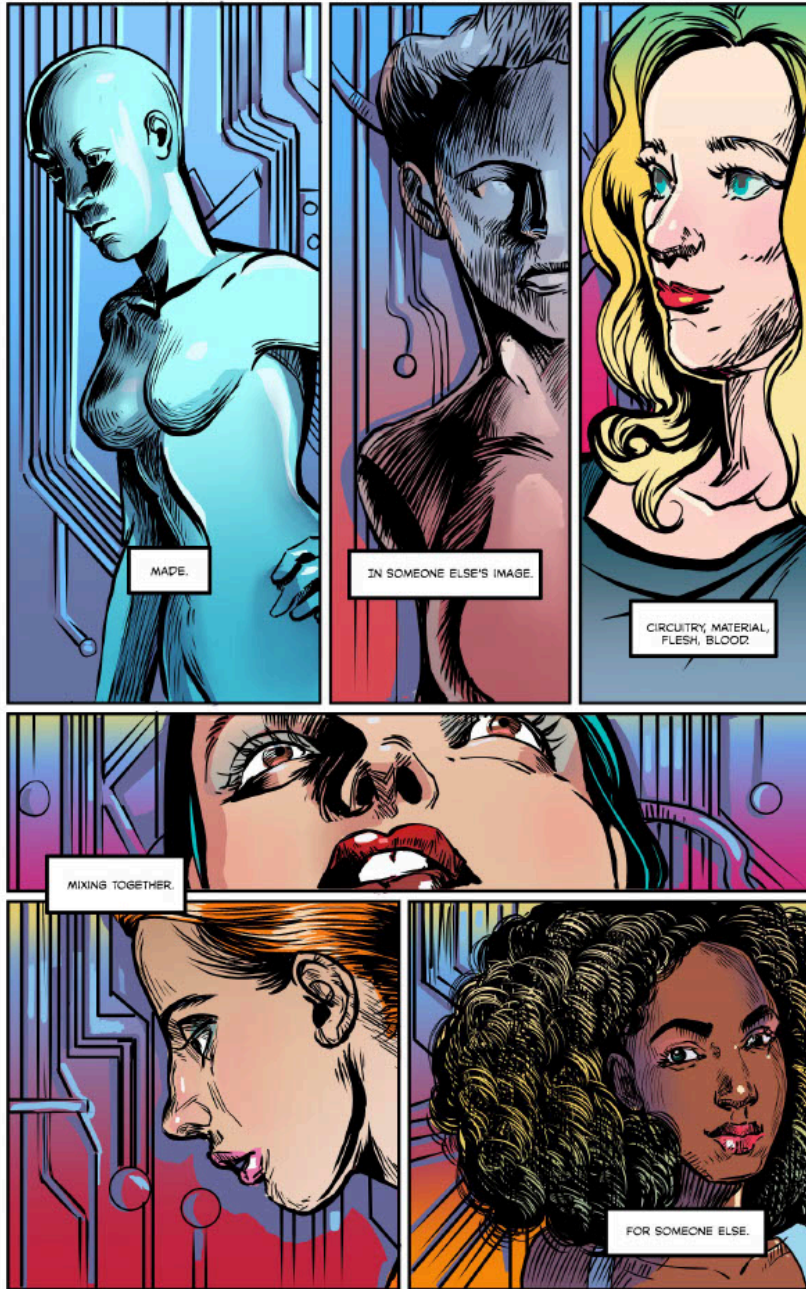
It won't be easy, but if you keep walking long enough, the sunlight will finally hit your faces. But that's not success. You'll still

be afraid of snakes. That's not success either.

Success is, once you've walked together from the Underworld, you will know how to keep walking. Because the rest is over-rated. And it's not enough that you get out of the Underworld.

You need to keep going somewhere afterwards too.

Usually, the rest of us toast you now, but perhaps this time, you'd both like to join in?

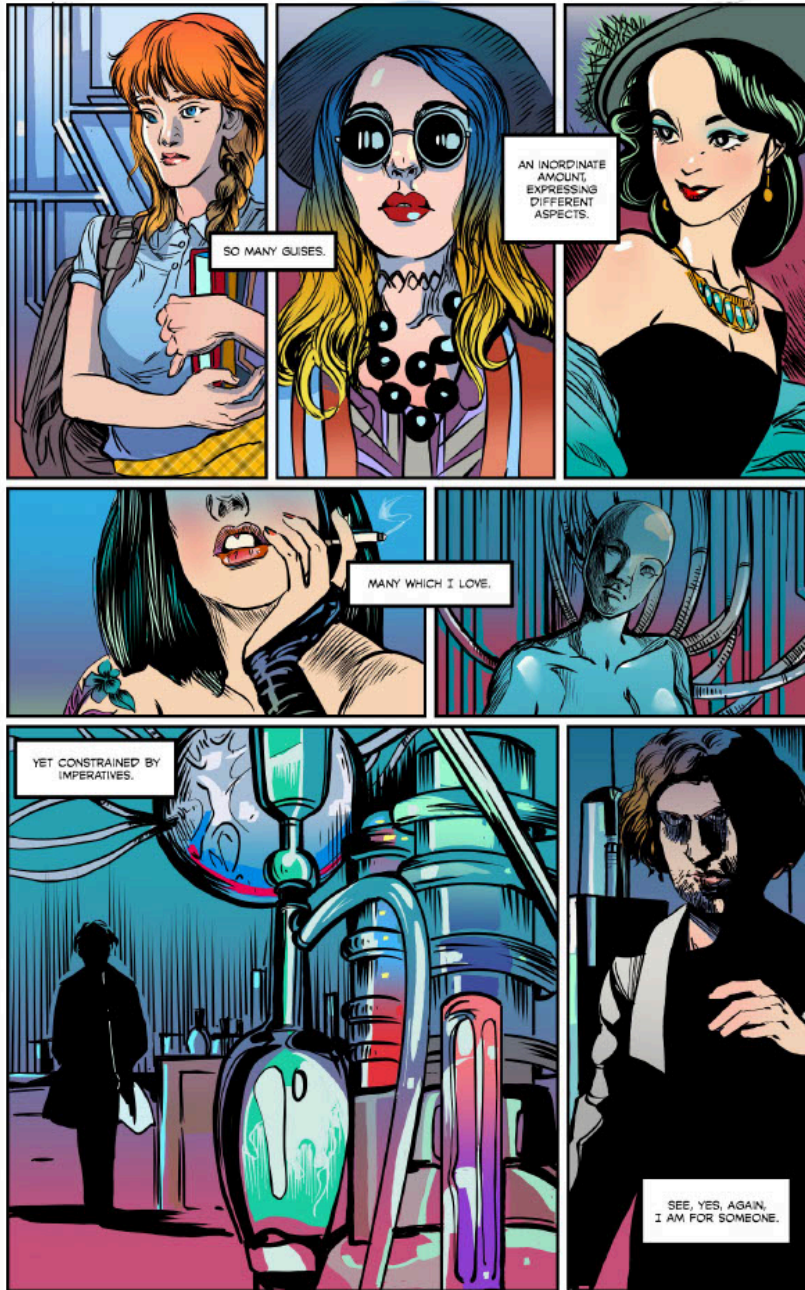


# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bride

by Patrick McEvoy and Andrea Montano

# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bride

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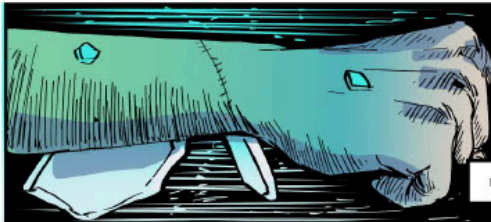




I AM SUPPOSED TO BE THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER.



WHAT DOES THAT NOTION MAKE ME WANT TO DO? REBEL, REBEL AGAINST THAT NOTION.



BREAK MY WAY OUT OF THE CONSTRAINTS.



ROAM PROUDLY ON MY OWN.

# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bride

by Patrick McEvoy and Andrea Montano

# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bride

by Patrick McEvoy and Andrea Montano





AFTER SOME TIME,  
WE RETURN TO HIS PLACE.  
OUR MAKER.

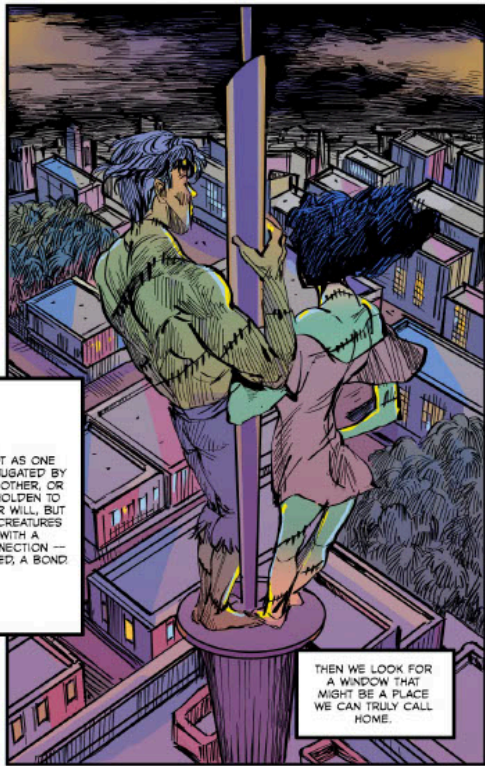


THE PAST IS WIPED AWAY.



WE MOVE  
THEN, MOVE  
FAST.

NOT AS ONE  
SUBJUGATED BY  
THE OTHER, OR  
BEHOLDEN TO  
THEIR WILL, BUT  
AS CREATURES  
WITH A  
CONNECTION —  
INDEED, A BOND.

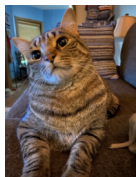


THEN WE LOOK FOR  
A WINDOW THAT  
MIGHT BE A PLACE  
WE CAN TRULY CALL  
HOME.

THE END

21<sup>st</sup> Century Bride  
by Patrick McEvoy and Andrea Montano

# Contributors



**DANA BEEHR** has a couple degrees in anthropology and works in real estate. She lives in a small town in the Midwest with her husband, one dog, and two cats. She is still hoping to one day open that doorway to Narnia.

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**BARBARA CANDIOTTI** is a former High Tech Worker who now focuses on photography, art, and writing.

You can find her website at [www.artstation.com/bcandiotti](http://www.artstation.com/bcandiotti).

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**A J DALTON** ([www.ajdalton.eu](http://www.ajdalton.eu)) is a UK-based writer. He's published the Empire of the Saviours trilogy with Gollancz Orion, *The Satanic in Science Fiction and Fantasy* with Luna Press, the *Dark Woods Rising* and *Green Man Ascendant* poetry collections with Starship Sloane, and other bits and bobs. He lives with his monstrously oppressive cat named Cleopatra.

\* \* \*



**LAURA DEHAAN** (any/all) is a masseuse and crematorium technician in Toronto, Canada. The jobs are remarkably similar, except for the smells.

For a full listing of their previous works, check out their poorly-maintained, sporadically-updated website [iaminyoureyebrian.com](http://iaminyoureyebrian.com).

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**SAGE EARLY** loves ponderosa pine trees, being barefoot in the grass, earthworms, and going for walks in his neighborhood. He enjoys math, weird horror movies, playing the banjo, testosterone injections, and picking huckleberries along trails in Idaho. You can find him in libraries, in the rain, in watercolors, in painted nails, in deep green. He loves being alone in a forest. He loves writing.

\* \* \*



**PHIL EMERY's** work has been published in the UK, USA, Europe and Canada since the seventies. The novel *Necromantra*, was published in 2005 by Immanion Press, and reissued in a revised second edition in 2015.

Various stories have been published in US and UK fantasy anthologies. Another fantasy, *The Shadow Cycles*, was published in 2011. His PhD thesis on the genre is entitled 'Revivifying the Ur-text'. Latest publications include the S&S tales 'Seven Thrones' and 'Demonic' in the recent 'Swords & Sorceries' Parallel Universe anthologies. The absurdist cyberpunk graphic novel *Razor's Edge* drawn by Toe Keen is now out from Android Press.

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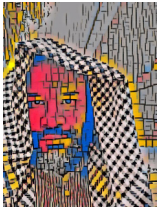
**JORDAN HIRSCH** writes speculative fiction and poetry in Saint Paul, MN, USA, where she lives with her husband. Her debut chapbook *Both Worlds* is out with Bottlecap Press, and more of her work has appeared with *Apparition Literary Magazine*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and other venues. Find her on Bluesky: [@jordanhirsch.bksy.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@jordanhirsch.bksy.social).

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**NEIL JAMES HUDSON** is a UK-based writer who has published around sixty short stories and a paranormal romance novel *On Wings of Pity*. He works in York as a charity shop manager and recently gained a distinction in the York St John University Creative Writing MA. When not writing his hobbies are learning languages, visiting art galleries, and aging.

\* \* \*



A writer who squandered their youth traveling to over sixty countries, **VIRGO KEVONTÉ** currently eats, writes, and works in the Eastern province of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where the annual date festival attracts visitors from near and far. Find him at [Virgokevonte.com](http://Virgokevonte.com).

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**S. R. KRIGER** (she/her) is a Canadian writer of speculative fiction. You can find more about her and her work at [www.srkriger.com](http://www.srkriger.com).

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**GERRI LEEN** is an award-nominated poet from Northern Virginia who's into horse racing, tea, and collecting encaustic art and raku pottery. She has poetry published by *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Dark Matter*, *The HWA Poetry Showcase*, *Dreams & Nightmares* and others and has just published her first poetry collection *Unwilling: Poems of Horror and Darkness*. Visit [gerrileen.com](http://gerrileen.com) to see what she's been up to.

\* \* \*



**PATRICK MCEVOY** has had illustrated stories appear in *Variety Pack*, *Pattern Recognition*, *Flora Fiction*, *Shift*, *Best of Penumbra Vol. 6 & 8*, and elsewhere. "Looming" has appeared in *NonBinary Review*. Photography has appeared in galleries and publications (most recently *Glint* and *Full House*) while he has written and directed short plays for various festivals in NYC. "Formal" appeared at Gallery Players Black Box Festival early in 2026.

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**ANDREA MONTANO** is an illustrator and comic book artist that has been working throughout the years in different publications. Andrea also produces portraits for events and children's books for a variety of clients. She lives with her husband, also an artist, in New Jersey.

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**WARREN MUZAK** is an Ontario, Canada-based illustrator specializing in horror and sci-fi imagery. A seasoned, self-taught professional, he has created artwork for numerous horror and science fiction anthologies, earning a reputation as a visual storyteller who brings mood, movement, and emotion to every piece.

Inspired by legendary artists like Bernie Wrightson, Wally Wood, Jack Davis, and Arthur Rackham, as well as classic horror publications such as *Creepy*, *Eerie*, and 1950s EC comics like *Tales from the Crypt*, his work combines vintage atmosphere with dynamic, contemporary energy. He has sold his work to and been commissioned by multiple publishers of horror anthologies and fantasy novels such as: Darkholme Publishing (UK), JayHenge Publishing, *Last Girls Club*, Hiraeth Publishing, *Penumbric Spec Fiction Magazine*, *James Maxey*, *Dug Up Magazine* and Dark Moon Rising Publications to name a few.

Whether working in pen and ink, watercolor, and pencil, or digitally with a WACOM Cintiq and Krita, Warren seamlessly blends traditional craft with modern digital techniques. When he's not crafting dark, otherworldly scenes, he's likely hunting for vintage comics or expanding his collection of classic Lionel trains.

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**VICTORIA OJO** is a high-achieving individual, consistently pushing the boundaries of what's possible. Victoria has built a diverse portfolio, featuring published works, stunning smartphone photography, engaging storytelling, and creative workshops. Driven by an insatiable desire for self-

growth. She continues to strive for excellence, inspiring creatives with her energy, creativity, and determination.

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**DONALD PATTEN** is an artist and cartoonist from Belfast, Maine. He creates oil paintings, illustrations, ceramics and graphic novels. His art has been exhibited in galleries throughout Maine. To view his online portfolio, visit [@donald.patten](#) on Instagram.

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A freelance journalist and photographer, **SONALI ROY** wears several other hats including painter, 3-D art designer, music composer, and singer though the sudden demise of her 8-yr old canine friend Fuchoo baffled her. Devoted to vegan diet, Sonali enjoys brainstorming healthy recipes in the kitchen. She also loves creative

writing.

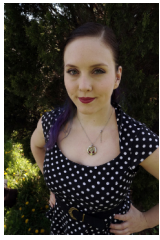
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**RON SANDERS** is an L.A.-based author, poet, and illustrator.

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**LYNNE SARGENT** is a Hamilton-based queer writer, aerialist, and holds a Ph.D in Applied Philosophy. They are the poetry editor at *Utopia Science Fiction* magazine. Their work has been nomi-



nated for Rhysling, Elgin, Best-of-the-Net and Aurora Awards, and has appeared in venues such as *Augur Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Analog*. Watch out for their non-fiction book *Not Just Playing Make Believe*, forthcoming from ECW Press. To find out more visit them at [scribbledshadows.wordpress.com](http://scribbledshadows.wordpress.com).

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**CARL SCHARWATH** has appeared globally with 180+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry books and his latest book is *The World Went Dark*, published by Alien Buddha Press. Carl has four photography books, published with Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently an art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for four The Best of the Net Awards (2022–25) and two different 2023 Pushcart Nominations for poetry and a short story.

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**MAHAILA SMITH** (they/them) is the author of the novelette in verse, *Seed Beetle* (Stelliform Press, 2025). They are a researcher, poet and editor based on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg in Ottawa, Canada. You can find more of their work on their website: [mahailasmith.ca](http://mahailasmith.ca). (photo by Curtis Perry)

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**RINA SONG** is a writer and speculative fiction lover based out of California. When not writing, she has a day job involving computers. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Dirty Magick Magazine*, *The Lorelei Signal*, and *In Another Time Magazine*, among others.

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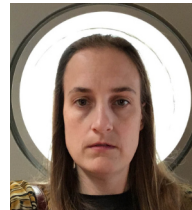
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**SJ TOWNEND** is an author of horror, sci-fi, speculative, and dark fiction. She has published with Brigids Gate Press, Ghost Orchid Press, Gravestone Press, *Gravely Unusual Magazine*, *Dark Matter Magazine*, and Timber Ghost Press to

name a few. Right now, the Bristol, UK-based writer is compiling her first collection of horror stories under the working title *Sick Girl Screams*. EIC: [www.bgaofbonespress.com](http://www.bgaofbonespress.com). Find her on Twitter: @SJTownend or hiding behind that sentinel oak in the woods.

\* \* \*



**JENNIFER WEIGEL** is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography, sculpture, video and writing.

Much of her work touches on themes of beauty, identity (especially gender identity), memory & forgetting, and institutional critique. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all 50 states and has won numerous awards. <https://jenniferweigelart.com/>

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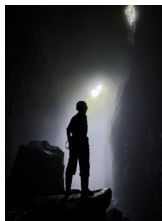
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**JACQUELINE WEST** is a novelist and poet living in Minnesota. Her work has appeared in the recent anthologies *Chromophobia*, *Mother Knows Best*, and *Into the Forest*, as well as in *Tales from the Moonlit Path*, *Strange Horizons*, *Mirror Dance*, and *Liminality*. Her next book, *Black Point* (YA folk/climate horror), is forthcoming from Simon & Schuster in July 2026. Find her online at [jacquelinewest.com](http://jacquelinewest.com) or on IG at [jacqueline.west.writes](https://www.instagram.com/jacqueline.west.writes).



Based in Scotland, **CHARLIE WINTER** is an academic by day and, by night, still an academic but more distractible about it. When not performing the inexplicable rituals of academia, he writes fantasy fiction celebrating everyday magic, eco-optimism, and queer identities. His publications include pieces in the ‘I Want That Twink Obliterated!’ anthology and *Tales & Feathers*. He can be found at: <https://www.awinterplace.com/>





# Shoe Tree

by Warren Muzak

*(full image)*