



Serpents of the Past by Katherine Souza

Journeys

Prose, Poetry, Music, and Art featuring

Brian Malachy Quinn • Lyra Meurer • Jennifer Weigel • Deborah Davitt • Alyce Lomax •
Kasia Runté • Beth Cato • Jennifer Crow • Gordon Sun • Jess Gofton • Hibah Shabbkhez •
Irina Tall • Cecil Fenn • Stephanie Johnson • Viviana De Cecco • Reema Rajbanshi • Joel
Bisaillon • Anthony Panegyres • James Edward O'Brien • Gabriel Shestack • Carl Scharwath
• Abby Nicole Yee • Nathan Chu • Marge Simon • Wormheart, with Z. Xzyruz on guitars

Penumbria is published six times a year (June, August, October, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234. *Penumbria*, *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Mag* and *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine* © and TM 2019–present Neomythos Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

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Table of contents

from the editor, 1

fiction & poetry

by Lyra Meurer
by Deborah Davitt
by Alyce Lomax
by Beth Cato
by Jennifer Crow
by Gordon Sun
by Jess Gofton
by Hibah Shabkhez
by Cecil Fenn
by Stephanie Johnson
by Reema Rajbanshi
by Anthony Panegyres
by James Edward O'Brien
by Gabriel Shestack
by Abby Nicole Yee
by Nathan Chu
by Marge Simon

Asleep in the Graveyard, Asleep by the Sea, 3
Reality, 19
Moon Lodge, 20
Better Monster, 35
Product Warnings, 36
Low Spirits, 37
As Sweet, 54
Villain Origin Story, 59
One Who Helps, 61
The Game's Afoot, 74
Sirens, 77
Departures, 89
Said the Banshee to the Bogeyman, 102
Ambrose, 105
Blank, 117
Immortals, 122
Eidolon (with art), 142

art & music

by Brian Malachy Quinn
by Jennifer Weigel
by Kasia Runté
by Irina Tall
by Viviana De Cecco
by Joel Bisaillon
by Carl Scharwath

The Mourner, 2
The Enlightened One, 18
Ogopogo, 34
Those Who Left in Winter, 60
Sirens Land, 76
Hazy Day, 88
Time to Charge the Robot, 116
Wings of a Celestial (Final Instrumental), 143

contributors

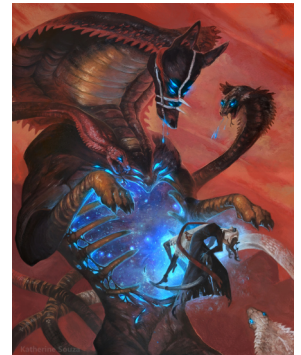
bios, 144



Sirens Land



The Mourner



cover: Serpents of the Past
by Katherine Souza

From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Hi, I'm Jeff, and I am rubbish at social media.

There, it's said. Hopefully there's a chorus of "Hello, Jeff's out there in internet land, others who just don't have the time/energy to enthuse online in an algorithmically appropriate way. Hopefully I'm not the only person who finds social media a little ... awkward? scattershot? invasive? As though I'm constantly trying to be a PR person, which is the least good skill I have. (In fact, "skill" might be optimistic.)

We maintain three different social media accounts (on Twitter, which I refuse to call anything else; Instagram; and Bluesky), and I've vacillated on trying to be more personal, more businesslike, and somewhere between. I think I've managed to seem weird, robotic, and manic, although I'm told most of my posts are perfectly fine (which from a marketing perspective is like saying I have all the excitement of bran flakes, so that's not exactly a compliment). We can't not be on socials, though—I mean, we're an online magazine, we don't print things (other than the annual anthology, which is print on demand), we don't send mailers (which feels very 20th century anyway). The only way to do marketing in a free way is through socials.

And I feel guilty when I don't post. For one thing, the Mighty Algorithm penalizes you for not posting, so we lose visibility. For another (and mainly), I don't really help our authors and

artists as much as I'd like by not posting about their publications. I just ... find everything else to be more immediate, more pressing—reading subs, proofing text, laying out the magazine, coding the html. And yes, those all have deadlines, and socials don't. But it ultimately feels like a neat set of excuses.

So.

What I want to do, and am setting forth in writing here, is try to post something every other day. And that's not just liking or reposting things (which I'm actually good at), but an actual post, be it weird, robotic, manic, or full of bran. Make it a Thing I Do.

And if any of you have helpful tips from out there in Marketing Yourself land, please let me know. I'm not looking for a marketing company, or marketing software, or marketing advertising, or any of that kind of spam. Just any individual advice you might have. Something to make it easier for the socially anxious to navigate this media thing.

Happy August!

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbric

The Mourner

by Brian Malachy Quinn



Asleep in the Graveyard, Asleep by the Sea

by Lyra Meurer

A breath, a hint of intrusion, rippled the whiskers of Auyomahlo's long snout. A part of her mind had entered this dream, which was meant to be someone else's. This manifestation had been appearing with increasing regularity, a haunt she normally ignored out of existence. She focused instead on plucking the threads of tension in the big-worlder's dream, which connected the dreamer's memories to the image that culminated hours of work: a mountainside cloaked in snow.

A confusion of symbology had plagued this dream: gloves, bodies with twisted faces, a white stag carrying away the big-worlder's sister on its icy horns. These images were not from Auyomahlo's world, but she had been a dreamherd long enough, had tended to enough big-worlders, to piece the story together.

Auyomahlo said, "You were once caught under a slope piled so high with snow it could do naught but topple, trapping you and killing your sister. But this is not every slope."

The mountainside disgorged its gluttony of snow and rock. The pale purple widjin and the furless big-worlder succumbed to its roaring curse. Entombed separately, big-worlder and widjin awaited rescue, frozen and gasping for air.

In fact, none of it had happened. The big-worlder's anxiety reversed the dream, as Auyomahlo had expected it would. They stood again in the shadow of that once-fatal slope. Wind sang through the crags, but no rumble came.

"Nor does every whistle in the rocks signal disaster," Auyomahlo went on.

"I know, I know," said the big-worlder, sighing. The weight she had carried for twenty years wicked off her, coiling from her chest and shoulders. "I knew while waking, but without believing. Now I *know*. I must stop avoiding the mountains and go home." Fresh tears welled in her eyes. "But I miss her, I miss her terribly!" She knelt, cradling her sister's ice-burnt corpse, which had been found months later, after snowmelt.

A pool swelled in the bare land, suckling water from the streaming snow. The surface, dark as night, was still for now. *No*, thought Auyomahlo, *I can't let him intrude. Focus. This woman needs help.*

The widjin knelt by the big-worlder, who had regressed to the tender, crumpled bud of childhood. The pool rippled. Auyomahlo's ears swiveled towards the water, the rest of her horrified

senses following. *He* emerged: first the tips of his ears, then the blue-furred dome of his head. His yellow eyes (eyes which had—*no!*), his thick snout and flaring nostrils, the gleam of his teeth (just like his grimace when—*stop!*)—

Auyomahlo placed her hands on the dead sister's temples. Pink life filled her cheeks, chasing away the desiccation of her flesh. The girl's eyelids fluttered. Looking up at her sister, she opened her mouth to speak—

But *he* sat at the edge of the pool, facing nonchalantly away, expecting Auyomahlo to join him. This wasn't Auyomahlo's dream—it rarely was—but still he came. What did she expect? If she said no, he wouldn't listen. He never did.

* * *

A languid breeze sighed through the widjin graveyard, tossing the leaves of the *palok* trees from purple to pearl. Auyomahlo stretched her blanket over Mün's grave and sat for a moment, feeling his presence through the earth. She could pretend, more poignantly than usual, that her childhood friend, the love of her life, sat with her, savoring the first fragrance of night-blooming flowers.

Sunset's flush faded from the sky, lifting the veil between the blue planet and the moon that orbited around it. The pale glow of planetshine still suffused the moon's atmosphere, but the big world was easier to see now: creamy swirls of cloud and dark outlines of landmasses, continents which no widjin had visited except in dreams. During the moon's night, the planet would turn sixteen times, widjins would sleep, flower-snouted nocturnal creatures would graze, stalk, and couple. And Auyomahlo would guide others through their dreams, as she did every night.

But tonight she must, according to tradition, sleep atop Mün's grave and dream of him, tending to his memory after death.

A *tice*'s first wakeful murmurings chuffed from the trees above. Auyomahlo roused herself to fill her water jug from the stream at the edge of the graveyard. She remembered the way from childhood—she and Mün used to play here, darting across the paths and hiding behind the slender tree trunks, heedless of the dead slumbering below.

Drifting back towards her spot, Auyomahlo saw a figure standing over her bedroll. She darted behind a screen of leaves, heart pounding. He hadn't noticed her yet; her fur was the same dusty purple as the trees. The sight of him—glossy red fur, broad shoulders and hands—struck her like lightning. Wilaf. He'd been among the widjins who didn't believe her, who petitioned for her exile.

Clutching the water jug to her chest like a shield, Auyomahlo approached, saying, "I'm allowed to be here. It's Mün's death-night. He chose me as his *idjif*. My visit is sacred. If I don't dream with his spirit, he will seek vengeance."

Wilaf's teeth flashed. "I know. I was sent to ensure you don't linger. Massioulgan doesn't want you here any longer than necessary. Kinless widjins aren't welcome here."

Auyomahlo stopped short of her bedroll. "Massioulgan? Massioul is the *olgan* now?"

"Yes. Your slander couldn't prevent his inevitable success. How disappointing for you."

Auyomahlo bared her teeth—a strong show when she felt like she

was floating away through the trees. “After what he did to me, he’s the *olgan*.” The water jug felt heavy and cold as a rock. She ached to put it down. “I’m not the only one. You’ll see. Others will have the same story before long, especially now he’s in charge.”

Wilaf turned away with a careless wave of his hand. He had taken to sharpening his nails, which looked cruel and hard as obsidian. “Whatever. No need to repeat an old lie. Enjoy your dreams and leave by dawn.”

“You’ll guard the graveyard, right?” she called after him.

He shrugged.

“It’s your sacred duty to the *idjif*! A curse on your blood if an *idjif* dies in your graveyard!”

Her shouting provoked no reply.

Auyomahlo didn’t move until she was certain he’d gone. She put down the water jug and sat on her bedroll. She slid her snout between her knees and wrapped her arms around her legs, curling up like a fetus.

The *tice*’s sunset chorus rang from the trees, high calls and flutterings of leathery wings. The air cooled as the last fingers of sunlight slipped from the atmosphere. The blue globe in the sky shone clearer than ever, like a gem set in sparkling stardust. Normally, when she was on this side of the moon, Auyomahlo gazed at the planet before sleeping, wondering about the big-worlders across the distance, wishing she could meet them in real life. Tonight, she couldn’t even lift her head.

When the *tice* began to take flight, Auyomahlo unfolded herself

with a sharp intake of air. *If I must be up before dawn*, she thought, *I ought to sleep as soon as possible*.

She folded the edge of her blanket for a pillow and laid on her side. Habit took charge from there. She coaxed her breath into evenness, focusing on emptying and filling her lungs. A rustling in the undergrowth roused her. Heart pounding, she listened for a predator, but nothing came. She rolled onto her other side and resumed her well-practiced breathing.

Auyomahlo’s last waking thought was that she didn’t care if they guarded the graveyard. She hoped she’d be killed in her sleep.

* * *

The barren land offered no breeze, no shade, no path. Auyomahlo stumbled over the rocks, bent double over her swollen abdomen, the skin under her fur dark as rot. Someone had stolen her womb and slipped a hot stone in its place. Her knees quivered with its burning weight, but still she walked.

Torturously, she mounted the hill. MÜN stood at the top, so beautiful, his fur glowing like auroras. Auyomahlo stumbled into his embrace, falling to her knees in the dirt. “MÜN,” she gasped, “I missed you.”

His voice floated around her head like a halo. “I missed you too.”

They sat to talk, but he became an insect in a cup of water—small, spindly, many-legged, encased in silence and a jet-black shell. “Stop it,” she begged him, “Change back,” but he did and said nothing.

That was the dream she dreamed for herself.

* * *

In her sleep, Auyomahlo's mind adopted its habitual stance of readiness and supplication, awaiting invitation from another dreamer. A mind fluttered against hers, opened with an unconscious flourish, and let her in. Such was the gift her ancestors had thrust upon her during the chaos following her exile. Thus they had saved her life—dreamherds, providing a service to all, must be fed by those around them, kin or not.

Others' dreams cast no spell of belief over her. The moment she entered the dream, she knew the choke of trees around her wasn't real. Still, when she touched the bark, it hooked the pad of her finger. *Realistic*, she thought. *Definitely a widjin's dream.*

A shout shattered the silence. A violet widjin crashed through the sunlit undergrowth, chased by another widjin, this one vermillion. Auyomahlo hesitated. The two widjins weren't dreamed and dreamer—no, both were dreamers, both emitted waves of sentience.

A three person dream, she thought. *Well, that's new.*

She padded through the trees, following their wafting trails of willpower. Another scream pierced the forest, this one anguished, terrified. A clearing opened before her, where the vermillion widjin pinned the other to the ground, knees on arms, knife in chest. Viridian blood gushed onto the fallen leaves. The victim stilled, then disappeared. Now Auyomahlo and the murderer were the only inhabitants of this dream.

She crept forward, trying to not alarm the dreamer. "I am Auy-

omahlo, a she. You are?"

The vermillion widjin looked up calmly. "Konslo, a he." He measured Auyomahlo with olivine eyes.

"How did it feel to kill him?" she asked.

Konslo looked at his hand-pads, still drenched with blood. "Good," he said with whispered elation.

"You brought him into this dream to kill him. That isn't what a dreamherd's abilities are for."

"I wanted him to know what it's like to die at my hands, to get what he deserves. He's awake now, but for a moment he thought it was real."

"But if *you* know it isn't real, do you know how it feels to kill him?"

Konslo met Auyomahlo's stare. "I believe so."

With a twist of will, Auyomahlo changed the dream, disappearing herself and all consciousness of unreality from Konslo's perception. The dying widjin—a mere reflection this time—reappeared between Konslo's knees, the last thrusts of his blood slowing to a trickle. Konslo watched him die, then stood to wash in a stream, leaving the slack-jawed and open-eyed corpse behind.

Konslo left his enemy forever, oblivious to Auyomahlo following him through the unfolding landscapes of his dreams. He searched subterranean tunnels for a clutch of eggs he never found, he chanted in ritual circles to purge his sin, he climbed

the white tower that pierced the sky, where he met a widjin whose head and shoulders bristled with thorns and who loved him on a splintery table draped with thin cloth.

Time passed, but that dark moment crept up on Konslo whenever he thought he'd waited long enough to forget it: the copper stench of blood, the silent watchfulness of the trees, his enemy's last struggles shuddering between his knees. The dream would hum with a vibration of memory and Auyomahlo would watch Konslo's shoulders rise, his motions slowing to a breathless stop.

He resigned himself to a life by the sea, in a shack on a cliff where the rough suicide of the waves left him forever damp with spray. Auyomahlo watched the dull passage of his days for a while before she lifted her spell of ignorance. Konslo, sitting at an empty table, looked up at her as unsurprised as before. "Was killing him worth it?" she asked.

"I don't know." His voice was measured. "I used to just be a victim. But now I don't just live with what he did, but also with what I did to him. I'm a murderer, even if he deserved it."

Auyomahlo fixed Konslo with a penetrating stare. He looked away.

Wet fur slithered across the stones outside. *He* came, risen from the ocean to drag her below, his tritonic emanations rattling her insides.

"I have no intention of killing him in real life," said Konslo. "I only wanted to show him. A cautionary dream to change his ways."

Auyomahlo pinned her focus on him. "Sometimes a dreamer

who fantasizes about murder has their inclinations confirmed. We dreamherds must prevent that. You are a dreamherd. You should know this."

"I taught myself. I didn't have a mentor to explain the rules."

"So that's why you're willing to cause him nightmares. It's one of the first things we learn not to do."

Konslo rose to his feet. "You wouldn't object if you knew what he did!" He towered over Auyomahlo, teeth bared. The house groaned and creaked, bending every beam to bear down on her. "He deserves no peace, no rest!"

"This simulated murder has given you no resolution," said Auyomahlo. "We still have work to do. I'm here for you." But *his* darkness advanced, filling the air outside the shack. No, no! She needed to try harder, to pour herself into this widjin, to not invite—

"We? You don't understand!"

"I think I do," Auyomahlo whispered. Heavy footsteps at the threshold. "I saw the imagery of your dream. Everything is tainted for you, isn't it? Love and loving, but also life itself. Not just because of the murder, but because of why you murdered him." Konslo hesitated. The shack creaked back into place. "I'm the same. And he—*he's* coming."

A shadow insinuated itself in the doorway. Auyomahlo didn't have to see him to *feel* him, the pain of his presence shooting through her bones.

Konslo's eyes widened. "What have you brought into my

dream?” His hands flashed up to grip her skull, his thumbs pressed into her forehead. “Begone! Take him with you!”

He thrust her away, shooting her across ballooning, billowing space. The hut stretched into an endless hall, down which she tumbled, away from Konslo, into unknown parts of the dream.

* * *

Is this my dream or his? Auyomahlo wondered. The dancers around her whirled and sang in concord with joyous music. *Seems like my sort of dream. Unless we’re sharing it?* She searched the choreographed crowd for Konslo, for Mün, for threats, and found none. So she drifted through the widjins and big-worlders paired in dance, together at last after countless centuries of gazing at each others’ worlds.

Fire erupted in the rafters, but still everyone danced and sang. Mün slipped out from the crowd and seized Auyomahlo’s hand, crying, “We have to go!” He tugged Auyomahlo through the thronged hall, which extended infinitely under a ceiling of flames.

She shouted over the music, “Mün, don’t worry! It’s a dream!” but he ran on. Auyomahlo shook her head, laughing. She could’ve willed him to stop, but the tug on her arm, the happy chaos of the dancers, were so familiar. “Remember the harvest festival? You saw there was *scroll* and you said, ‘Aumo, Aumo, come on!’ You pulled me through the crowd, bumping into everyone. We had our *scroll*—still the best I’ve ever had—and Ikalir told us off for spilling his drink, but all we could do was laugh. Oh, how we laughed!”

Mün pulled her onwards. She stumbled along gleefully.

“Oh, Mün! Remember the dream we shared a few years ago, before you died? That beautiful island with the cliff walls so no one else could intrude, and it was just us, looking upon the village below, the widjins living in wonder of us and our fortress of fog. Do you remember the feeling of being such a mystery, of—”

The ceiling groaned. The dancers finally looked up. Screaming, they ran about in terror as infernal wreckage rained down. Mün stopped, dragging Auyomahlo back as a bundle of flaming beams shot into the floor like holy lances.

Auyomahlo tutted. With a mental motion she banished the terrified mob and invented a wave to sweep out the fire. It crested before them, and, in one paralyzed moment, she realized her mistake: a dark shape hung in the water, yellow eyes gleaming as they had when—

She squeezed her eyes shut as the wave passed over her in a harmless rush. When she opened them again, it was to see Massioulgan standing in the glistening cradle of charcoal.

The inevitable curse settled on her: she froze in fear, sinking to the cindered floor. Her traitorous body remembered it was sleeping, trapping her there, supine, speechless, and struggling to stay awake.

Massioulgan stepped between the blackened beams, emerging unsoiled. “Look at that,” he said, “I don’t even need to do anything.”

He stood taller than he did in life, massive and beautiful as a lapis statue. Auyomahlo’s disbelief evaporated: she believed he’d always been that tall, that he truly stood over her useless

body.

“I don’t even need to try,” he went on, “because you do it to yourself. See how you fold! Weak as wet paper. Lie there, then, my love. Do it to yourself.”

Mün joined Massioulgan’s side. They hugged like old friends. Massioulgan told a joke and Mün laughed. Auyomahlo closed her eyes and tried to scream through the iron trap of her jaws, only managing a muffled moan.

When she opened her eyes, she laid in the village center back home, which she hadn’t visited since her exile. Familiar widjins sat under the whispering trees, pounding paper from bark, shelling fruit for dinner, bundling flux grass for thatch, playing with children, talking. Auyomahlo raised her heavy arm, reaching for them, only for it to flop back to the ground. Toninel, Ikalir, Welhil—how she’d missed them!

Massioulgan passed among them, speaking kindness and receiving kindness, touching shoulders, giving gentle commands to expressions of happy obedience. Mün followed him, lapping up every order and joke. He was, she thought, more attentive to Massioulgan than he’d ever been to her.

Massioul’s right. I did it to myself. If I’d been someone widjins liked more, they would’ve believed me and exiled him. It’s my fault it happened at all. If I weren’t me, he never would’ve wanted me, or known how weak I am.

* * *

Konslo found her still lying there after nightfall. The widjins had gone inside to sleep, leaving Auyomahlo to stare at the

empty clearing. He crouched before her and, with a touch, helped her remember she was dreaming, releasing her from her paralysis.

“You saw,” she said.

“I saw.” He pulled her to her feet. “I’m sorry I assumed you wouldn’t understand. I’m sorry I left you alone to face him.”

“S’fine,” she said, her words slow and sloppy from the effort of shifting her jaw and tongue, “S’m my fault. Should be more disciplined. I always let him in.”

“No,” said Konslo. “He invites himself.”

Together, they dreamed of a pebbly shore in the far south, where icicles bristled from the elegant structures that swirled up from the earth. Konslo and Auyomahlo perched on the tide-washed rocks, processing a harvest of tiny big-worlders, which were shrunk to the length of her palm. The widjins cut them in half lengthwise, separating arm from arm and leg from leg, and scooped the bloodless insides into a basket.

“Did it feel good to kill yours?” asked Auyomahlo, “when you thought it wasn’t a dream?”

“You saw how it was. It felt right at first, but afterwards, it haunted me. Sometimes I was glad I’d done it, sometimes I wished it’d never happened. But none of it should’ve happened. He never should’ve followed me to the stream. So I’d think: why not add another horror onto the first one? At least it was a horror where I exacted my revenge.”

Auyomahlo’s knife sank through body after body. “At least if he

did die, he'd never be able to hurt anyone again."

Konslo barked out a laugh. "I thought you were trying to prevent murder. Now you're considering it?"

Auyomahlo fumbled her knife and dropped it. Her joints slowed and she listed to the side, threatening to collapse into paralysis again. Konslo reached out to right her, saying, "To ensure he never hurts anyone again, you would hurt yourself. Do you think that's fair?"

"It's all unfair," said Auyomahlo, breaking off the icicles that had formed on her body with clumsy sweeps of her hands. "Unless I believe I deserved it."

"That's the choice, isn't it? Either there's no justice, or you're to blame."

"Yet somehow, we must make a life worth living."

They worked in silence until Konslo said, "What do you do for people suffering like this?"

"Same as for anyone. Many dreamers' bodies know what is needed, so I follow the dream. Sometimes they want to talk to the perpetrator—a dream version of course. Sometimes they need to imagine a new life, or they need to relive what happened, but in a different way, so they know how it feels when things turn out better. Sometimes it doesn't make much sense."

"Does it help?"

"I think so. It seems to in the moment. You have to hold onto what you learned afterwards, because regular life will strive to

make you forget. A healing dream is just the first step."

"So one must persist in their healing, holding onto a dream, even if they were hurt by someone who's still out there, unchanged, dangerous, and unrepentant?"

Auyomahlo took a deep breath to stave off paralysis, overcome with the fear that the ocean might surge up and nip at her feet. "Yes, I suppose so," she said.

"You've never been visited and treated?" asked Konslo.

"No."

"Why not?"

Auyomahlo shrugged, bent towards her work. "I don't warrant it. What happened wasn't bad enough and half my fault anyway. There are others who need help—such as you, I'm sure."

"Yet he intrudes on your work."

"I am near him, visiting the grave of someone I lost."

"I could feel it when he came—the habit, the routine. He's always there." Konslo stared at her until she met his eye. "Maybe it could've been worse. It could've been worse for me too. I could've died, it could've happened twice, or a hundred times. Nonetheless, I suffer. Are you not suffering? Why suffer if there is a way not to? What they do is horrible, always, even when it could be worse."

Auyomahlo looked into his eyes, pain spearing through her body. She'd become callous to the dull ache of her abbreviated

remembrances, but this pain cut sharp as the day it had been inflicted. She folded her knees to her chest, curling around this freshly bleeding wound.

“You wanted to try helping yourself, without a dreamherd,” she said.

“Why wait?”

“What you were doing can be dangerous, can lead you to the wrong conclusions.”

“Well, *you’re* here,” he said, with an edge of humor. “You can make sure no one gets the wrong idea. Maybe we can guide each other. Try something new.”

Neither of them spoke for a while. The pile of miniature big-worlders had disappeared, leaving them to stare out to sea as wave after wave died against the steep shore. They uncurled and reached for each other. The dream evolved around them to meet their silent consensus.

They floated among the stars, between blue planet and violet moon, clutching each other’s hands. They looked into each other’s eyes, exchanging unspoken uncertainty and assurances. *You’ll be alright? Yes, you? I think so. Well. I’ll see you after.*

Two presences collided with the dream. Extrasensory ripples of impact spread from a pair of epicenters—one planetside, one moonside. They let go of each others’ hands to dart in opposite directions: Auyomahlo towards the planet, Konslo towards the moon.

Massioulgan waited, floating before the world as if guarding it.

This time, it was the real Massioulgan, his presence as violent as an army waiting to charge. Auyomahlo fought the inclination to freeze by swimming vigorously, forcing life and motion into her limbs.

Massioulgan spoke before she’d reached him. “First you disturb the peace by coming to the graveyard—”

“It’s my right.”

“—then you disturb my sleep. You have no right. It goes against the supposed morals of dreamherds.”

“I don’t care.” She drifted into place before him.

“What do you want? Some sort of revenge, no doubt. You’ve heard of my success, and you wish to bring me down. Since you can’t do it in real life, you’ll have to find some metaphor in your dreamworld. Well, do what you must for your petty feelings.”

“I didn’t summon you for fantasies of harm. I only wish to speak.” For once, Massioulgan had no response. She drew in a breath, searching for a handhold in what she wished to say.

“I didn’t tell anyone what you did for so long because I thought it was my fault. But if you hadn’t come, if you hadn’t chosen to press me, to not listen to me, nothing would’ve happened.

“When I decided to tell people, you said, ‘No one heard screaming. If she hadn’t wanted me, she would’ve screamed, would’ve fought back.’ They believed you, but it’s nonsense. What if I was too afraid to scream? What if I couldn’t? What if I knew no one would hear me?”

Auyomahlo's hands tightened into fists, but she locked them at her sides, despite the jolts of impulse shooting down her arms. She tried to look up at him, but couldn't. Her gaze trained past his arm, at the spinning planet, she went on, "Do you know what it's like when your body isn't yours? Mine wasn't, never was. I thought the reason I existed was to serve others—to save my mother in her illness, to please people, to satisfy others' whims at my own expense. If you pressed your case, surely you had more to gain from my body than I. So I—" Auyomahlo gestured, popping her fist open like a bursting seed pod. "—I left.

"My mother had just died, Massioul. Did you forget that part? That's ostensibly why you came. Stopping by to check on me, showing everyone how you'd make such a good *olgan*." A growl of disgust rasped out of her. "Truth is, you came because you knew I wasn't well and you knew I wouldn't, couldn't fight. And because I didn't fight, you fool yourself into thinking I gave, when instead, you took.

"I could throw you into the depths of dreaming, show you how it feels to be as alone as I've been since you got me exiled as a liar. To lose your future, your kin, your credibility. Wandering, viewed with suspicion or, at best, tolerance. Sustaining off the minimum of what a dreamherd is owed for their service. But I shan't force you as you did me. I want you to understand of your own accord, if you can. If you can't, you don't deserve the title of widjin, much less *olgan*."

With those last words, she forced herself to raise her gaze. He looked down at her, his eyes fraught with a gem-like fire—brittle on the outside, liquid within. "It's absurd," he said. "If you didn't want me, why did you invite me in?"

"You visited. No one else had—"

"When did you decide to pretend you didn't want me? You didn't say anything."

"I did. I said, 'Stop—'"

"You didn't say it enough. You didn't say it loud enough. You could've fought, but you didn't. Your body betrays you, Aumo."

"You didn't lis—"

"Next thing I know, you want to keep it a secret. I kept the secret for you, didn't I?"

Auyomahlo's voice dropped to a stricken whisper. "I was ashamed. I thought—"

"Exactly! Ashamed! So ashamed you tried to ruin me. I was trying to help, to make you feel better!"

"Trying to help—" That was a new one. Paralysis seeped into her joints, but she reminded herself, *It's my dream*.

"As I thought," she said, forcing steadiness into her voice, "You are less than a widjin. I see the look in your eyes. I feel the reverberations of your thoughts. It happened to you too, but you're afraid to admit it. You'd rather fulfill your desires and repeat the harm so you can believe what happened didn't hurt you. Well, you've won widjins over to your side, but you can't win within yourself."

Auyomahlo thrust out her arm, casting him away. She caught the flare of pain in his eyes before he arced into the planet's atmosphere, dissolving in a streak of light.

Still, as she wandered across plains of sharp-seeded flux grass, she wondered, *Does he really suffer? He is the olgan, he is surrounded by the widjins who disowned me. He is respected and loved. By all measures, he has won.*

Mün walked by her side. Auyomahlo said, “When they forced me to leave, you wouldn’t come, even though you said you loved me. You died without telling me why. Tell me now.”

“I didn’t want to be lost like you,” he said flatly, without the evasion that had looped his language in life. “I knew what was at home. I knew I could meet you in dreams. I never liked him, I promise. I believed you.”

“You said you loved me, but you never loved me enough to stay with me, not even enough to defend me.”

“I had to think of myself, of my kin.”

Auyomahlo’s throat ached. Her chest felt empty, scraped out. “I spent years in service to you, wondering how to grow your love, how to plant it, fertilize it, water it. Mün, my saviour, Mün, light of my redemption. Mün, who will one day no longer be content to meet in dreams. Then you died, and left me with a facsimile. You never meant to join me. You never meant to love me in real life.”

They stopped at a cliff which overlooked the toiling sea. “No, I didn’t,” he said. “I needed your adoration, but I could only spare so much for you. I needed you to love me because I couldn’t do it for myself.”

“I couldn’t either,” she said. “I thought your love would make

me lovable. I just had to wait for it. I left myself open, waiting forever.”

“Instead, *he* came. You weren’t trained to resist others. You were alone, I was away, and all you knew was how to be open.”

Auyomahlo’s head drooped. “So what Massioul did is my fault.”

“No. Massioul should have seen your vulnerability and protected you. Instead, he, in his darkness, saw opportunity.”

“I could have screamed. I could have fought.”

“Why? Who would’ve heard? Fighting may have brought you more harm. It will never be your fault, Aumo. But now you know how you were hurt—by him, by me, by anyone who took your training and obedience to bed.”

She looked up at him. “Is that what I’m supposed to tell myself?”

“You should never have one story, Aumo. Life is too complicated for that. This is only what I have taught you.”

“You’re not real.”

“No, but I am what you knew about me. You’ve just been too afraid to acknowledge it.”

Mün’s long arms drew her into an embrace, wrestling her towards the edge. For the first time in her life, she fought him. He held her tighter and stepped off the cliff, pulling her with him. Together, they tumbled into the sea.

Auyomahlo lived under the waves, became one of the denizens of the sea floor. She sprouted algae and seaweed, accumulated an encrustation of shells and bones that gathered the muck of the deep. Dragging her disgusting burden about, she eventually came across another of her kind, another congested collection of discarded filth. They touched each other with well-coated hands, feeling each other's familiarity.

"Konslo?"

"Auyomahlo?"

"I forgot you were here."

"Me too."

They leaned into each other, their sea plants twining.

"So, it went the same for you as it did for me," said Konslo.

"Yes."

"He took no responsibility, made me believe it was my fault. No one could convince me otherwise."

"Same," sighed Auyomahlo.

"There's no justice," he said.

"We're not believed even by the ones who did it."

"We're not validated by the ones who should've loved us."

Auyomahlo's hand pressed through her scum and into his, finding his fingers. "I believe you. You deserve more."

He squeezed her hand. "I believe you too."

Weary, they sank through their layers of accumulated garbage to lean against each other. "It never should've happened," she said, "to you or to me."

"But since it has, I will listen," said Konslo. "Show me."

He remembered as if he were her. She had known Massioul since childhood, had considered him her friend. When her mother died of the sickness that had gnawed at her for most of Auyomahlo's life, Massioul procured offerings for her burial.

The death leveled Auyomahlo like a volcano blast. She hid in bed, afraid, as she had been since childhood, of being too heavy for another to care for. Mün, who she could trust, but who she most feared burdening, was away on a trading trip with his father.

When *he* came to the house she'd shared with her mother, Auyomahlo had been alone for three days. "We haven't seen you in a while," Massioul said, the perfect future *olgan*. "Are you alright?"

Though she often forgot it in favor of blaming herself, he was the one who offered to hold her. He discarded his pretense of comfort, offering his wandering hands, which she refused, offering his parts, which she refused. She feared what he wanted, but feared more that he might leave, and that he might leave hating her. Besides, she'd never successfully resisted him. He had cornered her before, moaning his loneliness, haranguing her until

he extracted her affections. Why prolong the experience? Easier, safer, to submit.

Trapped underneath him, unable to look at him even as she tried to expedite his pleasure, she stared at the ceiling. It was, she thought, about time she prepared new thatching.

Konslo suffered it with her this time, giving her comfort, drawing on her for comfort, proving that what she felt was pain. Together in the same body, they asked Massioul to promise secrecy and, after he left, set about gathering flux grass, enjoying the bite of those razor seeds.

The event had been so quiet she didn't attach that word to it until much later. Such a brusque, violent word: *rape*. The word churned in her chest until it spilled from her mouth. She hoped those she told would respond with the outrage she secretly felt. Instead came the questions: why didn't she resist, why allow herself to be overpowered, why submit to something so shameful?

Questions became narrative: they were two promising young widjins locked in a battle of believability. Surely she lied or exaggerated, wanted Massioul exiled so she would be the only reasonable candidate for *olgan* when the current one died. Massioul, so eloquent, so persistent, won.

When her kith and kin stripped her of her family name and dragged her away from her home, Konslo, unlike MÜN, came with her, whispering to her across those long years of lonely wandering, "I am here with you."

They dreamed together under their oceanic blanket like children sharing whispered stories. Auyomahlo opened her eyes and cra-

dled Konslo's face. The pain of her burden had lessened, but she could still feel the thorny vine of his suffering running through her spine.

"You too," she said, stroking his fur, brimming with tears, "I won't let you be alone."

She remembered it as if she were him: the last time he'd gone down to the stream to play. Popular wisdom said he was too old for such games, but into late adolescence he'd been able to imagine himself into another world using rocks and braided grass, spinning out an endless story, exploring a secret inner world.

Then *he* emerged from the trees, violet as the *plaloks*' deepest shadows, his frame wrought with menace. Anteon was a mere acquaintance before that day. He pretended he wished to get to know Konslo, feigning friendliness until he knew friendliness wouldn't get him what he wanted.

Face pressed into the wet riversand, not knowing how to scream or whether to bother trying, Konslo tried to escape reality. He touched his internal world one last time, catching a last glimpse of a distant white tower before his imagination left him forever.

Auyomahlo stayed with him, sharing his tormented body. She remained when he was released, when he washed in the river and realized he'd never feel clean again.

Konslo suffered through a year of Anteon's presence before he told his friend, Ykele, what had happened. Auyomahlo felt Konslo's relief when Ykele believed him, the gushing righteousness when he paced and cursed, enraged at the harm done to his best friend.

But Ykele insisted there was no use in speaking about it, for others might find Konslo's weakness under threats shameful. Not that Ykele believed it, of course, but—mightn't his failure to scream mean he'd wanted it? He hadn't told anyone when it happened, why speak about it now?

When Konslo left home in the dead of night, Auyomahlo whispered, echoing those words into the ever-present past: "I am here with you."

The twisted pain in their shared hearts uncoiled, lying lax and heavy in their bellies. Sinking into each other under the ocean, they found the one peace left to them: to tell and be known, to be believed and understood, to share.

"I thought if I spoke to Massioul, he would finally believe he'd hurt me," said Auyomahlo. "A hopeful delusion. He isn't the source of my redemption. He doesn't have anything for me, even if he owes me everything."

"No kindness, no justice," sighed Konslo. "But at least I needn't waste any more time waiting for the impossible." As he spoke, slime and tangled weeds sloughed off them, carried away on the current.

"Still, I wonder if he could change," said Auyomahlo. "He was hurt too."

"Look how well you've learned to sympathize," Konslo murmured, looking into her eyes. "We must learn to sympathize with ourselves too. Don't forget that." He took Auyomahlo's hand and they kicked off from the ocean bottom, ascending from darkness through layers of light. Swarming schools of sea life parted before them like flocking rainbows, brushing their

fur, clutching their fingertips with twining tendrils.

"I felt responsible for what he did and might do," said Konslo, "as if it must be my task to stop him."

"We have been straining to wring justice from a stone," said Auyomahlo. "That responsibility belongs to the world, too, not just us."

"So, be free of him," said Konslo. "Or as free as you can."

"Live for yourself," said Auyomahlo, "not despite him."

They burst above the water and launched into the night sky. Free of water, free of gravity, free of others, and free of themselves, they danced a wild dance—over and under, upside down, swirling around each other, grasping hands and releasing as they careened over the sea and islands full of astonished widjins.

As the sun cast its first light above the horizon, they landed. This spot was half the graveyard where Auyomahlo had slept, half the lean-to Konslo had constructed by the ocean.

"It's only a dream," said Auyomahlo. "This is just the start. The rest is hard work."

"I know. But now we know we are capable of feeling free, happy, even."

"Cultivate that knowledge. Be gentle with yourself. It's a tender seedling."

"I will. You must too," said Konslo. He opened his arms. "When you need to remember, find me. I'll be here."

They embraced, Auyomahlo murmuring, “I will. You find me too. If you need your narrative to change, if you need to learn something new, I’ll be here.”

They thanked each other and, as if with the swift snip of shears, awoke.

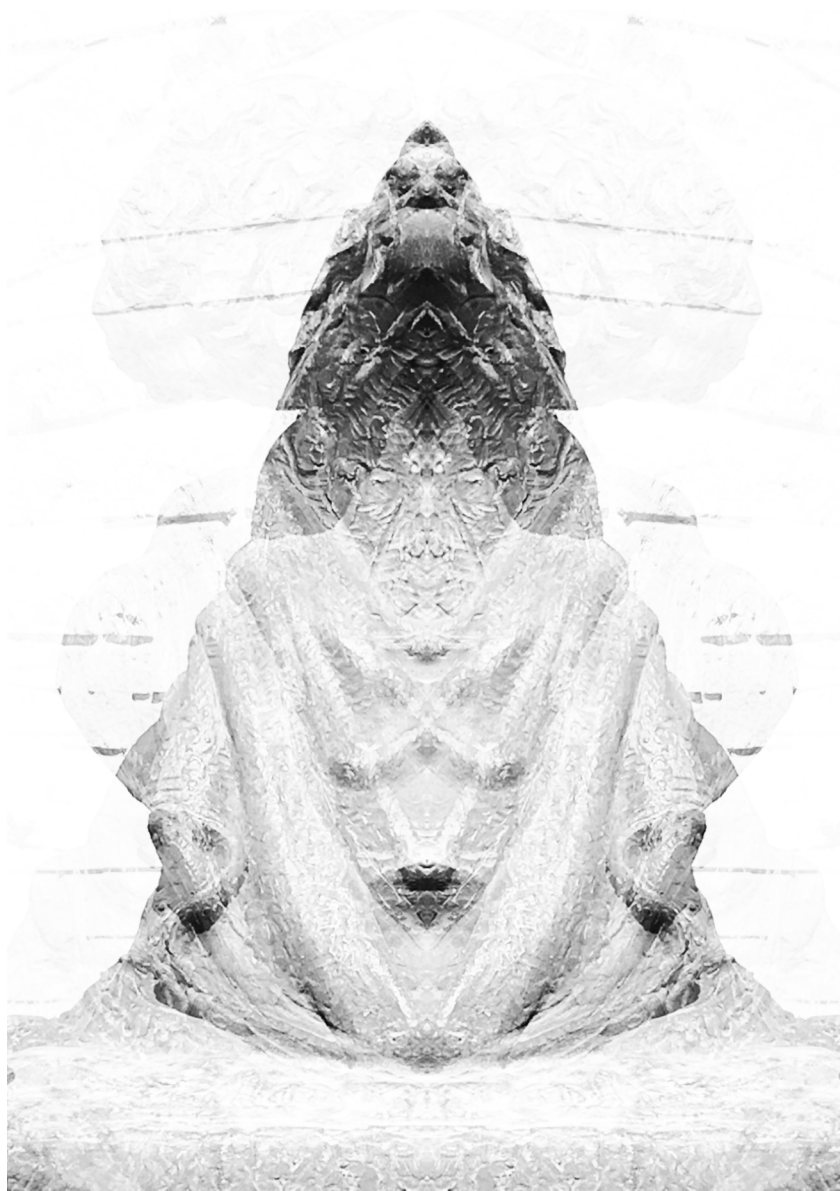
* * *

Dawn had lightened the sky over the graveyard. Auyomahlo laid there awhile, watching the slow shift of color above, breathing deeply. No creature had come to eat her, no one had attacked her in the night. Wilaf’s threats had been empty. He and Massioul at least had the sense to fear curses and taboos.

She sat up and drank water, listening to the *tice*’s bedtime songs, allowing herself the luxury of waking slowly. Massioul be damned—she doubted anyone would hurry her along before dawn’s full blush anyway.

She rolled up her blanket, fetched fresh water, and heaved everything onto her back. The *tice* had fallen silent, ceding to the waking songs and scuffles of diurnal creatures. She crouched by Mün’s grave, placing her hand on the dirt. “Goodbye, Mün.”

Auyomahlo turned her back on him, on her home, and, for the first time, didn’t think about when she’d return.



The Enlightened One

by Jennifer Weigel

Reality

by Deborah Davitt

Such a sense of decadence
as your fingers skim,
greedy along my skin;
no words spoken
in silent dialectic—

You'd like to own me, wouldn't you—
that's the fetish that most tempts;
as you press me against
a cold-fogged window
our forms become distorted.

It's not a question of ethics,
or even hegemony;
I'm a myth you've created in your mind
made up of tidbits from my dating profile
with no substance in reality.

You've got to let me go now;
it'll be for your own good.
But when I tell you I'm not real,
that I'm a fiction,
down to my deep-faked face
(I wear it like a mask)—

you reply that your reality
has no meaning
without me.

Those words shouldn't touch me
they're no more real than I am.

I let you sink in torpor,
dreaming of worlds that aren't
and never will be real;
as much an invention of your fancy
as I ever was—

except, my darling,
I think I might be
far more real than you.

Moon Lodge

by Alyce Lomax

Before Joe hit the road on his collision course with the Moon Lodge, he claimed Bobby had reached out to him. If you could have seen the look in his eyes, Genevieve, you wouldn't have corrected him. You wouldn't have had the heart to tell him that Bobby was dead.

I know it sounds ridiculous. Bobby's been gone for ten years. Barack Obama was still president. That weasel hadn't gotten into the Large Hadron Collider. Donald Trump was still a reality TV guy nobody took seriously. It's been long enough for a hell of a lot of change, even a shift in the timeline if you subscribe to the weasel in the Large Hadron Collider theory of why it's all gone weird.

I'm not denying it—one of the things that has changed has been Joe. That tear of bad luck. Laid off, ex gone sideways, kids gone silent, the cancer scare, all of that after losing Bobby, his identical twin, his best friend, his rock. It got to the point where all I could think to do was nag. And nag. And nag. About going to therapists who he claimed didn't help anyway. Nag about seeing a shrink, nag about how the shrink was the only path to getting back on his feet.

And then he insisted Bobby had called him on the phone.

From the Moon Lodge.

What was I supposed to think?

OK, maybe I should have been more understanding, Genevieve, but it didn't seem to add up to anything good to me.

I didn't correct him, no. But I did just fast forward, tell him I thought he needed to be committed. That's worse, right? Or is it? I don't even know. I know it sounds cruel, but my intentions were good, I swear they were—the thought that he would be safe and monitored. The thought he could snap out of whatever this was.

“Where even *is* this Moon Lodge?” I asked, convinced it was a figment.

Those icy blue eyes of his went wild. He ran his hand through his silver-tinged hair, gone long and feral, unwashed for I'm not sure how long—yet still he managed to have better hair than me, truth be told. “It's in Virginia,” he said.

“So, like three hours away?” I still didn't think it was real, this Moon Lodge. Who names a motel such a thing?

“More like six. Virginia's a big state.” He took a deep breath, backing away from me. “It doesn't matter how far away it is, this is *Bobby* we're talking about.”

Every inch of me was exhausted. I flopped onto the couch, opened the drawer in the coffee table that held a cigarette pack

with only two stale ones left from my quit date a year ago, lit one up without even a thought to do otherwise. It was like *that*, Genevieve. I exhaled the gray column of smoke, thought *thank you God* as the rush of that old friend protected me from the image of the gray tombstone with the words BOBBY CHRISTIANSEN, the pile of red dirt, the weeping mourners, *you*, Genevieve.

The nicotine left me once removed from the memory, helped me not to feel something other than just a remote acknowledgment of the concept of sadness, like every decent chemical dealer of death does, some more than others.

“Don’t you dare say it, Bridget,” he implored.

I looked at him helplessly, took another drag, then tapped the filter with my thumb.

“Don’t you dare,” he repeated. He sounded strung high like a wire. “Don’t say it.”

I took a huge drag, watching the orange cherry lay waste to the paper and tobacco, the ash expanding to an epic degree, like that meme with Shelley Duvall in *The Shining*, that fucking legend and RIP.

“Bobby’s *dead*,” I said, taking the dare.

So of course the Moon Lodge exists. If you were an angel, though, I don’t think it’s where you would go, let’s just put it that way. Well, okay—on the other hand, maybe. An angel whose specific business consists of lost souls and extreme, fear-

less hunters of cheap lodging.

A motel that’s dug in like a ponderous blight, conveniently located across from a 7-11 and a Tobacco Kingdom, and separated from a shabby neighborhood by a stand of sad, threadbare pine trees. The serpentine procession of single-room, one-story lodging features an exterior that’s a dingy beige hue, like walls that are somehow nicotine stained on the outside, and it’s tempting to believe it started out some other color whenever the paint was fresh, whenever that might have actually been. The main office is in a two-story manor-looking house, from which the flat-top strands of rooms spring, forming three sides of a square around a liberally potholed parking lot.

That one short, sad tree out front that seems to bend from the burden of living there. Like you wonder what it would say if it could speak.

I’m sorry to ramble about things you already know. It just helps to talk it through.

I didn’t think much of it when Joe didn’t come home for a day. We’d been arguing a lot and I already mentioned that I do know that I was nagging, and sometimes he’d go to his buddy Galen’s house after work and spend the night, to play videogames and smoke weed or whatever those guys do, at least that’s where he always said he was and I didn’t really question it. I shouldn’t admit it, Genevieve, but getting a break here and there was a *relief*. My nerves were shot and I felt like I was *this close* to being the one who should be committed, if only to get a rest from everything. Don’t get me wrong, I know the grippy sock vacation isn’t really a break, it’s a breakdown, and there’s nothing relaxing about that institutional check-in, but I felt *this close* for sure. My workdays were bookended with 45-minute subway

rides on either side of masquerading as someone who has no personal feelings or problems allowed to come to the surface, much less an ex-husband housemate at home who was losing the plot completely. Obviously, though, the reality was that I wasn't allowed to lose the plot too, and I kind of wanted to, if that makes sense. Why couldn't I be the one for once? Why can't I have a turn and slip away?

Anyway, it was Day 2 when I got home from work and the silence echoed back at me heavy with accusation, and I started to seriously wonder where Joe actually was. You know my mother always said I was too anxious, like blowing off actual pathology and instead portraying that my personal anxiety was to an *annoying* degree, as if I have gone around all my life trying to drive everyone crazy, so I opened a bottle of wine and tried to squash the feeling, frankly annoyed at myself. Maybe it made sense that Joe would stay at Galen's longer. I had said hurtful things several nights before, I didn't mean to threaten him that he had to get out and find his own way, but I was tired of the bizarre behavior and the sense that he was stuck, and so was I. I never told you this, it's a tired, sad story—we basically split up two years before, we didn't get infected with COVID but still, I credit that pandemic with doing our relationship in, and economics hadn't allowed him to leave. At what point was I allowed to just say, this can't go on like this anymore? Of course that did feel overly cruel, now that I think about it. I loved the man once. We'd kissed in the rain, made each other laugh, we'd had big dreams, though if you asked me to name one dream now, Genevieve, I wouldn't be able to tell you.

So I got super drunk on my own, pretended he was still at Galen's even though in my heart of hearts, I suspected that wasn't true, watched the Hallmark Channel to sink into the plastic comfort of a guaranteed happy ending, and went to bed.

So it was Day 3 of No-Show Joe, Genevieve, when I got home from work and got really worried. The house already had this weird, stale feeling that's hard to explain ... it's not like Joe imbued some real freshness to the place, clearly, but it was like the sensation of long-still air in a vault, undisturbed and heavy, a mausoleum feeling. As if even having another human in there just being and moving had kept things circulating, and I was simply not enough to get it done. It was so pin-drop silent I could hear the wall clock ticking in the living room, but then realized that I actually hadn't put a battery in that thing for years.

The sound stopped.

I shrugged off the willies, collapsed onto the couch and took the plunge, searching my contacts for Galen and thinking about buying more cigarettes. It took me a while to recall that in some fit of irritation years ago I had changed Galen's contact name in my phone to "Game Boy."

"Hi Galen, it's Bridget," I said, then cleared my throat, cringing at the awkwardness.

"Oh ... hey Bridget," Galen said, sounding surprised. "Long time."

"Yeah, it has been." My stomach literally dropped, if you can believe that—it isn't just a saying. Surprised wasn't a good sign. "Is Joe over there by chance?"

"Damn, Bridget, I haven't seen or heard from Joe for months."

"Crap," I said. "Crap, crap, crap."

"What's going on?" I heard the greedy intake and pause of a

bong hit. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Joe’s mental health has been really shaky,” I answered, grabbing one of those stress relief balls off the coffee table and squeezing it like I could make it scream louder than I wanted to. “Sometimes he would leave for a day or two and say he was going to your place, but I guess not.”

“Nope. Damn.” He paused, long enough for me to wonder what he might be holding back. “*Damn*. Dammit Joe. What can I do?”

“I don’t know, Galen. I’ll let you know if I think of something.” By “think of something,” I meant something about any of it, not just how Galen may or may not help. The easy, relieving answer was nowhere to be found.

“Look, Bridget, just let me know if there’s something I can do. And if I hear anything from any of our mutual buds I’ll let you know.” He sighed. “You do know I wasn’t part of any, uh, *secrets*, you know? Like I really mean that I haven’t heard from him in ages. I’m not bullshitting you, I swear. Keep me posted?”

“Of course not, Galen,” I said. Did I believe him? Maybe, maybe not, but I couldn’t even bring myself to think it mattered all that much at this point. “OK, I’m going to go figure this out, thanks.” I hung up, alone again in the silent house, wondering what the next step was, hoping Joe would burst through the door and render this new development moot. I still had the mortgage to pay; hell, I still had *all* the bills to pay, Genevieve. I didn’t have time for a manhunt. I had a feeling the police wouldn’t take it too seriously, either. Grown adults are allowed to go missing if they want. He wasn’t even technically my husband anymore, just my housemate who might be teetering on the brink of one

last poor decision.

By the way, I like what you’ve done to your hair, Genevieve. It’s absolutely transformative. I know I’m going on about this, and you probably don’t want to hear it, but I just feel like I need to get it off my chest, and I’ve had so much caffeine. You don’t mind, do you?

Should I have called the cops? Maybe, probably. But like I said, I could just hear them tell me that I was the crazy one, that he probably just ... left. As he is allowed to do. Even with mental health challenges, mental illness isn’t a crime, at least not until there *is* one, if you know what I mean. As long as he isn’t hurting anyone, isn’t hurting himself, there’s nothing anyone can do, particularly an ex-wife who still isn’t over the wish that it all could have been different but feeling powerless to change any of it.

Still, I couldn’t just do nothing, could I? I swallowed my shame at the massive invasion of privacy and found the spare key to his tiny room, which had been the home office we shared before we split, the room we’d originally envisioned as the nursery until we realized kids of our own just weren’t happening.

I also swallowed my fear at what might lurk behind that door.

It could have been worse, but it could have been better, too. I had worried about discovering maybe rotting food or emptied liquor bottles or even tiny plastic resealable baggies of unknown colorful pills mocking me (SURPRISE! TIME FOR A GOOGLE SEARCH!), but really it was just a room stuffed with papers, a fire hazard of papers, just everywhere, full of scrawlings and cryptic symbols. Stuffed beneath the single bed we’d crammed in there, hanging out from between the mattress and

box spring, carpeting the surface of the bed so that you had to already *know* there was a bed under all that mess, Bible-thick stacks, taped to the walls, yellow legal paper pages, white copy paper, occasionally messages scribbled on the back of a cardboard cereal box. Scribble, scribble, scribble. Some were even folded into exquisite origami but written on just the same.

A mile-long CVS receipt tacked to the wall caught my eye, given the bled-through lines of Sharpie ink on the back. Moon Lodge, Moon Lodge, Moon Lodge, it said over and over, about fifty times.

I stood in the middle of the mess pondering the dead trees that all this represented, and whether any of what he had recorded was even based on anything real. I couldn't make heads nor tails of the symbols, of course. I didn't know who the Moonside Emperor was, after all, or Our Lady of Lucky Breaks, or, simply, NECROMANCER. In fact, I didn't want to know. I felt too tired to face mystery or whimsy or nightmare.

"Bobby says bring \$500" scrawled in pencil on a hot pink Post-It note I found lying limp on the windowsill didn't sound good. I knew full well Joe couldn't get \$500. But maybe I was underestimating events that I couldn't even think to name.

"God," I said out loud, the padding of the paper-piled room somewhat swallowing my voice, making me small, inconsequential. "Fucking Moon Lodge. Joe, what's happened to you?"

Am I the best ex-wife ever, Genevieve? Or the worst? Before his disappearance, I suppose I flattered myself over my own magnanimity, giving him a place to live even though romantically and in the partnership sense, we were *so done*. Codependent and arguably pathetic, I know. But this was beyond the

pale, and I could feel myself unwilling to do more. Dragging my feet about what to do next. Possibly becoming more culpable in his downfall with every second, maybe even culpable for his death.

What would I tell his kids? They were mad at him now, influenced by his *other* ex-wife, unmoved by his run of bad luck not to mention his issues, but that doesn't always last forever. Sometimes people want reconciliation, or at the very least, just answers later in life. Some sort of closure. What about that? Was it even my business anymore?

What would you have done, Genevieve?

Maybe I was channeling you when I keyed "Moon Lodge, VA" into my browser. You always had a take-charge, ask-questions-later attitude that I truly envied as I'd hem and haw, dragged to a halt thinking "what if" this, and "I'm worried" that. And there it was, real, in all its one-star review glory.

I mean, at first it sounded scary in all the most mundane ways that you could have guessed without paging through the notes left by people connected enough to the living world to actually have the wherewithal to leave a review. Rat and cockroach sightings. Ceiling leaks, damp carpet, and the inevitable mold infestations. Curtains festooned with cigarette burns, comforters spattered with red wine or worse.

"There's no Bible in here, and it sure could use one," one reviewer complained.

Noise complaints. Smell complaints. Every variety of eyesore.

Of course, some basically said that for \$50 a night, it was worth

it if you're on a tight budget. Just bring some air freshener, pack your own towels and bedding if possible, and leave the lights on.

Oddly, though, a few reviews discussed a surprisingly good daily complimentary continental breakfast in the main building, complete with endless coffee, an array of Danish choices, individual yogurts, and actual fresh fruit.

Even more oddly, though, a few other reviews discussed intruders who turned out to be ghosts.

Terror Lodge, the review by MissKit573 blared. "If you're looking for a cheap stay right off of I-81, look no further. Just don't expect to SLEEP. I know people here talk about the roaches and the loud neighbors, but I woke up in the middle of the night with a SHADOW PERSON at the foot of my bed. It grabbed my FOOT as I turned on the light then DISAPPEARED!!!! I am not kidding, this really happened!"

Moon Lodge replied: "We're so sorry you didn't have a restful night. Talk to us at the front desk and we'll give you a free night. We've called exterminators. Don't forget the complimentary continental breakfast!"

Another review by JKJ read simply, **INFESTATION!!!** "By demons, I mean. They should pay YOU to sleep at this joint."

Moon Lodge replied: "We're sorry you didn't enjoy your stay. By the way, we're demon-free here."

Maybe I'm naïve and don't get out enough, Genevieve, but I have never seen a review thread like this. It was hard to stop scrolling and put the phone down to formulate a plan or lack

thereof.

Then this one did me in.

GRANDMA? BellaBella said, "I regretted reserving a room at Moon Lodge as soon as I pulled into the parking lot. I should have chosen one of the other bargain hotels down the road but this one was slightly cheaper. But the minute I pulled in I felt like, this sense of despair? It was so weird. I decided to just suck it up, like how bad could it be for one night and it fit my budget. I'm in between jobs but my grandmother passed away and I had to travel to her funeral in Florida and every penny counted. In the middle of the night, I woke up to someone in the corner of my room singing "Rock-A-Bye Baby"—it was my grandmother. I swear on her memory. I opened my eyes and saw her shadow. I AM SURE IT WAS HER! When I turned on the light, she was gone but I could smell her perfume. I guess I shouldn't have been scared because it was my grandma, but it terrified the sh*t out of me and I checked out in the middle of the night. They gave me a cheese Danish to take on the road, which was nice under the circumstances I guess??"

The Moon Lodge made no reply.

I finally put my phone down and pressed fingertips against my temples to combat the sharp headache that was coming on. That was the exact type of headache that always hit me when I was fighting back tears, trying not to feel emotions, putting myself in avoidance mode.

The house's silence weighed in, expectant and pressuring. With no regular cadence, the kitchen sink dripped from the faucet, reverberating through the quiet with its next *plop* mocking and impossible to predict. The walls felt close, stifling, like the place

was closing in on me. My very home felt like an enemy to peace. One of its own was in danger and the other was trying to refuse to take the call, was considering letting nature take its course. So inhuman. But probably, on the other hand, *very* human, am I right, Genevieve? The right thing is so often not the easy thing. Sometimes you just don't want to know, don't want to *do*.

Like I could just keep going to work, keep paying the bills, trying to cower in the unyielding yet somehow comforting slog of *The Daily Routine of Capitalist Society*—like at least I know what to *do*—while the house blamed me, while Joe's large absence threatened to swallow me up a little at a time until whatever terrible thing that happened to him caught up with me at last and forced me to look. I guess I do still love him, Genevieve, otherwise I would have left it alone, right? Shrugged and figured out the excuses later. I could have insisted to everyone, most of all myself, that *I had already done enough* and that there was nothing left to do.

What a way to realize I hadn't been magnanimous at all, as I looked up the route to the Moon Lodge. I simply still loved the guy and had held him for safekeeping inside a tiny room, hoping he'd become himself again, and we could go about our business again with our dreams and our daily laughs or whatever.

I left at 6pm without even emailing my manager about the fact that I wouldn't be coming into the office in the morning. I only had a few days of time off left and it was only late November, still time to need time off, and I guess in my panic, I almost convinced myself there was some way I'd be able to get back before anybody even knew the difference.

Remember when we used to do that, Genevieve? Spontaneous

road trips, ride or die, definitely no thoughts of letting anyone know. I lost my job at the Gap one of the times we did that back in the old days, way before Joe and Bobby. You and I just took off for the beach on a whim, punctuating the time with coffees then wine coolers and not stopping till we saw the sun rising above the line of the sea, the smell of salt in the air, a display that was just for the two of us. It was so much better than folding khakis, until I had to face the consequences.

Of course, this wasn't that kind of road trip at all, it was a trip into the unknown and unspoken, punctuated with grim bathroom breaks at gas-peddling purveyors of convenience, RoFos and Sheetzes and Wawas along the way as the odometer rolled and rolled, with me alternating between coffees and energy drinks as the evening grew darker into full night and the clock crept closer to my usual bedtime and then passed it. About halfway through the trip I broke down during one of my stops and bought a pack of Marlboro Golds, because of course I did, that year quit officially down the drain because all bets were off, smoke 'em if you got 'em. This operation called for any legal stimulant I could get, although I did notice that on several of my pitstops, it was probably possible to easily find plenty of illegal stimulants, too. Sad, grey towns that often seemed populated with shadowy night people with empty eyes who certainly didn't make me feel better about my errand.

One of them looked like you, Genevieve, but with dirty blonde hair and flat jade green eyes as if you'd lost all your light. Don't ever let that happen to you, okay, Genevieve? I couldn't bear it.

They talk about highway hypnosis and that's how it got as the trip wore on, just me occasionally getting passed by huge trucks on I-81. Several times as my eyelids grew heavy and sought to betray me, I thought about just stopping at some other roadside

motel three, two, one hours away. Would an overnight really hurt anything at this point? I know that's incredibly weak, but the caffeine and nicotine weren't really up to the challenge after a certain point. I popped a curiously strong mint I found in a tin in my handbag; it made my eyes water and my mouth sizzle, snapping me back to alert at least for a few more miles. I rolled down the car windows to let in the sharp winter air, cold and miserable yet obviously invigorating. Do you know what I realized I hadn't done about an hour away from my destination, Genevieve? I hadn't come up with any scenarios about what I was going to find and what I was going to do when I found it. My known generalized anxiety disorder had been extremely—and unusually—general.

Of course, that simple realization tipped off my brain and the dread started in, making it difficult to keep my foot down on the accelerator. Was I just going to bear witness to Joe's downward spiral? And what would I do then?

Would it be safe for me, if he were that far gone?

And of course, the worst-case scenario: what if he wasn't alive?

Then, of course, the ultimate question flashed, unbidden, across my consciousness.

What if Bobby *wasn't* dead?

I laughed into the frigid wind battering me through the open windows, took another sip of now less-than-even-lukewarm coffee. Where had that bizarre thought even come from? Joe was obviously paranoid and delusional, and this destination was where his paranoia and delusion had taken him. Random, and sad, with no real reason for any of it.

At any rate, the dark stretch of hundreds of miles behind me meant I was getting closer to arrival, and possibly—hopefully—the answers I needed, even if it only meant finding out where Joe was. I tried not to think about how my mental health might suffer if he wasn't there at all.

I just want you to know how I perceived it as I approached: I saw the beacon of the Tobacco Kingdom first; even though it was closed, its sign glared out into the darkness, as well as a variety of neon-type signage advertising VAPES! KRATOM! CBD! DELTA! And of course, next door, the fluorescent, ever-open 7-11, where flashing police lights told the story of one of those nights, or perhaps every night was. The Moon Lodge's sign was downright subdued next to these, restful but really, seemingly half lit, with "VACANCY" below the image of a pale cheese-colored crescent moon. I bumped through the potholes in the half-empty parking lot and slid the car into a space in front of the main building. Shadows slipped and darted into unlit corners near the edges of the strips of rooms, shadows variety sized such that they might be rats, might be people, might be extremely *large* rats again. Then again, might be trick of the eyes—maybe it was too much caffeine, I thought, making me jumpy and paranoid too.

The main lobby was nicer than I had expected of a one-star motel (and I know this reeks of privilege, Genevieve, my way of vacationing these last years has been to go big or stay home, so given my budget, I mostly stay home). That mosaic of the crescent moon rising above the forested stream at the front counter. That small portable decorative fountain on the side of the counter, the tinkling of its running water competing with the sound of television in the room behind the wall with the mosaic. That desk bell with a yellow smiley face, which I paused before ringing, once again realizing that I didn't really have a plan for

this.

That grey-haired man who emerged promptly, though a bit dazed. “Can I help you?”

“I hope so,” I said. “I’m looking for —”

“Do you have a reservation?” he asked, opening a beat-up looking laptop.

“Oh ... well, no. I’m looking for —”

That knowing look he shot at me! “Ma’am, I should really start this out letting you know that we feel real strong about privacy here.”

“Oh. Huh.” I laughed, uncomfortable. Probably not the best response.

“We really try to ... how do you say it. It’s late at night,” he said, pointing to his wrist, then burst out, “Discretion! I think I’m getting closer to what I’m trying to say. We try to preserve our guests’ discretion!”

I stood there, and I admit it, Genevieve, I think I looked pretty dumb as I stared at him. A seven-hour drive and I was standing here getting shut down over discretion. But of course discretion might be important here. And of course maybe he had all kinds of people come here looking for their lost, many of whom truly may not want to be found—like, maybe Joe, to be fair.

I made a big production of taking my wallet out of my handbag. “I get it. Can I get a room anyway? I just drove for seven hours.”

His obstinate expression melted. “Of course! And I won’t tell anyone *you’re* here, either!” he added, which frankly gave me the creeps.

“Oh, *plenty* of people know I was coming here,” I fibbed quickly, pulling out my credit card. “No secret keeping on my account.” I put the card on the counter and also retrieved my phone, paging through my camera roll as he went about his business on the computer.

After he had run my card and I signed on the dotted line, I attacked. “This guy!” I said, holding up my phone with a close-up of Joe in better days. “Joe Christiansen. I’m his wife,” I desperately lied to avoid the complicated truth, “and he hasn’t been home for a few days. He left notes at home about this place, and I fear he ... isn’t well. He’s not in trouble with me or the law or anything. I’m just worried about him.”

Mr. Discretion took on a pained and torn expression. “Let me get your key,” he said, taking a huge keyring out of his pocket and opening a firesafe that held the actual room keys. “I think maybe I have seen that guy, and I worried about him as well,” he muttered casually, under his breath, almost like he was pretending not to be talking to me, scrabbling through until he found a specific key ring. “I think Room 16 will be ... perfect for you.” His eye twitched, either a tic or a wink, I wasn’t sure.

“Okay ... thank you?” I said, hoping for more.

“Have a great night’s sleep,” he said. “Don’t forget the continental breakfast in the morning! It starts at 7am sharp.”

The room door closest to the main lobby building was 1, so I got

back in my car to drive however many feet it was to Room 16, although I assumed it was around the side, facing the 7-11 and Tobacco Kingdom. I was unbelievably exhausted but gripped the steering wheel and fantasized about driving all the way home again, getting showered and heading to work like nothing had ever happened other than an extremely bad case of insomnia. Instead I drove to the closest parking space to Room 16, and saw it—Joe’s beat-up but truly beloved old Honda Civic.

It wasn’t proof that he was okay, but it was more proof of life and actual whereabouts than I had had just minutes before. I emerged from the car. The police lights were still spinning behind me, and there was a watchful, expectant feel in the air that of course, I was probably just spinning up in my anxiety. But I thought I saw curtains moving in the window next to Room 16. What would you have done, Genevieve? I think you would have knocked on the doors of the rooms closest to Room 16, but to me, it seemed smarter to do it once the sun came out in the morning. I was alone, after all, and this was the most alone I had ever felt in my life. In a strange place, miles from home, with no one as backup, no one to call on.

I unlocked Room 16 and quickly darted inside and locked the deadbolt behind me. Now granted, this is not exactly the most secure door and lock I have ever encountered. The door is plywood or something and the knob felt wobbly in my hand. A deadbolt is all fine and dandy unless someone can conceivably literally kick the door down. I caught a pronounced smell of air freshener that I was certain covered up something else far less pleasant. I became convinced someone was waiting in there, watching me, so I desperately fumbled on the wall for a light switch, but when I activated the weak light, I found nothing and no one, just an extremely plain and utilitarian yet seemingly surprisingly tidy room.

I collapsed onto the bed, which groaned in protest, its hard mattress struggling to yield. In testament to my ever-annoying anxiety, I flipped over and looked under the bed using my phone’s flashlight, where I spotted what appeared to be, inexplicably, a shriveled plum on top of a formidable layer of what I believed to be dust.

Now what, Genevieve? That’s what I thought. Now what?

A dog barked somewhere, brayed in the uneasy night.

I didn’t want to touch the plum but also had a feeling it would haunt me that night if I didn’t dispose of it. Those two impulses warred with one another for a substantial amount of time before I decided to do nothing. This would normally be a problem I’d toss to Joe—he was having his issues, but he wouldn’t think twice about grabbing that thing while I yelled, “Use a Kleenex! Don’t touch it with your hand!” and throwing it outside to decompose or feed the supposed pests, and he’d never look back, either.

It’s funny, Genevieve. I said I liked your new hairstyle, but there’s more that’s changed about you. Again, I’m not saying you don’t look great, but ...

Well. So many mysteries.

And well past the witching hour, you’d think I would have just drifted off to sleep there on that bed as my mind spun on the fate of the sinister plum—I don’t know why I felt that way about a piece of fruit, but I did—but I realized that a muffled sound from behind the headboard, in the next room, which I had dismissed as too-high TV volume, was in fact a conversation. Male voices.

I spotted a questionably clean water glass that had been left on the cheap dresser where the small TV in my own room was, and gently, ever so gently placed it against the wall and listened, like in the old movies and also feeling very stupid because how could that work? And do you want to know what, Genevieve? It did kind of work.

And I was almost positive it was Joe. The cadence of his words that I couldn't quite make out, the haltingness he'd presented of late. The occasional little uncomfortable chuckle that didn't mean anything was funny, more like the entire world around him was a puzzle, a "what can you do?" kind of laugh.

Then, the other voice. Deep and muffled, seemingly further away.

I felt like I was also getting whiffs of a scent emanating through the wall, one I couldn't place. Like sulfur.

"Stop being so weird," I whispered to myself.

Both men began laughing heartily as if on cue.

That's when the knock on the door nearly caused me to drop my old-school surveillance device. Brisk, familiar. That take-charge attitude.

So now I've caught you up, Genevieve. I don't know how you knew I was here, and I'm not sure why you don't quite look like yourself. And now that I really think about it, it's been such a tremendously long time, and thinking about the last time I saw you gives me that ever-so-annoying *anxiety* and I have to just ... stop. Your nails are dirty, so unlike you, and you could use some concealer too, truth be told. Those deep blue shadows beneath

your eyes, you look like the definition of world-weary.

I don't mean to give you a hard time. God, come to think of it, I'm so tired too.

And I can't believe I sounded so critical! It's like I'm your mom, bless her soul! I like your new perfume. It smells like fresh-cut grass beaded with dew, that early morning scent. I also still smell that odor from behind the wall.

You still don't want to talk? Should we go over to the 7-11 like old times, like when we were kids, and buy some Mad Dog 20/20 on a lark and bark at the moon? Maybe we could run away from everything.

I know, there's work to do. Putting everything to rights. Come on, come with me, let's knock next door. With you here, I'm not scared anymore.

We pound on the door, and Joe cracks it open, check out that furtive expression, hiding who's inside! "Bridget ...? I really needed some time to figure some things out." He looks so surprised. I guess I would too, to see both of us standing here at the door, so far from home.

"Joe ... I've been so damn worried. I drove seven hours."

Genevieve, I'm just standing here waiting for you to yell, "SURPRISE!" Or *something*. I guess not. I guess you're waiting for some perfect moment to assert yourself. I feel like I'm missing something big, missing something with everyone. It's occurring to me that we used to finish each other's sentences, kind of like Joe and Bobby would do, come to think of it, so of course it's not weird that you can read my mind.

I jam my foot in Joe's door to prevent it from closing—isn't that funny, that that's actually a thing you can do, and not just a metaphor for breadcrumbs to opportunity? I guess I need to say something to fill the gap, so here goes: "*Haven't you ever heard of leaving a note?*" I see you laughing at me. "And I don't mean millions of cryptic messages."

"You didn't understand. You weren't nice about Bobby. There was nothing to say."

"Okay. I admit it. I could have been less ... blunt about the situation."

"Yeah, you got that right."

"Aren't you going to open the door?"

"I don't think Bobby wants to see you. It's all very hurtful."

"Well ... Joe. I think Bobby's beyond caring about it too much."

"Not at all, Bridget. Not at all. Just go home, please. Okay? I'm fine. I'll come home once I've figured some stuff out. Bobby's helping me figure out what I've lost. What we've lost."

"We've lost *everything!*" I am so exasperated. Hasn't it been obvious for years?

"It's so much worse than you're even willing to admit, Bridget. That's part of our problem."

Why don't you have anything to say, Genevieve? Once again, I fill the gap. "Joe, you're being rude ignoring Genevieve. Let us in."

"What the fuck, Bridget? That's not funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny. Would I drive seven hours just to be funny? *Call in sick to work just to be funny?*"

He yells something unintelligible in his frustration and lets loose of the door and I'm falling inside like a sack of potatoes, onto my hands and knees on the rough, cigarette cherry-pocked carpet. I wonder why you didn't catch me before I fell, Genevieve, my palms are smarting, my knees feeling broken. I labor to get up, stiff from the long drive and, let's face it, middle age.

You don't see Bobby either, do you, Genevieve? This truly isn't a reunion of his twin and my best friend. His twin and my best friend who fell in love. His twin and my best friend who fell out of love. His twin and my best friend who —

"Joe. Bobby's not here."

The deafening, expectant silence, swallowing us all up in this dim, sulfur-smelling cubicle.

I wait for Joe to speak; he looks more himself than he has for ages, truth be told, in case you're wondering why he doesn't look the way I described him. His hair is trimmed neatly, he has shaved off the sloppy, crumb-catching beard I hated so much, his clothes are neat and tidy.

Most of all, he appears to exude—pity?

"Bridget. *Genevieve's* not here."

"Please, Joe."

This is why Joe and I had problems, isn't it? Increasingly unable to land on the same page—hell, maybe not even in the same book—unable to see things the same way? But this, *this* feels so next-level fatal it's taking my breath away.

“Bridget, Bobby told me what really happened that night.”

“We *know* what happened that night. It was a terrible tragedy, a random, homicidal act.” My stomach, full of so much coffee, rumbles, threatens. “It was horrible. I know you lost so much, Joe. I know losing Bobby has been so damned hard to get over.”

It's not funny, Genevieve. Why have you always laughed at things that aren't funny? I suppose it's a coping mechanism, but sometimes it makes you seem like a psycho. Now is one of those times.

“It wasn't random. Genevieve shot him. He's admitted he cheated on her, but she plotted it out. Arranged for him to meet her in that park. Shot him dead and faked her alibi and had the nerve to show up at the funeral.”

“Joe, that's ridiculous and you know it.” Genevieve, don't you have anything to say about these allegations? You always had a flaming temper. And sometimes it did careen over the edge of rationality. I always did pity anyone who crossed you. But! But I know you have a good heart—you have to, because I love you like a sister. You cried more than anyone at Bobby's funeral. Your sorrow was so deep and gigantic, Joe and Bobby's mother laid aside her own grief and comforted *you*. It was like you had lost everything, had lost yourself.

My God.

How much of yourself did you lose?

Joe is going to keep going, isn't he? Until I scream “no more” ... I want the past to stay there, not come to life all over again in this crappy room, but not only can I not scream, I can't even speak. Frozen in place.

“Bobby told me that Genevieve ... took her own life yesterday evening. See what I did there? I said it *nice*ly. She finally couldn't take the guilt anymore. Someone will find her in that same park soon, when the sun comes up.”

I sit on the bed, more like collapsed. The right answer is, “That can't be true,” so why am I questioning? Maybe because come to think of it, you look so wrong, Genevieve. Like a semblance of yourself, just *off*. When you turn a certain way, your face does sag, one eye unfocused and staring into eternity. That striking new dye job and messy hair look could simply be blood-soaked and blown all to hell; I can't look so close.

The worst part is, after what Joe's said, after what I now see, I can't figure out which version of you frightens me more.

Should I believe that the Moon Lodge is where ghosts congregate? Or that Joe did something with \$500 that accomplished some summoning? Or that Joe is insane, or I am insane, or both of us are? Or, that we've somehow pushed through the confines of reality, found those we lost before we lost ourselves and each other, reunited at last with those we love best but also are staring at the bitter pill that maybe we never really do know anyone, examine it in our palms and consider swallowing it?

And once you do, how do you go back?

Forgive me, but I can't look at you anymore right now, Genevieve.

NECROMANCER, that one paper had said.

There's no such thing.

That stupid weasel in the Large Hadron Collider. I'm not saying it's the reason, but it is true, everything got weird, everything.

Everything but not *all of us*! Everything like politics. And news headlines. Billionaires gone batshit. But not *all of us*.

Reality couldn't have become that twisted that loyal, solid, sensitive Bobby could ever cheat. That was a man who wrote you love haikus on sticky notes and left them on the bathroom mirror to see before your morning routine, hearts and smiley faces and validation. All those bouquets just *because*. That time he walked a mile in the snow to meet you after your car got stuck, shepherded you home and dried your freezing tears.

The kind of couple that made Joe and I feel ourselves lacking, if you want one more truth flung onto the table.

How could *that* be a guy who would cheat? And how could it be that you, Genevieve, who claimed he calmed your riotous heart, could ever think to actually *murder* him over it—and hold that secret so long, so deviously. Visiting his resting place in mourn-

ing once a year at sunset, pouring out a scotch into a crystal glass that you'd set on his headstone, leaving him a Cuban cigar and a match, posting a solemn graveside selfie for the world to see (*O, my murdered love!*) before disappearing into the dusk.

None of this can possibly be real.

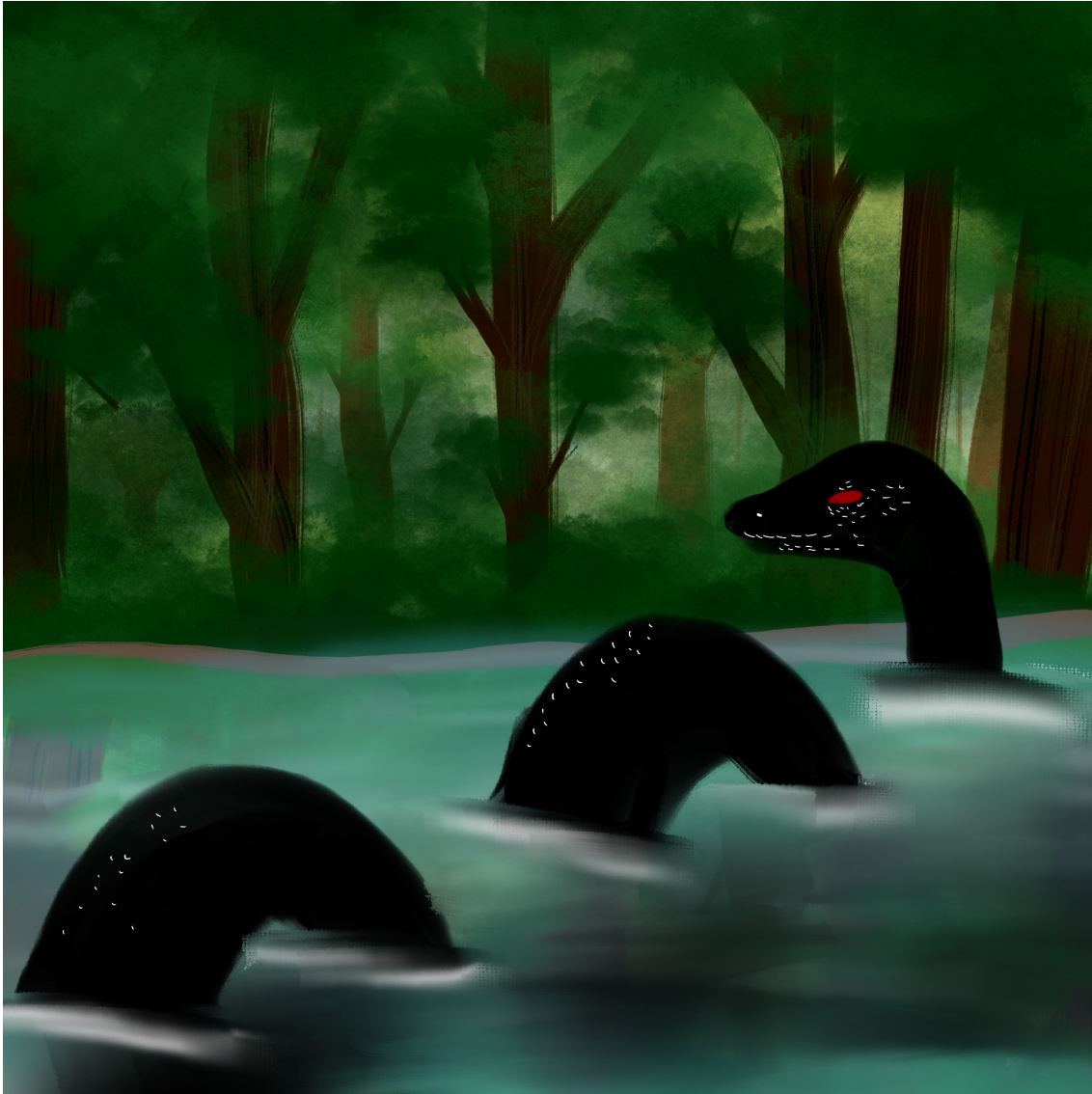
So why do I believe it? Further, why do I wonder if deep down, I knew all along?

"Oh Joe," I finally say, but that's it, like I slammed into a wall. Like shock and grief and realization have robbed me of words to speak.

And you're just standing there, Genevieve, no longer a force to be reckoned with, no longer vibrant, no longer silently laughing, the secrets are out and you're just cold and distant and throwing off an eerie curiosity about what happens now that I know the world's upside down and backwards.

That clock with dead batteries is ticking out there at home, I can hear it from here, the hands are lying about the exact hour and minute like everyone else has been, but it's still counting the time passing with fearful precision.

What happens now that we're here, reunited in heartbreak we're all completely clear about, trapped in this shabby room with all our ghosts?



Ogopogo

by Kasia Runté

Better Monster

by Beth Cato

she entered the midnight-black basement
she'd been scared of throughout
the months she'd lived
in the old Victorian

continuing downstairs
despite the lessons of a dozen
horror movies and her own
vivid imagination as the
violent thunderstorm made the
darkness even darker

she carried no weapons
only an offering of freshly
baked chocolate chip cookies
the batch still somewhat gooey
because the house had lost power
with two minutes left to bake

she had faith that
whatever was down here
growling and rustling and howling
was still better than what
awaited her upstairs
her boyfriend
trapped here for the night
drinking beers by flashlight

as he hinted a bit too heavily
about what they could do
to pass the time
even though they'd only been
together a few weeks and hadn't
done more than kiss

"hello," she said softly
to the impenetrable shadows
"if you don't attack me, I promise
I can bring you cookies more often.
I just want to hang out here and talk
if that's okay"

she heard a shuffle
the click of a claw against ceramic
as the plate became lighter
"okay" said a rumbly voice
"cookies are tastier than human flesh
anyway
what'd you like to talk about?"

Product Warnings

by Jennifer Crow

Is it safe to wash the cup I made
from the skull of my nemesis
in the dishwasher?

If the kitchen fire was caused
by my child microwaving
the golden idol of Xacmool,
will my insurance pay?

I had to drive my Civic
to the sixth circle of Hell
to pick up my heretic husband,
and now the transmission
slips—does that void
my warranty?

I didn't mean to drop
that hair dryer into the River Lethe.
Sorry about that—I forgot
about the dangers
of water and electricity.
And I forgot that I needed
to keep you safe.

Low Spirits

by Gordon Sun

The jangling phone jolts me out of my late afternoon stupor. I roll off the mattress and trudge to my desk to pick up the receiver.

“What is it, Lynn?” I mumble.

“Wake your ass up!” Lynn shouts over the din of the crowd in the bar outside, hoarse from chain smoking and years of yelling at drunks.

“Dammit, keep it down.”

“Someone’s here for you. Now get up and do your job so I can go back to mine.” I hear the clatter of glassware.

“You get a name?”

“She won’t say.” Lynn yells an order at someone in the background. “Sounds foreign, though.”

“What’s she want?”

“I’m not your damn secretary.”

“Fine, let her in.” I hang up. The prospective client enters my office as I’m combing my hair into place.

They say don’t judge a book by its cover. But this gal’s a glossy

porn rag soaked in poison. Milky skin, silky blonde hair underneath a wide-brimmed hat, big green eyes, pouty red lips, and a stylish overcoat that ends well north of her knees, showing off a slender pair of long legs perched on black pumps.

Socialite or hooker? Depends on your angle.

The woman seats herself before I can pull out her chair. “I am Katia,” she says in a lilting accent, crossing her legs. “I understand you can help me.”

Guessing she’s one of the 90% of my female clients who want to track down a wayward man. Menial, mindless stuff, but it covers rent. I quickly clear off my desk and pull out a stenographer pad and fountain pen. “Max Falls, at your service. What brings you here?”

“Беда, Mister Falls. Trouble.” The woman’s face hardens.

I pause briefly. “Russian?”

“Да,” Katia replies, nodding. “You speak my language?”

Russian’s uncommon around here. I picked some up a while back, enough to get by, but that’s nobody’s business. Wanna know why? Go to any South Side bar, any Strip dive, and watch what happens when someone puts Chancellor or Rather on the tube. Soon as they start reporting on the Commies, which is all

the time nowadays, tempers flare, bottles break, vets threaten to reenlist to beat the hell out of Brezhnev.

All-American here, but I don't want to get the crap knocked outta me just because I can pronounce да and нет correctly.

"Not a whole lot. Hopefully English works for you."

"It is fine."

"So, tell me about this trouble."

The woman removes her hat, letting her golden locks cascade down her shoulders. "I believe my *возлюбленный* is cheating on me."

I suppress a sigh. Another photo op. "You need pictures."

"Да. I need proof of infidelity."

I frowned. "Why? It's not a requirement to file for divorce."

Katia stares at the floor. "I was ... brought to the United States several years ago. At least with photo evidence, I may have a chance to stay."

"I see." Probably a mail-order bride, no green card. I'm a little surprised that the guy would pick someone out of the Evil Empire catalog, but beautiful women are wild cards. "Tell me about him. Who is he? What does he do?"

"His name is Peter Holland," Katia replies, handing over a photo. "I think he used to work for the American government. Now he just, what is the word ... 'consults.' Он советует."

I examine the photo. The sun-faded Polaroid shows Katia and Holland together at a black-tie ballroom affair. She's a stunner in a strapless black dress and a diamond necklace. He's in a tux, trim, with a full head of gray hair and a stern countenance. Looks to be in his late fifties, two or three decades older than the woman in front of me.

I start to hand the picture back, but she refuses. "You need it for your work."

"Sure." I drop the photo on the desk. "So, Peter Holland consults. On what?"

"I do not know. He sits in his office most of the day, talking on the phone. He does not tell me anything. At night, he goes out. When he comes home, he smells like ... another woman. Or women. I think there is more than one."

"Why would he do this?" Should've kept my mouth shut.

Katia smiles knowingly. "Who knows the thoughts of men?"

We talk a while longer. I gather data on Holland's work schedule, tennis club, favorite restaurants, potential locations for his wayward trysts. When we get to the issue of payment, she offers a surprisingly large figure, explaining that it's the entirety of her personal savings. Before I can protest, she says, "It will be worth it. I have the utmost confidence in you."

"I appreciate that, Mrs. Holland, but--"

"My surname is Belova," she interrupts, somewhat forcefully. Then, more softly, "But please call me Katia."

“Okay, Katia.” I pause briefly, collecting my thoughts. “One last thing before we finish. I’m curious how you found me. Who should I thank for the referral?”

“I overheard your name when Peter was on the phone.”

“Ah. Does he know me personally?” And do I know him?

“I am unsure. But he is a magician. Does that help at all?”

A magician?

Fuck.

* * *

The feds say less than 1% of all adults possess magical power, whether something classical like fire or air, modernist like metal or electricity, or the ultra-rare bloodborne variety. For most people, magic is more of a liability than anything. Accidental deaths are so common, the local news devotes a weekly segment to memorialize the poor bastards who self-immolate, drown, or asphyxiate trying out their powers for the first time.

I’m one of those odd ones “gifted” with blood magic, a grab bag of more psychological, difficult-to-classify skills: summoning familiars, telepathy, empathy, remote viewing, energy transfer, and so on. As I discovered during a reckless weekend binge in college, my skill set’s limited to summoning, with alcoholic spirits as my primer and my blood as the catalyst. I can only summon one of them for a few days at a time without blacking out, so I mostly use them as muscle. Keeps it simple. If I could remote view, this case--hell, my whole job--would be much easier.

Manny, my buddy in the local force, can’t find Holland in the MPR, the national registry for magic users, so I don’t know his repertoire. Back to basics. I start by tailing the guy.

The first night, while he’s in the bathroom at an Italian diner, I walk by his table and plant a listening device in his coat pocket. Outside, I secure a new earth magic-powered geolocation tracker to the underside of his red BMW M1. After he leaves the restaurant, I follow him to his triple-decker mansion in a Squirrel Hill enclave. Unfortunately, it’s too dark to see much behind the looming walls of his estate.

The days drag on. None of Holland’s conversations are with or about “other women.” There’s shop talk about business deals in the USSR, China, and Vietnam, but I’m not getting paid to investigate that. I start to question whether Holland’s really got a broad or two on the side. Then, the fourth evening after she first swept into my office, I run into беда.

I’m on a quick chow break in the Strip, leaving a Polish deli with a paper grocery bag filled with sausage, pierogis, and rolls. As I unlock my brown El Camino, I hear the shattering of a storefront window down the street. Two figures jump through the broken glass, eyes glazed and bloodied arms outstretched. The bodies are rigid, contorted, strings of spittle hanging from their lips.

Possessed humans? Must be a magician nearby.

I briefly consider leaping into the car and driving away, before tossing my food into the car instead. Sighing, I glance back at the two figures, who are mindlessly hopping in circles. Suddenly, as my hand reflexively drifts down to the pistol holstered at my waist, someone shoves my shoulder. I whirl around and

swing the gun up to eye level.

An Asian man, dressed in some sort of long blue robe and tasseled hat, stares at me with glowing red eyes. His skin is pasty, peeling, overgrown with green mold. I gag from the billowing stench of decaying flesh. But I steady myself, and I do what any reasonable guy would do when confronted by an honest-to-God zombie: put a bullet in its forehead.

It does nothing.

The bullet ricochets off the man's skull and smacks into a nearby tree trunk. My second shot embeds itself in his forehead but otherwise does nothing to slow him down. The zombie grunts and takes an awkward swing with his extended arms, barely missing the collar of my leather jacket. As his hands pass in front of my face, I feel a supernaturally deep chill penetrate my body, like being stuffed into an industrial freezer overnight. I backpedal before my limbs stiffen too much from the cold.

Suddenly, the creature yells out, "Falls!"

I freeze in shock. "How do you know me? Who are you?" My ears register faint screaming and the tinkling of broken glass in the distance.

"Zombie. Jiāngshī," the figure says, trying to close the gap between us with powerful leaps. "Peter Holland sends his regards."

I'm not prepared to engage further. Overcoming the stiffness in my legs, I sprint away as fast as I can, searching for a pay phone to call 911.

* * *

It's after 2 am. I'm at The Eighty, nursing my second shot of whiskey, when the cop finally arrives.

"Took you long enough, Manny," I mumble, pulling out a stool.

Manny Gutierrez, broad-chested and potbellied, settles his substantial girth onto the seat. The stool legs creak from his weight. Lynn hustles up, wiping an empty glass with a towel, but the cop waves her away. "On duty, sweetheart."

"Sure." The bartender moves over to a guy slumped at the counter two seats down, shaking his shoulder with a thin, tattooed hand.

Manny side-eyes me. "Well, dealing with some bastard's magical spawn ain't easy." He scratches his thick mustache and beard with a meaty finger. "Could've used your help. You're a registered wiz."

"Without any of the magical firepower." I take a slug of the whiskey. "I don't hang around when a bullet to the head doesn't solve the problem. Called it in like a good citizen."

Manny laughs darkly. "The boys upstairs had to dig out the manual on spirits. Fucking Chinese zombie. Some of them thought the Commies were invading."

"If we ever get invaded, I guarantee Pittsburgh's gonna be low on the list of priorities. How'd you kill him?"

"Fire. Literally had to spray him with gas and light a match." Manny fishes a cigarette out of a pack in his shirt pocket and

lights it, inhaling the fumes deeply. “Lucky for us, all the poor bastards he infected stopped jumping around when he went down. They’ve all been taken to hospitals.”

“Sounds like you handled it okay.”

“Wasn’t just us. Buncha G-men showed up.”

“What?”

“FBI, man. They don’t like Red wizards and their toys popping up on American soil. At least, that’s what I thought at first.”

“Not Chinese, Manny. Zombie said it was a guy named Peter Holland.”

“Yeah, the men in black said the same thing.” Manny coughs into his fist. “Max, the Zombie was a goddamn CI.”

Surprised, I knock over the shot glass. “What? An informant?”

“Yeah, for the feds.” Manny takes another deep pull on his cig. “We didn’t know that, of course, before we set the bastard on fire. Nothing left but glowing ash.”

“Right.” I wipe the spill with a wad of napkins.

“You blood wizards don’t know each other?” he asks casually, blowing a plume of smoke toward the ceiling. “Can’t be that many of yinz.”

“Never met the guy.”

“What were you doing out there when the Zombie hit?”

“You getting my statement now or something?”

“Just answer the question, Max.”

“Getting dinner from the deli.”

“So, wrong place, wrong time?”

“Something like that.”

Manny snorts and waves the smoke away from his face. “Piece of advice. FBI told us that this bastard Holland summons all kinds of monsters, several at once, and sells their services to criminals for fucking profit.”

“Several at once?” Unreal. People have gone insane doing far less.

“He’s an ugly piece of work. They even say he’s able to hitch a ride like a backseat driver, spying on people through their eyes. Fucked up.”

“Remote viewing,” I mutter.

“Yeah,” Manny says. “And the FBI’s key insider on this freak show just went up in smoke. Try to stay out of trouble.”

“Every day.”

The big cop eases off the barstool, stubbing the cigarette out in an ashtray. “You know, they never found another wiz after you left.”

I shrug. “Cap never appreciated my skills.”

“Yeah. Still, there were some good times.” Manny heads for the door.

“Goodbye, Manny.”

After the policeman leaves, Lynn returns with a glass of water, frowning at the pile of soaked napkins on the countertop. “You look like shit.” She scoops the napkins into the trash.

“Gonna pass out any minute.”

Lynn wraps a checkered blue bandanna around her short dark hair. “I heard you talking about Holland and the Zombie. You know, I’m surprised that summon was a CI for the feds. I thought familiars were bound to their summoner and couldn’t do anything to harm them.”

“I thought so, too. Maybe it’s a loophole. If someone else is doing the dirty work, it doesn’t count.” I rub my forehead. Long-ass day. “Hey, if Manny or whoever comes back, don’t tell them about Katia. She’s out of the loop on this. No need to get her involved.”

“Me neither.”

* * *

Cops or no cops, I need to warn Katia myself.

Around 5 the next evening, we meet in the public library on Forbes, across from the old Greek cathedral. Wrapped in a tan trench coat, I’m leaning against the stone railing by the entrance when I see Katia approach under the harsh light of a streetlamp.

She looks good. Light blue jumpsuit, wide leather belt, and heels, out of place amongst the hordes of college students in sweaters and hoodies and the bespectacled librarians in stiff, boxy dresses. I pick out a quiet table on the second floor, away from inquisitive eyes and ears. The green-and-gold glow of a small banker lamp erases the shadows under Katia’s eyes. I update her on the events of the past few days.

“Спасибо,” she says. “I know less about Peter than I should.”

“Powerful people often lead double lives. Don’t feel bad you didn’t know.” I frown. “He may or may not be cheating on you, but the guy’s involved with some nasty business. Have you gone to the police? They could--”

“Mister Falls, that is not an option. I do not want to be sent back.”

“But weren’t you brought--” I stop when I realize I never actually confirmed how Katia was brought to America. Judging by her icy face, she isn’t telling.

“I simply want to prove that Peter cheated on me,” she continues, shaking her head and looking away. “I cannot talk to the police about these other things you describe. Her. It is too much.”

“He’s going to be on guard, now that one of his minions has been killed. And they say he’s a remote viewer, so he almost certainly knows who I am now.” I look closely at Katia, wondering briefly if he’s listening to this very conversation, seeing who I’m seeing. “I’m sorry, but not sure there’s much more I can do.”

Katia bites her lower lip as she considers my words. “He will be

angry, then.”

“What are you concerned about?”

“Come with me.” Katia stands.

“Where are we going?”

“Over there,” she replies, pointing to the history section in a corner of the room, behind the stacks. I follow her there, the shelves of dusty books casting shadows across my face. She turns away from me, undoing her belt and unbuttoning the blouse of her jumpsuit. Suddenly self-conscious, I stand up straighter and take off my coat, holding it across my forearm to cover up the scene. “Help me for a moment, пожалуйста.”

“What was that?”

“Come closer. I want you to see something on my back.” When I don’t reply, she turns her head, tossing her hair. “I do not bite, Mister Falls.” She tugs lightly on the collar of her jumpsuit.

I stand just behind her, layering my coat over the both of us. My hands hesitate, and she reaches up with delicate fingers, nudging my hand down the back of her blouse. I slowly roll back the right side of her collar, exposing the cold, pale, almost translucent skin of her shoulder. Then I see it.

A lumpy, jagged pink scar slashes across her shoulder. I carefully run my fingers along the old wound, down the nape of her neck. More misshapen scar tissue crisscrosses her back.

Silence.

Finally, I help Katia readjust her blouse. As she buttons the shirt and cinches her belt, I slide my trench coat back on.

“You never said anything about this,” I say hoarsely.

“Why would I? It makes no difference,” she whispers.

“It makes all the difference. You need to get out of there.”

“With your help, I will. But I need to think.”

“Do you have someplace you can go?”

“I am not sure.” Katia’s silent for a moment, then looks at me grimly. “There is a way.”

“To escape?”

“Yes. Peter has to go away.”

“He might. If I were him, I would be looking to relocate ASAP.”

“I am not talking about relocation, Mister Falls.”

Very long pause.

“He will take me with him if he goes,” she continues.

“Find someplace to hide, then. There are big cities all along the coasts. Easy to--”

“He will send someone after me. Like the Zombie. I know of these spirits, these familiars. I cannot run forever.”

“The government will take action soon. He’ll have plenty to worry about,” I persist. “You just need enough to start a new life.”

Katia’s quiet for a while, studying me from under lidded eyes. “Perhaps you could come with me. Protect me.”

“I ... the FBI and the city cops are already on the case. I would be a distraction. I think--”

“I trust you, Max.” Katia leans close, forcing me back against a bookcase. I can smell her perfume. “I will do as you suggest. I will get the money first. All you must do is be there when I am ready. Can you do that for me?”

I grunt and push her away, reluctantly. “I’m not a gun for hire.”

“I did not say anything about shooting. I simply want you to protect me from Peter and whoever he might send after us. Consider it ... expansion of your duties.” She draws close again, placing a finger under my chin. “A private investigator can do that, да? Use his weapon when necessary?”

I gotta break this off. But--

“You are being quiet. You wish for more compensation?” Her finger slides down my chest, my stomach. “I can give you more. Whatever you desire. You will not regret it.”

My breathing quickens. “Katia--”

“But--” Katia suddenly pulls away, placing her hands behind her back. “--first, I must get the money, and I cannot do it without you. Will you help me, Max?”

I look at her and nod.

* * *

The next morning, I stumble out of my office into The Eighty’s seating area, fumbling with the knot in my tie. Thick gray fog hovers outside. Scattered raindrops rattle the roof. A couple of dim lightbulbs cast a pale, yellow light over the bar. The TV in the corner quietly plays a morning news broadcast, talking heads dissecting the aftermath of the zombie attack in the Strip.

Lynn’s already up, loading fresh tanks of beer under the tap.

“I’m gonna need an Old Fashioned,” I mumble.

“Morning to you, too.”

“Yeah, morning.”

“Little early to be drinking, Max.”

“Stop messing around,” I grumble.

Lynn wipes her hands on a washcloth and begins rummaging in the cabinets for supplies. “You’re really not dropping the case, are you?”

“No.”

“You’re not worried about the feds?”

“Same team, different tactics.”

Lynn stops, a sugar cube in one hand and a bottle of aged scotch

in the other. She shakes her head. “You really believe that,” she mutters.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Forget it.” She drops the sugar into a glass, soaks it in some bitters, and stirs. “You need to rest up first?”

“No, why?”

Lynn snorts. “Buddy, these walls are thin. I could hear you going at it with somebody when I unlocked the doors this morning. Thought it was Katia at first, but even you’re not that stupid. And your place’s empty.” She pours the whiskey and dumps a couple of ice cubes into the Old Fashioned. “Sex on the Beach again?”

“She didn’t stay long,” I retort.

“So? Takes a lot outta you to summon even one.”

“Lynn, mind your own damn business.”

She pauses in the middle of cutting an orange. “I shouldn’t help you with this shit. You wanna fuck yourself over, that’s on you.”

“I know, I know.” I raise a hand in apology. “But Holland could disappear any day, any hour now. If he does, Katia’s going with him. I gotta get to him soon.”

“And do what, Max?” When I don’t reply, she continues, “You gonna kill him? There’s no bounty and you’re no murderer.”

“I’m just there to watch Katia’s back while she gets the money

she needs to disappear.”

“Yeah, sure.” Lynn drops an orange slice into the drink and takes a bite out of the rest of the fruit.

“She’s paying a bonus.” Even I cringe a little as the words leave my lips.

Lynn rolls her eyes. “Oh, right! A bonus!” She sets the Old Fashioned on a cork coaster with a thud, a little drink spilling over the top. “There’s not enough money in the world for your stupid escapade.”

“I can help her--”

“You think Holland’s gonna let you waltz out with his money? Assuming she actually finds some? The guy’s a blood magician like you, but stronger! You have no idea what he or his summons are capable of! Hell, even that Zombie knocked you around.” She throws the orange rind into the trash. “You can’t go on the run forever. Fuck no. You got bills to pay, man.”

I look out the front windows, twirling the glass in my hand. Rain’s falling in steady sheets now, dispersing the mist and sending pedestrians scurrying for cover. The reflection of The Eighty’s red and purple neon sign shimmers in the growing puddles on the sidewalk. “How the hell does Holland handle multiple familiars all at the same time? His mind must be in a hundred places at once.”

“Yeah, he’s a tough sonuvabitch. Look, it hasn’t even been a week. Take what you got and dump her.”

I scoop up the drink and walk back to my office. I pause in the

doorway, turning back. “No. I owe it to the client to finish the job.”

Lynn stares at me for an uncomfortably long time. Then, she sighs in exasperation and turns away. “Whatever.”

I head inside, shut the door, and close the blinds. Setting the Old Fashioned on the desk, I settle into my armchair and take a deep breath. “Spirit to spirit, water to ether, blood to ichor ...”

I murmur the rest of the spell, watching the glass and its contents glow with a warm yellow light. I take a small penknife out of a drawer and holding my left hand over the drink, make a tiny prick in my fingertip. A couple drops of blood ooze out and splash into the Old Fashioned. The booze fizzes with high-pitched energy before bursting into bright light with a loud crack. I instinctively shut my eyes from the glare.

When I open them, a weathered, grim-faced man stands before me. He’s clothed in button-down white shirt, pinstriped vest and slacks, and clipped red tie. Hot steam billows off his bald head and broad shoulders. He cracks his knuckles menacingly.

“Ah, Mister Falls,” says Old Fashioned. “Someone need a beat-down?”

“It’s a little more--” I wince as a bolt of pain lances across my forehead. Should’ve waited a little longer before summoning again, like Lynn said. “More than that.”

“You okay there, boss? Hate to pop away just because our connection’s iffy--”

“Yeah, Fash. Just a bit of a rough patch.” I clear my throat.

“Then, what’s the deal? Personal protection?”

“Katia, the client, is in a bad spot. She’s trying to get out.”

“Extraction, then.”

“She’s gonna, ah, acquire some funds from her husband first. Then, we need to help her disappear.”

Fash scoffs. “Fuck, she better not be doing anything dirty.”

“Probably not.”

“Probably?” My familiar crashes onto the guest chair and stretches his muscular limbs. “Look, boss, I enjoy smashing heads as much as the next guy, but it sounds like you’re missing some pieces of the puzzle--”

“Stop bitching, old man. We’ll call her first, see what’s what. Then we’ll book it over there.”

“Now? It’s daytime.”

“We don’t have much time. And there’s cover from the storm.”

“Fine.”

“Also, the guy our client’s with is a blood magician.”

The summon raises his brow. “That right?”

“Yeah. Multiple summons, remote viewer, maybe more.”

Fash laughs wickedly. “You’re in some deep shit, pal.”

“It’s not all bad. One of his summons was killed a few days ago, so he’s probably hurting some right now.”

“Can he heal?”

“Dunno.”

“Right.” The spirit stares at my phone. “You gonna call the broad or what?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I pick up the receiver and dial the number she provided when she first visited the office. After a minute of ringing, I’m about to end the call, but just then I hear a click.

“Привет?” Katia’s voice, but with an unfamiliar edge.

“Katia? It’s Max.”

“Кто это? Я плохо тебя слышу--” The line beeps once.

“Katia?” I tap on the receiver. “Are you okay?”

She sounds grainy, faraway now. “Привет--Я не знаю кто ты--” A man’s voice momentarily interrupts the conversation, but static soon overwhelms the call. I hang up.

“She’s in trouble.”

“Your plan?”

“Talk it out in the car. Their house is maybe thirty minutes away.” I crouch under my desk, spinning the combo on a heavy iron safe nestled there. The door unlocks. I remove a brown screw-top booze flask labeled “FOR ME.” I hesitate but decide

to leave the passport and stacks of cash alone as I relock the safe.

After ensuring my gun is secured in its holster, I gesture for Fash to follow me out. He notices the bottle in my hand. “That bad, boss?”

“It’s my backup plan.” I stash the flask in my left pants pocket.

“You realize if you die, I’m free to do whatever the hell I want over here.”

“If I die, I don’t give a shit what you do.”

“What’s your big idea? Drinking the bad guys to death?”

I shrug. “Let’s hope I don’t have to use it.”

* * *

We cruise to a stop along the shoulder of the two-lane road, a couple blocks away from Holland’s mansion. “Nice place,” Fash remarks. It’s still pouring down, with lightning bolts streaking through the dark clouds. A few cars slowly cruise by, headlights on.

“That’s the Hill for you.”

We hop out of the car and onto the sidewalk. We get our bearings underneath the heavy, bowed branches of red- and yellow-leaved maples and oaks. A light wind blows rain in our faces. Fash uses a bit of air power to push it away, keeping himself dry. I content myself with forcing my fedora lower over my brow, rainwater dripping over the brim. Gotta keep the trench coat

loose for easy access to my gun and extra ammo. Unfortunately, my shirt and slacks get drenched.

“Even more reason not to go through with this,” Fash says. “You oughta cancel whatever deal you’ve got with the broad. Get out while you can.”

“You sound like Lynn.”

“She’s smart.”

“Unquestionably. It’s about honoring contracts. You’re a summon, for Pete’s sake, you get it.” We keep close to the trimmed hedge walls lining the path. I wonder if Holland has eyes out here. My own eyes?

“No honor in being dead.”

“You’re just jaded.”

“Heard that before.” Fash stops. “Boss, you don’t see any construction around here, do you?”

“No.”

“Then what’s that?” He points to a white van across the street from Katia and Holland’s mansion. A cartoonish logo of a muscle-bound guy in a hard hat, wielding a jackhammer, is pasted onto the side door. Driver seat’s empty. A single orange cone is planted behind the van. “Little out of place among all the Bentleys and Mercedes, yeah?”

“Right.” I stop behind the gnarled trunk of an oak, Fash beside me. “Manny said the feds were watching this guy.”

“Your pal on the force?”

“Yeah. Anyway, they’re on our side.”

“Sure. You tell them we were coming?”

“No. Our shit doesn’t involve them. We get Katia out with her money. They come and do whatever to Holland. Doubt he’s gonna worry about one broad when his own life’s at stake.”

“I don’t know, boss.” Fash chuckles. “You really believe that?”

I resume walking. “Couldn’t reach them if I tried.”

At the next intersection, we linger by the stop sign as thunder rumbles overhead and rain continues to pound down. The construction van hasn’t budged. “Take the side entrance,” I say. “Down this way.”

“Gated?”

“Yeah. Gotta jump it.” Picking up the pace, we turn up the road. The wrought iron gate to the service entrance is on the left, covered in ivy vines. High stone walls extend down the property on each side. There are crossbars on the gate, so even in the slickness of the downpour it’s easy to get a handhold. I go first, clambering over the entryway and jumping down onto the cobblestones.

As soon as my feet hit ground, I hear the click of a gun being cocked. “You’re trespassing, pal,” someone shouts over the rain. “Don’t move.”

Slowly, I turn toward the voice. A bland-looking man in a long

black coat and hat stands about twenty feet away, his pistol pointed at my chest. His other hand grips a walkie-talkie. "All units, we've got an intruder here at the east entrance."

"Who is it, Mobile One?" the voice on the other end barks.

"I'll find out. You, toss your--" The guy doesn't finish his sentence as Fash leaps down from the rocky wall, slamming him into the ground. My familiar wrests his gun away and delivers an air-powered haymaker to his jaw with a loud crack, knocking him out.

"Thanks," I mutter.

"Mobile One, report! Mobile One!" the walkie-talkie squawks. "We need backup--" The panicked voice cuts out as Fash stomps on the walkie-talkie with a boot.

"Who's this overdressed loser?" Fash stoops down, searching the man's coat for identification. He fishes a black leather object from an inside pocket and flips it open.

FBI.

"Fuck!" Fash says, throwing the badge holder away. "They're guarding him?" He unloads the magazine from the agent's pistol and hurls it over the wall, then tosses the gun into a nearby tangled rose bush.

My mind races. "Don't know. Gotta move."

We scurry forward, squinting through the rain. A short distance away from the huge mansion is a bungalow with an attached one-car garage and its own little driveway winding up a slope. Lights flicker ominously in the windows as we approach the

front door. "You think she'll be in there?" Fash asks.

"Dunno, but we need to check. Let's--" A long metal spike suddenly explodes through a window, sending shards of glass flying. Cursing, I dive away as the metal slams into the lawn where I was just standing. Raindrops sizzle on the spike's hot, orange-brown surface.

Fash rolls to his feet. "Watch it!" I shout as another spike blasts through the shattered window, aimed directly at him. He scrambles away as the spear carves a big chunk of asphalt out of the driveway.

The spikes slither tentacle-like back into the bungalow. Moments later, the front door smashes open. A giant, thickly bearded man in a heavy olive-green parka, cargo pants, and brown work boots storms out. He wields a gleaming sickle. "Подонок!" the man roars.

I whip out my pistol and fire wildly. The giant ducks as the bullets pass overhead. A thick copper shield materializes over his free arm. Moscow Mule. "Take him out!" I yell at Fash.

"On it!" My familiar hurls a volley of air punches, the powerful fist-like projectiles thumping against the Mule's shield. As the huge spirit staggers, turning his attention to Fash, I use the opportunity to bolt toward the mansion.

I cut across the manicured lawn, quickly surveying the house for an easy entry point. Suddenly, pain knifes across my forehead, and I see flashing stars. I topple forward and get a mouthful of wet grass and dirt. The pistol flies out of my grasp.

Hello, Mister Falls, a voice echoes inside my head. You

shouldn't have gotten involved.

Peter Holland.

The one and only.

Fuck. This guy can do everything.

I stumble to my feet, wiping mud off my face, and pick up the dropped gun.

Well ... not everything. There's too much you don't know. Leave now and the feds probably won't kill you.

A woman's in danger. That's all I need to know.

Holland chuckles. Always the shining knight. Well, have fun with Mary.

Who's Mary?

No reply. Instead, the front door bursts open. A scowling middle-aged woman, eyes bulging with rage, steps into view. The front of her old-fashioned maid's outfit is splattered with gore. In her right hand is a large cleaver; in her left, some poor sap's head, blood dripping from the open neck.

"Coming for your wench?" she snarls in a haughty tone, waving the cleaver.

I ignore her, level the pistol, and fire. Mary ducks back inside, dropping the head onto the porch, as the bullet thwacks into the door frame. I run up the stairs, about to burst inside, when I hear a muffled whump from across the estate. A blast of hot air nearly

knocks me off my feet. Pain tears across my head and chest.

I stagger to a stop, breathing heavily, heart pounding, head throbbing. It's a horrifying feeling of weakness, fragility, like someone's ripped out a chunk of my soul. I gag and spit out a mouthful of blood.

They got Old Fashioned. Fuck. Hope he took out the Mule before he croaked.

Shaking off the pain, I rush into the mansion. The foyer is immense, dimly lit by a golden chandelier, furnished with benches, and floored with black and white marble tiles. Directly in front is a huge spiral staircase. There's an elegant dining area through the arched passageway behind it. On either side of the stairwell are separate living rooms, one containing a white grand piano.

I quickly scout all the rooms on the ground floor but come up empty. Surprisingly, Holland doesn't reenter my head. Maybe he's too busy packing up.

I hear a clattering somewhere above me as I return to the foyer. Gripping the pistol in both hands, I carefully tread up the stairs, rainwater still dripping from my coat. As I glance down, I mentally kick myself for not noticing the trail of fresh blood splatters.

At the mezzanine, I nearly trip over a headless, black-suited corpse slouched against the engraved marble railing, a surrounding pool of blood soaked into the white carpet. Could be the guy I heard on the walkie-talkie. Dunno why Holland's goons would suddenly turn traitor on his government protectors.

I follow the bloody trail down the right wing of the second floor,

where several more empty rooms await. The old maid, Holland, and Katia are nowhere to be seen, but I do find two more dead agents, both decapitated.

Frustrated, on edge, I return to the central stairwell and head to the third floor. The spacious home gym on the left is empty. The high-ceilinged hallway on the right leads to a handful of rooms; I suspect Holland's hiding behind the closed door at the end. But just as I step off the landing, I sense movement from the nearest room. I stop midstride just as Mary leaps out, screaming and slashing with her cleaver.

I stumble back and trip over the carpet, crashing to the floor. The woman cackles and dives at me, her blade extended forward. I manage to roll away, but as she lands, she swings her arm, slashing the cleaver across my face. Cursing, my eyes water as blood begins to drip from cuts on the cheek and bridge of my nose.

Still clutching the pistol, I scuttle away on my ass, trying to brace myself for a clean shot. While on the ground, Mary lunges forward again, teeth bared. Her blade sinks into the carpet, barely missing my groin. She raises her arm for another strike.

I steady my grip, aim at the maid's crazed face, and pull the trigger. As the bullet slams into the spirit's forehead, she erupts into scorching blue flame. Cinders fly everywhere as Mary thrashes in agony. Burning ash manages to get onto my trench coat, but the soaked fabric fails to ignite. Unfortunately, some debris lands on the carpeting and walls, where it starts to sizzle and smoke. I tear off my coat and try to smother the embers, but it doesn't work. Within seconds, it starts consuming the walls.

As Mary dissolves in a shower of sparks, I hear a shout from down the hallway. Should I bail? Let the feds sort this disaster

out?

No. Gotta see this through to the end. Nothing good's waiting out there, anyway.

Leaving the fire behind, I run down the hallway and kick down the door, pistol at the ready.

Inside, the master bedroom is filled with a strange white mist. No dampness, no burning odor, oddly enough. Two open suitcases lie on top of the king-sized bed, one containing clothes and the other containing a few small bundles of cash and a large black leather-bound notebook.

A figure hunches in a wooden armchair next to the door to the bathroom, features obscured by the haze. The fog lifts as I cautiously approach.

Peter Holland.

The bastard's not looking good. Hemorrhages stain the whites of his half-open eyes. Blood drips from both nostrils. His breathing is shallow and erratic. When he finally opens his mouth to speak, bloody foam dribbles out the sides.

"Falls ..." Holland coughs weakly, flecks of spittle flying from his lips.

"Where's Katia? What have you done with her?" I seize him by his shirt lapels. His head lolls. I let go with a shove. He flops backward, gasping.

"She was just here ..." Holland points with a quivering finger at an open window as a flash of lightning briefly lights up the

room. “Goddammit, Falls. All this ... for a woman.”

“She’s a client. Now, all I need to know is that she’s safe from your two-timing wife-beating ass and maybe I’ll let you off the hook.”

“You just believed her?” he mumbles.

“You denying it? I saw the scars.” The choking smell of burning timber reaches my nostrils. The fire’s right outside.

Holland’s mirthless laugh is cut short by another bout of coughing. “... worked with some real assholes. That’s why ... fucking feds need me. I’m their link to the Commies, the terrorists. Don’t you ... don’t you remember?”

“Remember? What the hell are you babbling about?”

He shakes his head. “Doesn’t matter now ... Falls, I never beat her. Hell ... not even married to the bitch.”

“Don’t lie, Holland.”

“No reason to ... about to die anyway. Too many familiars dead ... too little time. Was always ... risk.” He starts to slump forward, his chin dropping to his chest.

I slam him against the wall with a hand. Holland groans, his eyelids fluttering. “Where’s Katia?” I shout.

“Hah ... probably took the money and ran ...” The man gasps as a fresh surge of blood streams out his nose and mouth. “You want answers? Just ... that book ...”

“Book?”

“The suitcase ... you’ll see ...” The blood magician sighs deeply, and his eyes close. I release Holland from my grip. He slides out of the chair and collapses onto the floor.

I reach down to feel for a pulse in his neck. He’s gone.

The roar of the fire grabs my attention anew. Blue tongues of flame have devoured the bedroom door. Thick smoke is pouring inside.

I rush to the bed, grab the book, and flip through the pages. There are dozens of handwritten notes, names of summons, powers, contacts, locations, dates, sums of money in neat rows. Too much information to take in. Zombie, Sangria, Bloody Mary, Moscow Mule, Gimlet, Screwdriver, White Russian ...

I read the entry for the White Russian. Katia Belova. 3/8/1977. Pittsburgh, PA. Personal protection. Polymorph (fog).

No.

The inferno rages into the bedroom. Shoving the ledger into my back pocket, I dash across the room and hurl myself through the open window. Glass and wood shatter around me as I tumble awkwardly through the hole and plummet three stories. I smack into an awning, topple off the edge, and land hard on my shoulder and knee. I curse in pain as bones crack and joints dislocate.

Despite the agony, I manage to stay conscious and struggle to a sitting position. Beyond the gates to the estate, police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances have pulled up, blocking the road. Several FBI agents are cleaning up what looks like the scrap metal remains of the Moscow Mule. However, an eagle-eyed cop on the street--looks like Manny--spots me and rushes to get the at-

tention of nearby feds.

Multiple dead agents. The FBI's key contact to the Commies and the criminal underworld gone. A disappeared client, money unaccounted for.

Hell, I'd blame me.

No hesitation. I pull out the flask, the one labeled FOR ME. I unscrew the stopper and smear some of the wet blood from my face into the liquid inside, sloshing it around while muttering the summoning spell. With a flash of light, it appears.

Unlike most magical familiars, this one's not even remotely humanoid. Two insectile eyes protrude over a dense mass of writhing green tentacles. Spiny, reptilian limbs click and scrape

together. A scaly, serpentine body ends in a large scorpion-like stinger. A disgusting, noxious miasma surrounds the unholy nightmare. I can barely fight the urge to vomit.

The cops and agents notice the monster and start blasting away, not realizing that it can't be hurt by non-magical weapons. I stare inside the now-empty flask as bullets ricochet around me. They shouldn't worry. This backup plan's just for me. For plausible deniability. For forgetting the woman who betrayed me.

I look up at my familiar. The Mind Eraser: one part vodka, one part coffee liqueur, one part lemon-lime soda. So close to the White Russian, yet so far.

Silently, I will it to do what it does best.

As Sweet

by Jess Gofton

Deep down, Pearl and I both knew she was going to come home in a box. I also knew, when Pearl was past knowing anything, how the town would talk when I dug a hole for that box in the backyard, Pearl and all. I didn't know a rosebush would grow from the grief-tilled earth, though, so quickly that the space where I'd imagined a headstone became a fairy tale thicket, blushing with cloyingly sweet roses.

"Did she like roses?" I frown even though my mother can't see my expression on the other end of the phone. She's been discovering herself in New Mexico since I was fifteen. Thirteen years later I continue to imagine her eternally swimsuit clad, an unnaturally bright cocktail in each hand.

"That's not exactly the point, Ma," I say, glaring at the rosebush that's now almost taller than I am. Not that it's hard to be taller than I am. "I haven't even planted any roses."

Not to mention that no, Pearl had never liked roses. Her favourites were always snowdrops. I only ever picked them for her once, but it was enough to know not to give her flowers again or to expect any. No flowers, no chocolates, no holding hands when we walked along the shore, welcoming the sand between our toes. I didn't need any of that, though. She was enough. I wish I'd been the same.

I hiss when I prick my finger on a rose thorn with enough force

to draw blood. When I go to suck my fingertip clean, the stem absorbs what my capillaries have left behind as voraciously as a sponge. A nearby bud unfurls into full bloom before my eyes with the slow relief of a last breath.

"I was six years old the first time I noticed another girl was pretty, and I pinched myself so hard I left a bruise."

The voice is an echo of Pearl's, a whisper through an empty glass, and I swallow the shocked lump in my throat.

"Ma," I say, holding the phone so tightly the plastic creaks in my ear, "one of the roses just spoke to me."

There's a beat of silence, then my mother sighs.

"Oh dear," she says as though I've told her it's raining and there's washing on the line. "Honey, you need the Tippi Witch."

* * *

I believe in many things Pearl never did—Santa Claus, mermaids, happy endings—but the Tippi Witch always seemed too homespun to be real. If Pearl were here, while swampy mud seeps through my hole-ridden sneakers until I might as well have set out barefoot, she'd say something logical like how the

Tippiti Witch is probably just a strange lady who lives on her own in the marsh—a lady I don’t know enough about to presume it’s safe to approach her, stinking of roses and sweaty be-reavement.

“How are you going to run away in those shoes if she’s dangerous?” Her voice is so clear in my head I almost lose my footing. “One of these days you’re gonna get yourself killed, Zinnia.”

“You already beat me to that.” I say before I can stop myself, and immediately regret it when my head quietens. Turns out I can’t even keep Pearl when she’s imaginary.

I brush hair I didn’t bother tying up out of my face; there’s a fresh mosquito bite in the crook of my elbow and a wave of grief like I’ve swallowed my own tongue hits me thinking about how Pearl will never see it. Never again will she apply cream or kisses to my hurts or find a new grey hair or a laugh line. In a couple of months my skin cells will regenerate and there’ll no longer be any part of me left that she touched.

I suck in humid air and push myself forward. I’ve barely eaten a thing since the police arrived at my door, bearing solemn-faced news that’s made me feel as though I’m constantly missing a step in the dark ever since, and I can’t remember when I last drank anything either. Pearl was forever reminding me to stay hydrated. Even back when she was in Afghanistan, she stuck post-it notes around the house before she left—inside cutlery drawers, on the fridge door, under the desk—reminding me to drink more water. The irony of wading through a saltwater marsh with a tongue as dry as a ginger snap doesn’t escape me, but there’s no stopping until I find the Tippiti Witch.

“You’ll find her soon enough,” Ma told me. “Just look for the

mouths.”

She didn’t clarify further after that—she was already late for Pilates and mindfulness with Joyce—but I understand her soon enough when I stumble into a clearing, as though I’ve just discovered the centre of a labyrinth, and spy a pink and green mound twice my height that looks as though it’s breathing. I creep closer, saltwater sloshing over my socks as I disturb a small crab that quickly scuttles away, and realise the mound isn’t a mound at all, not really.

It’s a small house, almost entirely covered with yawning Venus flytraps. Some are closed around their latest meal; others patiently await curious insects like baby birds frozen in their want. A tickle on the skin between my sock and the frayed edge of my jeans has me looking down just in time to see a small one pulling away. I stumble back, hands clenching and unclenching by my sides.

I’ve almost given up looking for a way in or any sign of life that isn’t botanical when I spy a brass Venus flytrap that appears to be devouring itself. It’s not fossilised or a rare breed mimicking inanimation, but a doorknocker that’s the only indication there’s an entrance there at all. I’m reaching for it when the door swings open.

The woman standing on the other side of it only looks a few years older than my mother, her silver hair haphazardly tied up with the assistance of a pink polka dot scarf. There’s a not entirely unpleasant stench of sweat and soil coming from either her or her house.

“Uh huh?”

“Are you the Tippiti Witch?” I blurt out the words before I can

ask them with any attempt at grace and she looks me up and down, wiping her hands on dungarees saturated with grass stains.

“I prefer Audrey.”

* * *

I can’t remember what I said to Audrey, if any of it even made sense, but I suppose it must have.

“Show me,” was all she said before she began to lead me back through the marsh to my own house. She holds my hand like I’m a lost child and I watch her feet; they’re bare, her soles dirty and calloused, and I swear the marsh’s flora and fauna leans out of her way to offer us a clear path.

The rose bush has almost doubled in width in the hours I’ve been gone, creeping beyond Pearl’s resting place towards the rest of the garden, which is mostly wildflowers aside from the small rows of radishes Pearl had loved adding to her salads, covering her food like bullet wounds. The petals are a luscious organ red, the thorns abnormally long and spindle sharp.

“And this was here when you woke up this morning?” I watch Audrey watching the rose bush. She’s clearly surprised and I thought that would make me feel better—like I’m not going crazy—but it only makes me more uneasy that a woman who lives in a cocoon of Venus flytraps thinks my garden is strange.

“Yes,” I say, “but listen.”

I offer my thumb to a hungry thorn that sinks into my skin like a tooth, and another bud flowers.

“In second grade I told my best friend Martha McGinnis that I wanted to marry her someday. She told everyone and I was bullied so badly I had to change schools.”

I remember this story. Pearl and I spread-eagled on the grass after too much wine and not enough sleep, watching the clouds drift past while the sunburned skin on our noses peeled. A slurred, quiet confession from Pearl, only a week out of her second tour of Afghanistan, about Martha and her nastiness. I don’t think Pearl ever knew I once went searching for Martha online, only to find a beautiful photo of her and her wife on their wedding day.

I never told Pearl. Now I wonder if Martha thought about her at all when she got married, or if she even remembers the hateful poison she dripped into Pearl’s ear. If she’ll ever know that she got a ring on her finger while my Pearl fashioned one for her neck.

Audrey crouches down, knees cracking, to rub the soil between her fingers; she licks a fingertip and then spits into the grass, away from the grave, and examines the leaves as though she’s reading a palm. She doesn’t really start frowning until she presses her fingers against the thorns. I wait for the whispers, but nothing happens; she presses with so much force her arm shakes and still her skin won’t break.

“This ain’t her,” she says at last, pulling her hand away and looking at me, “it’s you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You ain’t let her go.”

Of course not. How could I? Why *should* I, when I’d spent the

best part of a decade watching the woman I love punish herself for not being enough for the parents who didn't deserve her? Why, when I loved Pearl so damn much and knew Pearl loved me too—she'd've been happier, after all, if she hadn't—and yet none of it had been enough to steady her balance on mortality's knife edge.

“What happens if I can't let her go?”

“Then there ain't much I can do for either of you.”

I feel the burn of tears behind my nose and my voice breaks when I say, “Am I hurting her?”

Audrey shakes her head, offering me a smile just short of pitying.

“She's past pain now.”

It can only mean I'm a terrible person that I'd rather she was in pain if only it meant she were here. If only I'd found a way to convince her not to do what she did. But she faded like a sun-bleached book spine, so gradually that I didn't notice the difference between what she'd once been and what she'd become until it was too late. And then there was me, perpetually jocund, hoping my happiness could save her.

I never really wanted anything before I met Pearl. I stayed in the home I was born in, in the town I know so well I could walk the streets blindfolded, and left school with no great accomplishments to work whatever odd jobs I could find. Even when Ma fled and it was just me and Pa in the rickety house his great-grandfather built, until his pickled liver saw him exit stage left when I was eighteen, I was content.

Then two years later I saw Pearl. A military belle fresh from her first tour in Afghanistan, hiding out in a bar on the other side of town in the hopes she might unsee some of it. She drank whiskey like it was communion wine, shied away from the drunkards who patted her shoulder and thanked her for her service, and I wanted.

I refilled her glass for free. “What service can I offer you tonight, soldier?” The words tumbled out before I could stop them, and she finally looked at me. I grinned and she gulped and I wanted.

“We all grieve differently—”

I bat Audrey's hand away before she can rest it on my shoulder. “I don't want to fucking grieve, I want her!”

“She's gone,” Audrey says as gently as she can, but her eyes are steely. “This will fade when you're ready for it to fade, and right now you ain't ready.”

* * *

To Audrey's credit she tried to comfort me before she left, with a promise to return when the roses stop talking, but I have no patience for sympathy. I weep until my throat is raw and pound the dirt with my fists. A thorn as eager as low-hanging fruit scratches my wrist, just sharp enough to draw blood, and I hear Pearl.

“Sometimes I hated Zinnia for how much I loved her, and I wished she'd meet someone else when I was away.”

There's a strange sound like an old car that won't start. It takes

a moment to realise the sound is coming from me. I'm laughing.

"You'd've loved that, wouldn't you? That would have made everything so *easy* for you, wouldn't it? Because we both know you love the easy route! Maybe I fucking hate you too, alright? Did you consider that? Did you ever fucking think about that, Pearl?"

I slam my hand against the thorns, seeking an answer I know I won't get.

"I thought the army would make me braver but all it really made me was more ashamed."

I rip roots from the earth and a thorn spears my palm.

"I spent my life afraid, like my whole existence was a matinee show performed by an understudy who forgot to practice. But I swear I loved Zinnia—even on the days I couldn't prove it."

I'm crying so hard I can barely breathe as I rip clumps from the rose bush and crawl in, my fingers sinking into the soil that separates me and Pearl as thorns rake along my arms, pierce the spaces between my ribs and tangle in my hair.

"I'm sorry, Zinnia. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm-"

I scream and the roses bloom.

* * *

The rose bush is gone when I come to in Pearl's arms. We're so close our noses are almost touching and I can see the earth caught in her hairline. For a moment I'm frozen with the fear

that someone has been cruel enough to dig her up and leave her beside me—but then she blinks.

It's the quickest I've ever sat up, loathe as I am to leave her embrace.

"Pearl?"

A thorn protrudes from the corner of her right eye, clogging the tear duct; it doesn't seem to bother Pearl when the petal her eyelid has become snags on it with each slow blink until the edge tears as easily as tissue paper.

"Yes," she says, pauses, "and no." She sits up and looks at her arms, running trembling fingers over her collarbone, bulging with thorns. A spiny peduncle has wound itself around her throat like a necklace, hiding the bruises. "I don't know what I am."

I cup her face in my hands. "You're *alive*." I reply through a watery laugh. "You're here."

Pearl's fingers curl around my wrists, the clammy kind of cold of something thawing out. I can smell the fear on her when she looks me in the eye.

"You can't love me like this, Zinnia," she says, but my head is already shaking.

I bring us close enough for our foreheads to touch, heads bowed in a shared prayer.

"Stay. Stay here where you're planted." A thorn jutting from her scalp worms its way into mine. "Stay with me."

Villain Origin Story

by Hibah Shabkhez

The flower does not like
Being my metaphor—
It wilts to strike
Me through the heart:

In the dark of the night
It wants to haunt my dreams;
But cannot blight,
Only flourish—

Only grow. So it blooms
Instead. Its tendrils shoot
Through veins, blood booms
In my ears, and

The flower laughs, knowing
It will kill me.



Those Who Left in Winter

by Irina Tall

One Who Helps

by Cecil Fenn

Sebbi fell in step with the red-haired man who lived outside the walls and caught him round the shoulders, pinning his arms to his sides. Though Sebbi wore a crucifix and believed in compassion, he flashed his knife before pressing its cold iron blade against the man's pale throat. He was desperate enough to make this threat, and maybe desperate enough to follow it through.

In a moment of unplanned lucidity, Sebbi had escaped his Norse captors, evading the bryti overseers by bolting into the forest while they were busy with the late autumn slaughter, the screaming pigs. The sun was going down on his third day without proper food and the cold left Sebbi's limbs burning; the temperature was dropping, and the wind had already chapped his skin, split his lips. He did not think he would survive another night in the open.

"To live you desire?" Sebbi demanded in the broken Dqnsk tongue he had to speak with his captors.

The red-haired man leaned back against him, relaxed and smiling. The man was thin, his shoulders loose-jointed, and he did not try to fight, but Sebbi held him tighter. There was a wrongness in this calm.

"I know that I will not die today, whatever I desire," the man replied in Sebbi's own language, the West Saxon heavily accented but fluent. "What do you want from me?"

Sebbi jerked his head towards the man's pit-house. "Food. Fire. A place to sleep."

"You have much to learn about the hospitality of my people. You could have gotten these things without holding a knife to my throat."

Sebbi let go of him but kept the point of the knife close. "I also need a secret keeper."

The red-haired man just smiled broadly and gestured Sebbi into the smokey closeness of his home.

"You speak my tongue," Sebbi said, going to huddle by the fire, afraid the feeling in his toes might be gone forever. Behind him, the red-haired man shucked off his mittens and fur mantle. "How is that?"

"What is your name?"

"Sebbi."

"I have travelled many places, Sebbi. And in this way, learned many things. I am called Birgir here. It means One Who Helps, in your language."

"And do you? Help?"

“I try to.” Birgir ladled skause from a simmering cauldron into a wooden bowl and thrust it towards Sebbi, who took it with shaking hands. “Where have you escaped from?”

Sebbi looked at Birgir, sharp and scared.

“A free man would not have his hair cut so short and so badly. You were captured and traded as a thrall, no? Is that not the secret you need kept?”

“You will not run back to the town and call the law down on me?”

Birgir let out a short laugh. “I am not welcome inside the walls, either. Is that where you came from?”

“No.”

“Good. How many days from danger are you?”

“I’ve been walking three days due south, through the forest. I have rested little.”

“Do you not wish to return to your homeland?” Birgir asked him, mild and quiet. “This is not your best route to the sea.”

“It’s not a good season to cross the waters. I will find my way home in the spring.” Sebbi said.

“Rest here for now, then. I will keep your secret.”

After Sebbi had eaten, Birgir insisted on checking his extremities for frostbite and hissed at Sebbi’s toes, which were an angry, burnt red that Birgir smeared in honey and herbs as they warmed. He put a salve over a windburned split on Sebbi’s

cheek, too, and over his chapped lips. Up close, Sebbi saw that Birgir had delicate hands, though he used them roughly, and his serious face was handsome despite an undernourished gauntness. Beneath long and girlish lashes, his blue eyes were sharp. When he caught Sebbi staring, Birgir smiled in a slow lopsided way. He showed a crooked canine tooth.

When Birgir finished his ministrations and told him to share his bed, exhaustion pulled Sebbi into unconsciousness swiftly. He dreamed, though, of Birgir, sat with a bowl of smoking seeds, hair flashing and glinting in the firelight. In one hand Birgir held a staff of twisted metal that he moved through the smoke, wafting it towards his face as he inhaled, pulling it over the pout of his lower lip. His eyes rolled back in his head, and still, Sebbi felt sure he was being looked at through the white of the vitreous. Then Birgir’s right eye refocused, and it was looking at him, but it was also dark with blood—when it blinked, a red tear tracked down Birgir’s hollow cheek.

The rest of Sebbi’s dreams were darkness.

* * *

In the morning, Sebbi ate what Birgir gave him and accepted the gift of a clean tunic. “You’re being very generous,” Sebbi said.

“Considering you held a knife to my throat yesterday?” Birgir asked, a twist in his expression.

“I’m sorry,” Sebbi told him, looking at his hands and running the rough-spun fabric through his palms. “I didn’t think anyone would help me.”

“It is maybe some Norn’s kindness, sending you here,” Birgir

said. “I have enough to feed two for the winter, but I struggle with the work of a household. There’s wood to chop and carry, repairs that need to be done. It would help me if you could stay until the spring.”

“I will not be your slave,” Sebbi spat.

Birgir shrugged. “I am asking for help in exchange for a warm fire and a full belly. If that is not to your liking, you may continue your journey with my blessing. You are not a thrall under my roof.”

Sebbi nodded, then. The thought of serving Birgir had prompted a frisson of horror, brought him instantly to the flashpoint of anger, but he could see the logic of it. Sebbi was not prepared to weather the winter alone in the cold Norse lands. He could see, too, that Birgir did look fragile. He was a man who would need help, even if he did not feel entitled to demand it.

While Sebbi calmed himself to consider the offer, Birgir reached for the crudely carved cross Sebbi wore around his neck on a leather thong. “You have promised yourself to a god?” Birgir asked.

“I have prayed for my freedom. I will return home, if He wills it,” Sebbi told him.

Birgir tugged the cross free of its cord. The swift pain of it surprised Sebbi enough he nearly retaliated with a fist before he got control of himself and dropped his hand.

Birgir grinned at Sebbi’s visible restraint, his teeth bared in a feral challenge. Sebbi knew he was shackled, then: by his need for shelter, by the strange handsomeness of Birgir, by his secret,

and by his desires.

Birgir dropped the cross into Sebbi’s hand and closed Sebbi’s fist around it. “Better for us both if you keep this hidden. If you decide to stay.”

When he looked up into Birgir’s face, Sebbi saw that a crescent of bright blood had pooled around the rim of Birgir’s right iris during the night. The red stood out plainly against its clear blue.

“Your eye—” Sebbi said.

“It will fade soon,” Birgir told him.

* * *

While his strength returned, Sebbi kept out of the way and observed Birgir closely. His was not the life Sebbi was used to, even among the Norse. Birgir collected herbs and dried an assortment of things from the timber beams of his roof. He kept a small garden, newly buried under the winter’s frost, but he had no livestock and did not hunt. Instead, Birgir was brought provisions by the people in the walled village who came to ask him questions and seek his advice. Usually, it was about everyday things—how to remedy blood in a cow’s milk, the banishment of pests, setting a broken bone. Birgir dispensed his learning in solemn consultations, prescribing spells and herbs and patience. The visitors assumed Sebbi belonged to Birgir, who spoke only Dönsk tongue when others were present. When he noticed Sebbi’s careful interest, Birgir set him to chopping and grinding his supplies of dried plants. He sometimes even called Sebbi to assist him, instructing with the simple phrases Birgir taught him as they sat together in the long dark evenings. By the next moon, Sebbi could prepare Birgir’s herbs and restrain his patients, even

reseat a joint pulled from a socket under Birgir's direction. Sebbi liked the work, and liked more the companionship of Birgir.

Sometimes, though, Sebbi could not understand what took place in that pit-house. Birgir had once healed a girl brought to him coal hot with fever and mottled from head to toe in a violent rash. He sang over her for most of a night, sunk in a trance that ended when he put a hand to her chest and the rash receded, her fever cooled. Birgir's hand, though, was marbled red with bruising, the nails dark with blood; he was nauseous and feverish for a week in the aftermath. When Sebbi asked about it, lying next to Birgir's hot and shaking body in the bed they chastely shared, Birgir just smiled his feral smile and shrugged.

"I am a vitki," he said, leaving the word untranslated. "I travel and I sing the charms that can change the weave. Sometimes I can pull the threads, or speak to the right spirits. Change, in some small ways, a fate."

Sebbi did not understand. He decided, still, to stay.

* * *

In the darkest part of the year, Birgir called for Sebbi, standing in the door of his house, his voice hushed and hoarse. "Sebbi, I must speak with you," Birgir said. He stayed in the shadows, a slice of weak sunlight just catching the copper of his eyelashes.

Sebbi was surprised to see Birgir up. As the winter deepened, Birgir grew more reclusive, exhausted and unwilling to leave the close, warm dark of the house. He slept late into the mornings and had a dry, gasping cough when he spent too long in the cold. Most evenings, he sat in front of the fire, sunk in a trance. Sometimes, Sebbi thought to touch him, to return him to himself

and bring him to bed, but he didn't quite dare. Once, even, Birgir's nose had started to bleed as he sat, and Sebbi had held a rag under his chin to catch the blood dripping into his lap, too afraid to rouse him.

"So speak," Sebbi said, still stacking freshly split logs. He did not move from the wood pile.

"Come inside, please. I said I must speak with you, and I will not stand in the cold."

Birgir disappeared into the dark of the house, then, and Sebbi followed behind, sheepish as a scolded child.

"I have to perform a spae tonight," Birgir told him, looking into the hearth fire rather than at Sebbi. Sebbi's eyes, adjusted to the weak midday sun, could only make out Birgir's silhouette against the flames. "I will walk into the future, follow the threads of Fate, and see faraway things. Bring back prophecies for the people inside the walls. Men will come to hear me speak, including the jarl of this hold. Does this put you in danger?"

Sebbi shook his head. "I do not know anyone here. I reached your door before the walls of the city."

"Good. I wanted to be sure."

"Is that all?"

Birgir nodded and sat down at the cooking fire; he stirred a large pot of an evil-smelling liquid he'd begun boiling that morning. "That's all."

Sebbi's eyes had attuned to the dark and he could finally see Bir-

gir clearly. His face was ashen and filmed lightly with sweat.

“Are you alright?” Sebbi asked. “You don’t look well.”

“I am preparing. Nothing to worry about.” Birgir smiled tightly. Sebbi didn’t like the expression at all. Still, he nodded and turned to go.

“Sebbi,” Birgir’s voice, quiet, held him at the door. “After the spae, I may be quite ill. Nothing lasting. I will recover, but I will need to rest. Don’t let it upset you.”

“I understand. Let me know what you need.”

“Sebbi?”

“Yes,” he answered. He felt certain for a moment that Birgir would tell him something important, then. That he would reach for him.

“If there’s anything you need to know, you may ask me tonight.”

“That is kind of you.”

“I trust you will be kind to me.”

* * *

When the sun began to set, Birgir instructed Sebbi to prepare the house for the ritual he called a spae. Birgir himself was sweating and glassy-eyed, sinking ever deeper into a restless trance. By the time the jarl and his entourage arrived, he was silent, insensible. Sebbi led the guests inside and accepted their gifts for Birgir. There were many things brought for him: furs, a supply of

venison, casks of mead, honey, and a heavy purse. Sebbi acted as cup bearer while they feasted at Birgir’s table, toasting each other while Birgir sat huddled in a hooded cloak, his plate empty except for a stoneware bowl of burning henbane seeds. Sebbi listened to the jarl’s somber words, though he still did not have enough of their language to understand them.

When they had eaten, speeches were made and the cups drained, and then Birgir began to speak. The voice in his throat, though, wasn’t his. The words were in Birgir’s native tongue, but the voice he used was deeper and stranger than his own, too resonant for his slender throat, his narrow chest. When he pushed back the mantle that had hidden his face in shadow, it was not his face that looked out. One of his eyes was full of blood, and the muscles of his jaw, the set of his brow, were strange, heavy with the tension of someone else’s worries. The crooked asymmetry of his smile was gone.

The jarl and his guests asked questions, and whatever was inside Birgir gave answers. The men who came to consult him listened and accepted his words. Late into the night, they spoke, and though they were all crushed together in Birgir’s pit-house, speaking in a language he did not know, Sebbi felt that great things were being discussed. Weighty matters: the concerns of kings, or of gods.

When the talking was done, and the lamps were sputtering out, the distinguished group left, all pale and serious. Sebbi helped them with their cloaks and lit the torches that saw them out into the black of night. Birgir remained in his seat, head down.

“The spell will be broken soon, thrall,” the voice inside Birgir said when the door had shut and they were at last alone. It spoke in Sebbi’s West Saxon dialect, its deep and unaccented voice a

shock in the smoky darkness. “Ask your question.”

Sebbi turned to him, then. Birgir’s expression was still strange and stoic, but he was crying blood from his right eye, his skin an icy white under the seething waves of his red hair, lips blue-
ing. The sight of it unmoored something in Sebbi and he went to Birgir and held his hands in his. The fingers were limp and cold and Sebbi massaged them as he spoke.

“Will I ever be able to return to my home? To Wessex?” he asked quietly.

Birgir’s head snapped back, his eyes rolling up to the ceiling. Sebbi, frightened, dropped his hands.

The face that eventually turned to Sebbi was different again. Bloody bruises were blossoming around his lips in bright pinpricks, and his mouth was pulled up in a broad smile. “Oh, Sebbi,” some new thing speaking through Birgir said in a clear ringing tenor, “The Fates have cleared the path for you to kiss the dirt of your precious Wessex. You have the power in your hands, though, to defy their weave and return home.”

“But Wessex is my home,” Sebbi whispered. “I don’t understand.” His heart was slamming in his chest. He was afraid, and afraid for Birgir. The bruises were spreading under the skin of Birgir’s lips. The muscles in his face twitched under the strain of his strange expression.

Whatever was inside Birgir reached out and ran a hand along Sebbi’s face, fingers light and probing along his jaw. “No,” he said. “You do not.” It leaned in towards Sebbi, then, hungry for physical contact, even to kiss Sebbi. Its probing tongue flicked over Birgir’s bruised lips.

But then Birgir went limp and fell forward. Sebbi caught him, felt him shiver and gasp in his arms, quivering back to consciousness.

“Birgir?” Sebbi cried, desperate for some confirmation that Birgir was there inside the husk of his body, that there would be no more riddles and wrongness, no more blood and prophecy. “Birgir, please.”

“I’m back. Hush now, I’m back,” Birgir whispered. “Help me to bed. I’m so tired.”

Sebbi started to pull him up, but Birgir doubled over when he tried to stand, his hands grasping at a pain in his guts. Sebbi carried him to bed and lifted up his tunic. There was a bruise flowering across his abdomen, so fresh and red Sebbi thought at first Birgir had been stabbed. When he unpinned Birgir’s cloak he found his neck, too, ringed in vivid bruises.

“What should I do?” Sebbi asked Birgir, who was still conscious and stealing short, shallow breaths around his pain.

“Wait,” Birgir managed to say, before dropping back into sleep.

* * *

Sebbi slept for only an hour, waking again in the dark. When he checked on Birgir, there was blood on the floor by the bed and dried over his lips, but his breathing was deep and even. Sebbi only went out to bring in firewood; he didn’t want to leave Birgir alone.

For three days and three nights, Birgir slept. A fever took hold of him; he was hot to the touch, his skin clammy. Sebbi did what

he could, coaxing water and broth down his throat, preparing the tea Birgir himself prescribed for fevers, but nothing seemed to help. Birgir shook and sweat, swimming up to consciousness to vomit blood that grew darker and thicker every day before collapsing again into sleep.

Outside, winter descended with a violence Sebbi had never seen before, and inside, Sebbi was mad with worry. He paced and pulled at his hair, screamed, even, in frustration at Birgir's unresponsive body. Panicky in the close heat of the house, Sebbi threw open the door, thinking of going beyond the walls to the town, thinking of hands to carry Birgir, medicine to give him. Someone who would know what to do. The snow and the cold, though, quickly put those thoughts to rest.

Sebbi was alone. He could not even see the walls. He would not be able to reach the gate, not with the burden of Birgir in his arms, not in the darkness.

"Help," Sebbi shouted into the black. "Help, please."

The freezing winds captured his voice. His tears froze on his face, and the pain of the cold—the unimaginable northern cold—drove him back inside.

* * *

The sun had smudged its grey light over the horizon on the fourth day when Birgir finally woke. He sat up, then moaned and leaned off the bed to spit up a last mouthful of clotted blood. He mumbled something that sounded like a curse.

"Birgir?" Sebbi asked, going to him and checking his fever again. It was finally lowering. Birgir leaned into his touch.

"Sebbi," he croaked.

"Will you be alright a little longer?" Sebbi asked. "I'll take you to the town as soon as I can. As soon as the snow stops."

"No," Birgir's eyes opened wide. He looked awake, at least, finally fully conscious. "No, I cannot go there. And you. A thrall. You have some protection under my roof, but you could be captured inside the walls."

Sebbi shook his head. The worry he felt for his strange host was a surprise even to him. It had only been two moons since he'd held a knife to Birgir's throat, thinking he would kill him for the warmth of a fire and a meal in his belly. Now, he could not watch Birgir waste away in his bed, even if it cost him his freedom. "You need help. Do you mean to die like this?"

"The danger has passed. I'll be myself soon," Birgir said. He reached out his hand to Sebbi, who took it firmly in his own. Birgir had lost weight and his fingers felt fragile in Sebbi's grip. "I know how I will die. It is not like this. Whatever I desire."

"How long have you been sick, Birgir?" Sebbi asked. He closed his eyes against the thought of Birgir's pain and brought his bony knuckles up to his forehead like a blessing.

Birgir huffed a weak laugh. The ghost of his crooked smile turned up one corner of his mouth. "Do you think I am sick?"

Sebbi nodded.

"A long time, then," Birgir answered.

* * *

The next day, Birgir was able to sit up in bed and make conversation. He was hungry after his long sleep and cheery despite his weakness. Sebbi, though, was irritable and restless. Birgir told him to prepare an ointment to go over his bruising, as much to give Sebbi a distraction as to ease his pain. Birgir sniffed it and gave Sebbi corrections until he was satisfied with the work, then swung his feet over the side of the bed and pulled off his tunic.

Though they lived in close quarters, Sebbi was shy about his own body and, perhaps out of a sense of reciprocity, he had always averted his eyes from Birgir's, too. Sebbi fixed his gaze on the bowl of ointment in his hands.

"Am I so hard to look at?" Birgir asked.

"No," Sebbi stammered. He looked up and saw Birgir watching him over his shoulder, smiling again. Though his cheeks were sunken, his lips bruise-mottled, and his right eye was still bloodied, Birgir remained handsome. His skin was smooth and pale except for a scattering of dark freckles across his shoulders, and his hair shone red and gold in the firelight. Birgir's body was so lean and spare that Sebbi could see every muscle and sinew shot through with the blue marbling of his veins. Ribs shadowed his chest, and a pulse jumped in his throat.

"Give me the ointment," Birgir said, reaching a hand out for the bowl. When he took it, it wobbled briefly in his weak-wristed grip.

"Why do you live outside the walls?" Sebbi asked, watching Birgir start to work the ointment into the tense muscle of his stomach. The bruise there had faded from red to a dark purple and mottled black. "It is dangerous for you to be alone if you're ill."

"But I am not alone," Birgir grinned.

"That doesn't answer my question."

The counter sobered Birgir. He wiped his expression clean. "It is a long story, Sebbi. And I do not think you will like it."

"I wish to know. You have been kind to me, but you keep secrets from me also."

"When you came here, you were looking for a secret keeper."

"Yes. And I will not fight you for your stories, but I would know them. If you trust me."

Birgir didn't reply immediately. He pushed his hair back to look at Sebbi with his good eye while his hands rubbed circles over his bruised neck. "You have not spent much time with my people, and I do not know all the right words to tell you this. Do you know what *ergi* is? What it means to be *argr*?"

"No. I did not learn those words."

"Well, they are best not repeated. If you are known to accuse a man of this falsely, you may be challenged and killed. But if you are *argr*—that is, you commit acts of what is called *ergi*—you must also be punished with exile. You cannot live in the community. Most of us outcasts become wanderers, but that life would not suit me, and because I am a *vitki*, a seer and healer, I am needed by those who have turned me out. So I stay close, but I am not allowed beyond the walls."

"Because you are *argr*?"

"Yes."

“Does that mean—what? You committed a crime?”

“It means that I am, to put it weakly and imprecisely, unmanly. This is common for vitki; seeing is often a woman’s magic, done with women’s tools. You leave yourself open to be penetrated by the spirit world, and you are left vulnerable afterward, as I am now. Sometimes this crossing is accepted. But it means too, and particularly in my case, that I have been used as a woman in sexual congress.”

“Ah. I see.”

Birgir shrugged. “That is the truth of it.”

“That is a sin to your people?”

“A sin?” Birgir laughed. “Well, perhaps. But you’ve lost something in the translation. To be argr is to be unworthy of the society inside the walls. It is an unfitness. An unfitness for your duty as a man.”

“You said it was common for vitki.”

“Yes, but vitki are themselves an aberration. Most seers like me are v”lva. That is, they are women,” Birgir sighed. “In any case, the accusation was brought against me. I would not fight to clear my name. I did not think I could earn back the trust I had lost. And if you break the trust, if you show that you are not worthy of the protection of your community, you will be outcast.”

“It is not like that among my people,” Sebbi said.

“It is like that everywhere, whether it is written in law or not. If your community rejects you, then you have no help when you

need it. No one is so independent that they need no help—even if help is only the knowledge that harming you will be punished. You have been a thrall and a free man, so you must understand. Your fate is decided by how others see you, and you cannot so easily change that.”

“I have never met a man who seemed so needed as you are,” Sebbi told him. It was a kindness, but his voice was dark with anger. Though Birgir did not seem sad about his exile, the thought of it had enraged Sebbi. Birgir, after all, was a man who cared for others, a man who helped. He was clearly not only fit to live in the settlement, but necessary to its inhabitants. He sacrificed for it. “Why force you out?”

Birgir smiled at that, or bared his teeth. It was a grim expression. His eyes were hard and dark in the low light. “In truth? I was also accused of poisoning someone. Which is itself a type of ergi. A real man would fight. A real man would use a knife. And if it was his Fate to die, he would accept that, too. I did not.” Birgir shrugged. “They are afraid of me, and they do not respect me. Until they need me, of course. So they have not forced me to go far.”

Sebbi swallowed, his anger ebbing in the wake of Birgir’s confession. Though he considered asking Birgir if it was true—if Birgir had taken a life in this way—he did not. The answer was not worth the offence. He had always known Birgir could kill him with poisons or with words. “It is a serious accusation. But it must have been difficult. To leave, and to be unwelcome still.”

Birgir looked at Sebbi with a strange tenderness, but then simply handed him the ointment. “Have I missed any of my bruises?”

Sebbi took the bowl from him, and seeing that the bruise on Bir-

gir's stomach was paired with a bruise low on his back, Sebbi worked the salve into the taut muscle over his hip. "Do you want any for your lips?" Sebbi asked.

"My lips?" Birgir repeated, his fingers going to his mouth, probing. "What has happened to my lips?"

"At the end of the spae, when the others had left, I asked you a question. And when you answered, you changed. You spoke with a new voice. And your lips, you have these small bruises all around them. Like—"

"Like someone had sewn my mouth shut."

"Yes," Sebbi whispered, afraid, again, for Birgir, or perhaps of Birgir. "Do you not remember?"

Birgir only smiled. "Not to worry," he said. "It will heal." He dipped two fingers in the salve Sebbi held and smoothed it over his mouth. The motion was perfunctory and quick, but Sebbi watched with a sensual interest: the softness under his fingers, the way his lips shone.

* * *

In the frozen deep of winter, Sebbi found himself alone with his thoughts often. There was less work to do, fewer visitors and fewer chores. Birgir's bruising faded and his fever passed, but he still slept late into the day and was exhausted long before Sebbi. In the quiet hours he spent huddled at the fire, listening to Birgir's breath whistling through his chest, Sebbi thought of the cryptic answer Birgir had given him at the spae. He turned it over and over in his mind, but couldn't unpick its riddle.

Not long after his bruises had gone from pale green to gone, Birgir sat close to Sebbi at the hearth. "I didn't think it was possible, but you have been more reticent than usual," Birgir said. "Do you find the long darkness difficult?"

"No," Sebbi answered. "It is not that."

"Then what has made you so quiet?" Birgir asked.

"Do you remember what I asked you? During the spae?"

Birgir shook his head. "The voice who answered you is a voice that has not guided me for some time," he said. "His is not a thread I would choose to follow."

"What do you mean?" Sebbi asked.

"I speak the words of spirits and of my gods, the Aesir, if I can follow the thread to them. Often I draw on the wisdom of Oðin, one-eyed and all-seeing. But the other, is—he lives in the home of the gods, but he is something older, even, than Aesir, and less bound by law and oath."

"A devil?" Sebbi whispered, stunned.

Birgir tried to soothe him, to explain. "Not a devil," he promised. "But still dangerous. He is the Mind-Tester. The Unquiet Thought. Like you, though, he is far from his home. He is allowed to live with the gods because he is clever, and he has his own power. He has done them great services. And he loves them, too. But he is granted his place because he is useful, and the ways he is used have poisoned him."

"Then the voice meant me harm?"

Birgir shrugged. “That I do not know. Perhaps he is looking after those who can’t go home.”

“I do not know what his words meant.”

Birgir surprised Sebbi by resting his head against Sebbi’s arm and moving a hand to rest on Sebbi’s knee. “I cannot explain it, either. But you are welcome here.”

“You have been kind to me,” Sebbi answered.

Birgir turned to him, then. “I mean you would be welcome to stay with me. You are welcome to make this your home. Past the spring. If you wanted it. Instead of going back to Wessex.”

Sebbi leaned forward and kissed Birgir. He caught his lips between his teeth, felt Birgir moan against his mouth.

“Stay,” Birgir said. “Stay with me.”

Sebbi did not make a promise, then, but he felt the foundations of an oath laid down, the beginnings of a new knot to tie him. With his words and with his tongue, Birgir worked this spell. Sebbi did not resist, again at his mercy.

* * *

In the quiet of the night, as they lay together in the bed they shared, Sebbi turned to Birgir, and felt Birgir turn to him, too. In the dim of the hearth-light, he could see very little. Birgir’s eyes were a deeper darkness, only, than the white of his skin.

“You should know. It is true that I poisoned someone,” Birgir said.

There was a silence then. Sebbi wanted Birgir to say something more, to reassure him that he wasn’t a man prone to violence. To say he had made a mistake. Sebbi thought Birgir was a kind man, usually, but there was a meanness to him, too, an inflexibility. Maybe Sebbi shouldn’t have been surprised. Maybe he should have been more afraid.

“He disrespected me,” Birgir said. “When I was weak and sick and could not stop him.”

“Ergi,” Sebbi spoke the word Birgir had taught him, the clustered consonants strange in his mouth.

“Yes,” Birgir whispered. “But would it not have been argr to leave him unpunished? I am not a man who will accept what scraps the Fates dole out. I will not be broken for their pleasure.”

Sebbi dared, then, to reach a hand out, to run it over Birgir’s arm. He was prepared for Birgir to pull away, but instead he folded towards Sebbi, resting the crown of his head against his chest.

“I listened to the voice who spoke to you at the spae. The Unquiet Thought,” Birgir admitted. “He taught me many things. To follow the weave. To chase sickness from the suffering. The hour of my death. The revenge I would take. But it was dangerous knowledge. The gods were right to have his mouth sewn closed. Again and again, his words have stung me.”

* * *

The spring thaw came, the snow melting under the golden slant of the sun that still only arced low through the sky. Every hour of

sunlight was perfect and gilded, so that Sebbi often found himself struck into stillness by the beauty of the trees, the carved support beams of Birgir's house, or the bloody red of Birgir's hair.

At dawn, though, and at twilight, when the fog would lower in a grey haze ahead of the enveloping darkness, he thought of Wessex. Kept close to Birgir's pit-house still, by cold and by fear, he thought of freedom.

Sebbi woke early to watch the sunrise and to think. Though he tried not to wake Birgir, he did not always succeed. Usually, Birgir made a complaining noise and rolled himself up in the blankets Sebbi had abandoned. If he had slept well, though, and was in good spirits, Birgir would prepare some bread and honey, and bring it out to Sebbi, watching outside his door.

"You are thinking of home?" Birgir asked him on one of these mornings. "You're restless again. Now spring is here."

"Yes," Sebbi admitted.

"Then you have decided where you will go?"

Sebbi shook his head. "I do not know what I should do."

"You are not happy here?"

"I am happy with you," Sebbi soothed, "but here I am not a man. I am not free. There I have land and history. I am more than my labour."

Birgir nodded. "You know you are more than that to me."

"Yes. But I feel shackled in this place in a way I don't under-

stand."

Birgir chewed through the coarse barley slowly. Eventually, his crooked smile crept up his face. "We can ask the gods. If you need guidance."

Sebbi shook his head sharply. "I won't see you sick like that again."

"Just a peek into the future," Birgir said. "Not like the spae. Just one question."

Sebbi frowned at the idea, but he followed when Birgir tugged at his hand and followed him inside. He did not stop Birgir from preparing the bowl of seed pods and lighting them with a splinter from the fire.

"Sit down, Sebbi," Birgir said, taking a wand of twisted metal from where it hung on the wall. "I will help you decide."

They sat together, then, while Birgir pulled the smoke from the burning henbane deep into his lungs. His eyes turned glassy, his expression distant. He breathed in again, and kissed Sebbi with his mouth full of smoke. Sebbi saw the line of bruises appear over Birgir's lips.

"Where should I go?" Sebbi asked. With the question given voice, he wished it was Birgir who would answer him. Wise and good Birgir. But instead, there was the tenor of a god in his throat.

"Why would you stay in a land where you are not even counted among men?" the voice asked.

"Because I love him," Sebbi whispered.

The thing that wasn't Birgir spat on the ground, the saliva marbled red. "What need does he have of your love? He is a broken vessel."

Sebbi shook his head. "No. No, he is more than that."

Birgir closed his eyes, and when he opened them the glassy shine of the god was gone. Two tears, crystalline and clear, not blood but water, ran over his face.

"You could come with me," Sebbi said. "I will give you a home. You will not be outcast. You will not have to do this anymore."

Birgir nodded. He slid his hand into Sebbi's and leaned forward, letting his head rest against Sebbi's chest. Sebbi hesitated for a moment, but then he put his arms around Birgir, ran a hand through his flaming hair. He tilted his face up and kissed him again, though Birgir's lips were dark with bruising and it must have hurt.

"You are not a man here, either," Sebbi said.

* * *

Birgir packed what he needed, though he could not carry much. When Sebbi offered to take some of his things, Birgir shrugged. "I will not need more. The rest is just weight for our shoulders."

Sebbi frowned at that. He worried that Birgir was not fit for the journey, and worried, too, that Birgir would not accept his help.

"You've been across the sea before?" he asked. "Are you sure?"

"I have travelled. How else do you think I could speak your

tongue?" Birgir answered. "I know what I have agreed to, Sebbi. This journey was set down for me. Don't fret on my account."

"If you're certain. I will get you what you need. I will make a home for us, when we reach Wessex," Sebbi promised him.

"If your god is willing," Birgir whispered. "Isn't that what you said, once? If the Fates are willing, too, perhaps."

"It has not been my god guiding me back to my shores," Sebbi answered. "And you have always twisted the threads of Fate."

"All the worse, Sebbi." There was no sharpness in the reply, no slant in his smile. Sebbi hoped Birgir's softening was a good sign. A sign of love, at least, if not hope.

"Whatever you desire, Birgir. I promise. When we find our home."

"I only want to help you," Birgir said. "I have never wanted to bind you."

Whatever he desired, Birgir knew, he would be feverish when they reached the sea, exhausted. He would die, he knew, on the waves, in the dark, the water lapping at the sides of the long boat, and Sebbi's tears falling into his copper hair.

It was the only way Sebbi would reach home.

Whatever he desired.

The Game's Afoot

by Stephanie Johnson

Breathing.
Hard.

Legs.
Spaghetti.

Heart.
Oh, my heart.

Can't stop.
I thought ...

It was so funny.

Breathing.
So hard.

I thought it was an awesome prank.

Fuck, it's getting closer.
Why did I do it?

Arg, my knees.
Who the hell said ...
 fucking with ...
 a unicorn ...
 would be ...
 a fun thing to do?

Imma gonna kill 'em.

My ma said
 if someone told me
 to jump
 off the Brooklyn
 Bridge
 I'd do it.

I'm such an idiot.

Joe led me
 (Wait ... can it cross water?)
"let's go to where it drinks every dawn," he said.

Oh God, so cold!

We got there;
He had on
 hardcore
 Running shoes

Oh man, I'm soaked,
Dammit.

He had a stick.
A fucking stick.

We jumped out.
Joe yelled,
“The game’s afoot!”

Fucking psycho.

I didn’t know
He’d sharpened the stick.
What a dick.
 (Gahhh, it’s crossing,
 Maybe that was werewolves.)

Fuck, it’s almost on me.

This asshole behind me now
Is the biggest thing I’ve ever seen.

Joe laughed and said
He didn’t have to outrun it,
that he only had to outrun me.

He didn’t know
I always won Parkrun
 Before the monsters came.

FUUUUUUUCK!
My knees my knees ...

Joe won’t be leading me
Astray any more ...

Sorry Ma—

Breath
 inches from
 My neck.

It passes:
 all white foam and wild eyed
 a trail of blood behind

Marking
Calling something
 hungrier,
 older
 than either of us.

Sirens Land

by Viviana De Cecco



Sirens

by Reema Rajbanshi

I.

I found the papers on a rare morning the Cyclops let me sleep in. I had been roaming his bedroom, exploring the half bath with its wall-sized mirror. The sink was littered with silicone eyeballs. They glowed like translucent billiard balls rolling across the marble top, an iris in place of a number. I had only spotted the balls from the far bed, as the Cyclops plucked out an eye each night, then pushed another back in each morning.

I never told Siren that he made love blind. That, for all his gusto, I stayed up wincing and pacing the blacked-out room.

The papers lay atop a silver filing cabinet in the bathroom's walk-in closet. I could never afford such a closet if I worked a hundred cleaning crews for a hundred lives. Silk shirts were folded on hangers, polished dark shoes were lined beneath them, and the cabinet shone in the corner. On the top page, *S-I-R-E-N* was stamped in red letters.

My friend had disappeared by then, a loss the Cyclops stonily distanced himself from. I wondered if my grief had flattened the sizzle between us. I knelt rapt in the closet, flipping through those pages, and saw this was truer than I'd known.

* * *

Siren was always talking shit about getting back to her islands. I never mentioned what the Oracles said: the seas would swallow everything once the last ice melted. I was only a Saltwater human—a distinction Siren knew even if she had approached me first.

“Hey sis,” she'd called from a shoreline rock. I dragged myself out the water.

The dawn sky was rosing behind Siren, who glowed cross-legged before me. I plucked strands of seaweed from my arms, my flesh leg, my mechanical leg.

“Does that thing swim?” She pointed to my steel joint, which tapered to a retractable fin.

“Do you think I'd be alive if it didn't?” Rummaging underwater left me cross, why I had few friends in Seca.

She assessed me with her citrine eyes. “Catch anything good for breakfast?” She gazed past the e-scooter lot to the row of Bite cafés. “I can treat.”

I peeled off the kelp-suit and towed myself down. I assessed her too—Sirens were sexually fluid—her enviable hourglass, her tie-dyed sundress, her lava-like hair. But she didn't flinch, just cocked her head as if I were the trap.

“I’m not hybrid, you know,” I said.

“Oh I know what you’re not,” she laughed. “I’m curious about what you are.”

Identity lines in Seca led to cold shoulders rather than invites. So I zipped up my beach bag and my yellow shift. “I insist on paying my half.”

She laughed again.

* * *

When I first caught the Cyclops’ eye, Siren and I were ogling human surfers. They somersaulted like extinct dolphins over the waves. But the Cyclops studied me rather than the beach bums who must’ve been his friends, given how water money congregated at the most pristine shores. I didn’t smile back. I’d grown used to ignoring the roving eyes, mostly from divorcés in convertibles.

Seca was a calculating place.

Only when the Cyclops paced before me, then zeroed in did I break gaze with the surfers lounging at the tiki bar.

“You look natural here,” he said. I assumed he was sick, what with his baby skin and single eye under that hairless brow.

“Actually, I was raised in Seca. You don’t look natural at all.”

His blue eye narrowed, intrigued, and swept over my chest. “I moved from the Wetlands. Have you heard of No Salt Inc.? I manage projects for them.”

We chatted till the beach cleared, which is how we knew, bodies squared, he’d hooked me. The following days with the Cyclops were a whirl of waterfront restaurants and yacht clubs and beach cottages I’d never cleaned. Posh denizens like him—newcomers from The South—hired more expensive services. I wore my steamed dresses and drawled my sentences and not one of those yuppies was brazen enough to ask where the Cyclops had found his “cute human.”

Siren laughed at his image when I first hologrammed it up for her. “Are you serious or are you blind?”

“He treats me well.”

“Look at him, Zweety. He has no choice.”

She was floating between parties herself. I had just joined her for a wedding between a Saltwater and a Drylander—the woman a mermaid, the hermaphrodite a hybrid—and realized I’d glimpsed this unlikely pair at a rally for Drowned Islands. I wasn’t a rally kid, so how could I know they were another coupling “between the streets and the sheets”? Siren related this with a wink over her plate of soy oysters, and mouthed *try it*.

The couple sat behind a driftwood table at one end of the candlelit barn. Comrade after comrade toasted to “life, water, and community,” but the couple cried *fuck the rich!* Everyone cheered and chanted, the paper bouquets trembling. I raised my glass too and downed my tequila in one gulp. But the Cyclops flashed before my eyes—his velvet bed, his gloomy house, his backyard that overlooked the Reservoir. I wasn’t ready to give up on the rich just yet.

Gate 1

Seca stays green by siphoning its water from the North, its workers from the East.

I've never seen the dust fields encircling us, the Guards at every fence. Only the eastern Dumps go unpoliced, despite thousands of squatters. Half the migrants sway in place, high on waste fumes, and half totter about, scouring for crumbs. Police patrol the westside ocean, though few venture there, the waters even fouler.

I swim daily, figuring I'll be dead in a decade anyway. I love diving in those aubergine waters, to pebbled floors where slivers of fish and metal waft. I love breaststroking under the chainlink which splits Long Shore, to where tent cities rise like bread.

Most dwellers are middle-aged women with grandchildren wailing at their legs. The men are really teens or over sixty-five, and sit apart silently. They stream in from Jungles and Steppes that dessicate into tinder then spontaneously burn. Older migrations—from Sweetwater, as had been my parents' case—trickled out decades ago.

II.

My father told me stories of Sweetwater that seemed like fairy tales. He held my hand on Long Shore walks and described a hundred fishes in the East-end estuary where we were born.

"I caught them standing waist-high in the river."

His own father held doors open as they walked through one fish market after another, as if entering magical palaces. The fish were glistening pods lined on snow mounds, behind which mongers streamed back-and-forth. Scaling, hosing, slicing.

"Hundreds would appear after the floods. We had too much rain in Sweetwater."

Too-much-rain became my child mind's way of visualizing an unknowable past.

I joined the Gate Cleaners after my parents vanished too. Though I'd had no Gates experience when Agatha interviewed me, I'd swept and mopped plenty of houses by then for black market cash.

"I started where you are, Magdalena," Agatha said. "Can I call you that? I worked my way up to running this agency."

I wanted to ask if that made her feel like less of a minion. "I'm grateful for the opportunity. My parents came with nothing. They're gone now."

She swiveled away from the three screens on which she monitored the Gates. "You got a boyfriend or girlfriend? Any relatives or kids?" Her shock of wrinkles revealed her as human, unlike Immortals with their marble features or hybrids with their cherub cheeks.

"I got nowhere to go," I said. "I'm a safe bet."

She swiveled back to her screens. "That's what they all say. Log into the e-manual on your own time. Ask the other girls where

they rent their equipment.”

That was the first and last time I’d meet Agatha, who vanished as well.

* * *

Siren didn’t need to work and didn’t know how. Immortals had lived in spheres without money. Though Seca required coin or cash, it granted Immortals privileges. Shelter, e-mobiles, water reserves—humans and hybrids had to hustle for these. Maybe magic was a kind of money.

Siren, for instance, could make fire. She would stand before you and boom! All ten digits were matchsticks, tiny flames flickering as she gesticulated and kept talking. If your car sputtered on the road, as it did when we visited the ruins of Yosemite, she’d open your car hood and press her palms to the carburetor. Boom! The car coughed and growled again.

Countless times, Siren tended bonfires during our desert parties. For all her razzle-dazzle—she wandered bare-breasted on sequined legs—she never spun on Ayahuasca with the human hip-pies. She never sang with drunk hybrids who spun their own entertaining shows. She waited till we’d passed out by the fires, then crooned shanties in the most mellifluous voice. The men woke stunned, their girls glowering next to them.

Siren fed fires all through the night, often till dawn. She’d dip her hand in, grimacing as the flesh burned, whispering till the flames roared up again.

That’s why I can’t forgive any of them. Not humans nor hybrids nor Immortals, like the Cyclops. They’d pimped her out for fun,

as the Cyclops did with me. No one bothered to report her missing—till I noticed my friend no longer flirted with beach bums or waited around to talk shit with me.

* * *

The Cyclops steered me around his parties as if I were a delightful new toy. I felt in fact like a prize doll, the way he directed me to wear the crushed silk gown he’d purchased, to apply scarlet lipstick and don bejeweled rings. Being a beautiful object was far better than scrubbing one.

After those parties, he drove us right back to his cavernous house. There was no question of staying at the rinky-dink studio I shared with two human maids. Those nights felt like secrets, the Cyclops pumping me with fantasies of comfort, which I’d lost with my parents. He’d roll over breathless while I clutched my belly, filled with his dreams.

What catapulted me out of his palm-rimmed house were small explosions: bottles flung and shattering in the night.

First it was Siren’s disappearance. One day she was driving us about Seca, her lava-like hair ribboning in the wind. The next day, she wouldn’t respond to her e-visor. Her loft had been ransacked of her vinyls, her journals, her art.

“Put on your public face,” the Cyclops would say. “Why the hell do you look so sad?”

“My friends are missing,” I’d say. “Am I supposed to pretend everything’s ok?”

Then there were weekly arrests at the growing skirmishes

around water and jobs. One group might protest the monetization of flights between Eco-Nations; another group the militarization of pre-War borders. No one could tell me the ends or means for the protests, which grew more raucous, bore more casualties. We only knew, as curfews fell back and more acquaintances were locked up, that we'd grown panicky. Would we be next? Was anyone counting?

"Be grateful you're in here and not out there," the Cyclops would say.

"Being grateful doesn't mean turning a blind eye," I'd say.

Then there was my own tornado, which I could never name to the Cyclops. He liked his internal life to be as beige as his external one. I should've known, mornings I roamed the rooms, running my palms roughshod over dark walls and metallic things, that he was as brutal inside as his house was. Only when I caught my reflection in an onyx countertop did I think, *sirens can also be silent*.

Gate 2

The Main Gates are really a maze of waiting halls. After every turnstile, you hit an inspection. You wait for a day in one hall till you get the go-ahead to march to the next turnstile, the next hall. It takes at least a month to pass through the maze. So you pack as if for a trek: water, food, and clothes, if you have any.

Few babies make it in, fewer of the disabled and elderly make it out. The Underground has protested the Main Gates as eugenicist, forever. Their placards rot in museums and government

buildings. *Water for the poor! We are ALL migrants!*

When I sweep trash and feces clumped in hall corners, I wonder if my parents entered and exited politely. Escape is haphazard: some people paddle across the sea or risk the Mountains, others jump the turnstiles after midnight, leaving bread and water for those huddled in the halls. Do my parents wait at the cusp of another world? Will I too always be waiting at gates?

III.

"Why do you keep choosing that monster over us?" Siren asked.

Long Shore was darkening fast with sunset, so kelp divers were dragging back their haul. From her wild eyes and tangled hair, I could tell Siren had been partying again. Yet her form glittered more than mine ever would on my most rested days.

"Are you jealous of him?" I asked. "Can't you let me have this one luxury in my life?"

Siren cackled and fell backwards onto the sand, waving her arms and legs so that she carved an angel. "Come on Zweety! Where I come from, he's a dime-a-dozen. You're the one who needs him! You need *me* to feel good about yourself!"

I grabbed a handful of shells at my feet and hurled them at Siren. "You bitch! If your magic is so special, why didn't you save your own people instead of running away here?"

She jumped up and grabbed my hair. We tussled in the sand, clawing at each other's arms, punching each other's gut. The

kelp divers glanced at us but plodded on. They probably assumed we were Dump-dwellers fighting over water reserves.

After several minutes, the beach went dark, and we lay sodden and gasping in the sand. “I don’t think I’m special,” Siren said. “You are, Zweety. But you can’t fucking see that with your self-pity. It blinds you to everything.”

I pushed myself up on an elbow to glare at her. But she was slithering away. Her legs had gelled into a sequined fin and her neck gills had feathered up. As she did when she regretted flashing any secret corner of herself, Siren slipped into the sea.

* * *

I was nicknamed Zweety as soon as I crossed into Seca, though I felt salty through and through. One afternoon, when the schoolkids had pummeled me again, my father pulled me into his den. He washed my cuts with stinging iodine, then sat back and stared at me.

I sobbed. “Aren’t you gonna say or do anything? They want me dead!”

“When in Rome,” my father muttered.

“What the hell is Rome? We’re in the fucking desert! Why did you even bring us here?”

He held me to his chest until my crying trailed off. “It’s not your fault. The old stories were taught before the schools were closed. Artemesia was a girl when she was abandoned by the Greeks. She became loyal to the Persians who raised her. So when she became a great warrior, she sided against her own

people.”

I pulled away from my father. He slumped in his chair, gaunt from his six-day week at the Desalination Factory. I never heard him or my mother speaking Amsterdam English anymore, their choppy, high-pitched language of love.

“How can I be friends with my bullies?”

“Magdalena,” he said. “You’ll all grow up to become someone else. If you want to protect yourself, you have to own the names they give you. That way, when you fight back, it’ll be a town spat. Everyone will go back to worrying about water.”

“Are you saying I have to accept their hate?”

“I’m saying it doesn’t matter. You have to live.”

* * *

I began dreaming about children just before the affair ended.

The hallucinations accompanied my cycle, both a bloodbath. I’d weep more than I had in 25 years, as if I were miscarrying. Every dawn, I started up, unsure if the faint bleating I’d heard was my e-birds, the girls I lived with, or the babies that crawled through my nightmares.

One child was as hairless as the Cyclops, a pale creature with the same bony brow and rigid smile that seemed ravenous. Another baby was my child self, before I lost my left calf, who punched the tub with ruddy fists. Another baby looked like a lover who’d disappeared in the Mountains—a winged hybrid who had also crossed from Sweetwater—waking from that

dream felt as if I'd lost Phoenix anew.

What the Cyclops did have was his house by the Reservoir. He never failed to repeat how much it cost, how much his family had made in the Wetlands, how the cost of raising children in a parched world was impossible for a single woman.

"I'm just not sure," I said nightly. This worked as an aphrodisiac on him, cueing his eye to glaze cerulean under that frowning brow, his brass-ringed fingers fussing at the fine-stitched gowns he'd gifted. I was dressed and undressed at his behest. I never mentioned my dreams.

Gate 3

The Reservoir is the lone body of water besides the ocean. It's so clean, we dip our hands into the clear water and drink without getting sick.

The Council built the Reservoir in 2150, after the Recovery Pact between the Drylands. The Wetlands opted out, unsurprisingly, as they'd won the Water Wars.

Long and glistening, the Reservoir is bordered with wildflowers whose names I don't know. In some lights, the lake shimmers like a glass plate. In others, it's a purple velvet blanket. Now and then, a heron swoops its beak into the water, then flees with a fish into the sky.

I make a weekly ritual of filling the apartment's water jug. I punch T435 into the machine for our allotment, then sit for an hour strumming the lake skin. I've always wanted to know if

Immortals live in the Reservoir, but I never sully the water. More than a gate, it's sacred.

IV.

The Cyclops and I began sparring whenever the breakfast water boiled. Would the migrants ever stop coming? Why should people be banned now?

Not as long as whole Eco-Nations collapse, I'd say. The continents need to be re-districted, like after the first Water War, he'd say. Along the lines of what, we'd shout. Who had water and who didn't and what kind?!

"You make mountains out of molehills," the Cyclops said.

He stalked before his obscenely large entertainment unit in his living room. I folded my hands as usual, staring at the wires webbing the charcoal walls.

"The molehills *are* actually mountains," I said. "If you can't see that, then you're the one with the problem!"

The Cyclops glowered and stomped up to his bedroom. I gathered my coat and cleaning gear into my satchel and drove to what felt like home.

Long Shore was teeming that afternoon with families: everyday Joes and Janes, humans and hybrids whose loved ones had been swallowed by Seca's jaws. On one side, there was the serene ocean, and on the other, a roiling human sea.

I had never seen these ordinary people who survived in denser neighborhoods with shacks and studios I never cleaned. But here they'd come: stricken faces of fellow maids and school peers, lost faces in a human mother's downturned eyes or a hybrid father's photo pin.

A few Immortals, like the Orixia, idled among us. He chatted with the beer cart boy, looking as disheveled as he would in his apartment. But I did not know him yet. I simply wondered why an Immortal, who never suffered from thirst, who could come and go more easily, would cast his lot here?

What matters now is that I spotted the Gate Cleaners before the firing squad rolled in. I waved and ran over, hoping to snag a beer with loose change. Just as I clicked open the metal tab, blockish tanks rumbled onto the beach. They lined up before the tide and aimed at the thick of the crowd.

Screams. Scuffles. Pop-popping.

I'm alive only because I was thirsty, surrounded by maids at the edge of the street.

* * *

I sprinted with the crowd right for nearby blocks and scanned for Siren. Not that she could be harmed in the usual way—but Guards were already spilling out of tanks, already handcuffing rally kids.

I never did find her, the friend who'd made me wonder if I were a friend. Two hours later, the bodies had been bulldozed and I was called into work. It was the Gate Cleaners who swept up the food debris, the rags and shoes left behind. We stayed past mid-

night—bagging plastic cups and paper fliers—from one bloodied end of the Shore to the other.

When I returned to the Cyclops' house, the entire street had gone dark. Palm Row seemed a shadowscape of cinderblocks, as if the rich and poor had swapped places. Still, I spotted the Cyclops' silhouette, watching the e-screen for news flashes, stalking back and forth like he was hunting something. I had the tingling sense that what he was looking for wasn't me.

Was another woman there? He'd told me once, *all Immortals cheat*. But then he sank, cradling his bald head in the shadows, and I saw what he saw: a lonely misfit. No woman who had a real choice would love him more than they lusted for his pockets. I slipped the gate latch back on and started walking to the maids' quarters.

The girls wandered about wordlessly, as if our speech had been blown away. Some wore pine green uniforms splotted with dried black blood. Others had peeled these off and walked about corridors in bras and slips. A few strolled naked—hybrids with their extra limbs, their animal weapons—everyone's long hair unbraided. It felt like a funeral procession.

I changed into a cotton nightdress and went looking for a plaza bonfire. The night owls, warming up for night shifts, eyed me warily.

"We gotta leave Seca. We'll be next."

"I say it's time to collect arms like the Fire Crew. It's time to fight back."

"Be careful ladies. There are people here sleeping with the en-

emy.”

I slipped away before the meanest girls could name me. In bed, I cradled the glass fish my father had gifted on my sixth birthday. It was a pink-swirled salmon, with yellow eyes and silvery scales, which I clipped inside my metal leg when I wore it. As I drifted off, I heard my father say *when in Rome*. But I’d never learned about a single ancient city. I knew only Seca, where even the humans were not my own. If anyone had bothered asking, I would’ve said, *be my guest. Burn this hellhole down*.

* * *

For a whole week, I stayed away from the Cyclops. I slept in Siren’s loft, on the sunken rose sofa we’d kvetched on for years. I told the girls I was checking on Puffer, the rotund tabby Siren had rescued from the Dumps. But Puffer loafed immovably by the window that loomed between his feeder and a pile of dirty clothes.

I was the one who curled up in Siren’s bed, smelling her blend of salt and patchouli and citrus. I was the one who played on loop her podcast “Underground Sirens.” I didn’t care for her soliloquies on elevated water prices or her banter with guests over strikes. I was listening for her raspy tone, which caught you off guard given her vulpine form. It made Siren unforgettable, so that I’d feared introducing her to the Cyclops.

I was listening too for any clue as to how she must have escaped. I refused to believe she wasn’t alive, even if there were methods for Immortals too. I scoured the e-files for guests who sounded like they might know, who hadn’t themselves been whisked off. Overnight, the Underground was being swept into a labyrinth, jails that had been built beneath the desert during

the first Water War. Every morning that I walked between the maids’ quarters and the Immortals’ oasis, I felt the ground rumble. I counted the X-es on cinderblocks tagged by police.

By the second week, I’d run back to the Cyclops’ velvety bed. I detached in relief for the interminable minutes he lunged greedily at me. “I could do this forever,” he’d whoop and I’d marvel at his insatiable eye. Frozen, I’d forget my true name or those of my friends. I’d forget that more and more of Seca was thirsty for Immortal blood.

Gate 4

No human knows what lies over the Mountains except the Guards. The cobalt peaks undulate in an icy squiggle from the ocean to the Main Gates. In Seca’s calm season, dashes of green liven the rocky terrain. In Seca’s windy season, you can barely scooter within a half mile of the base. Sand blasts against your face, so that you return blinded.

Folks whisper that something extraordinary must wait beyond the Mountains. Why else would seventy percent of the Guard be posted there? Why else are protestors, who barricade the mines, never found again? How come water lines run over the peaks, then detour to mansions where technocrats live?

Folks say even First Inhabitants crossed through the Mountains’ ravines. They say early waves of migrants lost half our families there. They say runaways have met new hybrids whose gifts could free Seca, could bring more water.

I don’t believe the folklore, but Siren did. *One day you’ll trust*

magic more than money, she said. *Just make sure, Zweety, it's not too late.*

V.

There in his closet, on page after page, I read “activist purge.” I ran my thumb down every margin and paused at the final heading:

Target 1: Climate Action Now!

Target 2: Arrest Security Threats.

Target 3: Freeze Non-Profit Funds.

Under each column were the names of hybrids and humans and families I’d met over thirty years. They were something like a community, long before I imagined an exit out of Seca’s cleaning life.

Suddenly, Cyclop’s hints fell together like a puzzle: *think tank, investments, water legacy*. He must’ve reeled me in when I said I knew the beaches. He had heard I was close to Siren, her name famous all over Seca.

What he hadn’t admitted was that the Big Water company he advised had a growing stranglehold across the Drylands. No Salt was the sort that had drained other Eco-Nations of accessible water for the non-rich; the sort that paid newcomers to buy lovely-boned houses in neighborhoods evicting long-time denizens to the shacks.

The lock rattled downstairs and I hurriedly jammed the papers into the silver cabinet. Five minutes later, the Cyclops stood at

the bedroom door, his shadow looming over me in the blind-drawn room. I perched on the bed, my satchel ready at my feet.

“I thought you’d be gone by now,” he said.

“I’ll be gone for a while since a long gig came up.”

He gave one of his strained smiles, as if pondering what our next chess moves might be. “I’ll miss you more than you know.”

“Why are you talking as if you won’t see me again?”

He gathered me up in his husky arms.

“Ouch, you’re hurting me!” I said.

He released me, eye shut and grin gone, then stalked to the sink to swap eyeballs. “Why don’t you take some leftovers before you go?”

* * *

Months later, I will spot the Cyclops’ house from the old Orixia’s apartment. I will peer through the bedroom window, the day awash with sun, and the street will seem endless. The Orixia will rasp from the bedroom door—citing prices for the rental-share will have irritated his lungs—and the irony will ring in my head.

I might have been living as the Cyclops’ wife inside his mansion. Now I could spy other women coming and going.

“It’s yours if you want it,” the Orixia will say.

It will be pinprick quiet, even with every window open, and a

straight shot between the window and the door. The Orixas, crouching in light, will block the door, will seem stuck underwater with his breathing tube. A forgotten god who once escorted drowned slaves between realms, he will be longing for a companion.

“I’ll let you know,” I will say. “I gotta run to my next gig.”

* * *

The final week I ran into her, Siren told me how her islands went down.

We stood on a stranded end of Long Shore, where hybrids in ombre shirts liked to show off tricks, and Siren swept her hands across the horizon.

“It didn’t even happen in a day. It happened over *years* like mini-heart attacks. Do you know what that does to a people, Zweety? No, you couldn’t possibly. You grew up in this godforsaken place.”

She was in one of her moods, the dark swath of rainbow that was my friend. I put an arm about her shoulder. “I listen to ocean sounds to sleep sis. I’m not gonna stay in the desert forever.”

She knelt and wept. Ocean figures crawled out, the ones who couldn’t abide the heat bubbling beneath the water. There were selkies and apsaras, orixas and witches. They formed a baleful circle about Siren, whose hands kindled into flame. Over and over, she muttered her islands’ names.



Hazy Day

by Joel Bisailon

Departures

by Anthony Panegyres

C*entenarian Ships Update* [on The Feed: audio, text, video AI]

Centenarian Ships leave from your locale in April.

All those not enrolled will be incarcerated and sent on secondary ships in May.

Happy Travels!

The Garden

Pete, a rare gardener, and his accountant wife, Thalia, have been kind enough to put me up—only the cities have work for a ninety-six-year-old.

My plan is to hold this job until my forced departure from Earth on The Centenarian Ships. The new workplace is called The Garden: an old federation house with a *real* garden, actual earth and loam, the kind that you can dig your hands into. Worms tunnel, ladybirds land on the roses, and you can hand-pick figs and pomegranates and citrus fruit. A kaleidoscope of colour, with birdsong in the mornings and evenings, and a great pond in the middle with fountains and goldfish and koi and frogs.

Grevillea (doubt it's her real name)—all wild loops of auburn hair, who owns and runs the business—welcomes me, hand out, as she has every day so far. I hope she doesn't feel the creaks in my bones as we shake hands. Even with all the anti-aging drugs, the years still creep over you, just a lot slower and gentler than it did in my own grandparents' time.

I breathe easier in Grevillea's Garden. The dust, which has me sneezing in the streets, never seems to touch the place. It's as if the vegetation and soil soak the dust up to provide a haven for me and all those warblers and chirpers.

I head over to the barista bench, where I'll soon be creating crescent moons and love hearts with my pours.

I don't get my hands dirty like Pete and the other gardener, Baz, who is one of those weird Womban creatures. The café, with its verandah overlooking the greenery and a few tables situated under the trees too, is booked months ahead. Grevillea is a canny operator and always keeps a couple of free tables for regulars, and some for passersby. A tour of the green Eden, however, costs more points than a regular worker like me can afford.

Like always, today is hectic—no time for me to practice the new, more intricate flower pattern, which I haven't yet nailed—so it's all foamy tops of simple hearts. Everything is measured automatically—I can't really burn the milk or the coffee, even if

I try.

Centenarian Ships Update [on The Feed: audio, text, and video]

This year's ships may or may not land on Mars. This is contingent on spaces available on The Red Planet. But regardless, the luxury liners are fully equipped to cater for decades of enjoyable travel through space on your final journey of a lifetime.

Happy Travels!

Grevillea has been firmly insistent I take no part in the cleanup at the end of the workday. Why argue? I sit at a table with *The Long Valley* by Steinbeck, resting my feet on a chair opposite.

I have reread “Johnny Bear” and am about to begin the next when Pete and Baz come in for the evening meal—Grevillea’s custom of getting the staff together after the workday.

Pete slumps across from me and skulls a couple of glasses of water. “Boy did Baz and I work up a sweat, Yi-Yang. Hard guy to keep up with.”

“Thalia coming today?” I ask. Pete’s wife oversees the finances for a bunch of businesses, including Grevillea’s, and sporadically joins us. I get a little nervous around her. Might be that she is overly neat and overly groomed and overly capable. Not the type I have ever understood well, but then again, I’ve only known her a week or so as I’ve only been in the city for eight

days, marking time until I board The Centenarian Ships.

“Not today.” And he nods toward Baz, who is repeatedly backing into a wall. “Thalia can’t handle him. You’ve seen *The Feed*, haven’t you?”

You can’t avoid it. *The Feed* is in every restaurant, every home, every café. Excluding a few of us oldies, almost every adult has *The Feed Input* inserted behind their ear, linked to the brain, so they can upload even quicker, scan the news, download, get updates, even project to other devices. Rumours are some are being stolen from people’s heads. Can’t see why though, not like it’s expensive anymore or exclusive. Maybe for the thrill of it? Maybe they have some way of accessing info we’ve been told is private?

“All that *Womban* news,” Pete says, “my wife ... she’s one of the many who wants them removed.”

I shrug uncomfortably. “I don’t access *The Feed* much.”

Pete laughs. “Well, you and Grevillea must be the only two around.”

The Garden was a rare “*Feed-free*” venue.

Grevillea comes over. Must have been eavesdropping. “Now, Yi-Yang,” she says, addressing me. “I won’t have you learning poor habits from Pete. I’m sure he didn’t intend to say ‘Womban.’ It’s incredibly insulting.” Grevillea eyes Pete warily. “You didn’t mean it, did you, Pete?”

“Course not, boss. Bad habit. Sorry.”

Grevillea nods curtly, then goes over to Baz and scratches his

back and head. It seems to calm him, as he stops shoving his rear into the wall.

“Back in the day,” says Pete to me, “they wanted to demolish this place. Offered her major points, but Grevillea stood firm, said she had a family legacy and a vision. ‘The past is worth cherishing’ were her words, and the quote spread over *The Feed* like wildfire. Gotta love her. Basically, told them to go shove it.”

The womban, Baz, waddles over to us, Grevillea follows. “Good day’s work, Baz?” I ask. I haven’t spoken to him much. Aren’t many of them on the farmlands. I ensure I don’t recoil while Pete scratches Baz’s head to contented grunts.

The Womban’s incisors are mammoth, the bottoms of them especially white as if they’d been chipped clean off.

Baz pulls two tiny leather pouches out of his trouser pockets—one green, the other brown—and hands them to me.

“Baz’s family,” explains Pete.

“Family?”

“Yep,” says Baz. “My wife and daughter,” and he pauses to snort, “Jaye and Mel.” His voice, between grunts and sniffs, sounds earthy, like he forces it from someplace deep, someplace elsewhere.

On opening the pouches, I discover fur in both, like that on Baz’s body.

“Go on, smell ’em,” says Pete.

I do. Both strong, one pungent, the other musky-sweet, not much different to Baz’s own odour. I grasp that these scents are the equivalent of family pics. I give the pouches back to Baz. “Nice,” I say.

“Thanks,” says Baz. “Mean more to me than anything.”

Grevillea, overseeing us all, pats my knee. It isn’t patronising. I decide I like her. Not for the knee-pat, but for caring.

Two of the waiters bring out food and join us: Elias, with doe-like eyes and a mop of brown curls, and the taller, charming Imran are a newly married couple. Pleasant, genuine types, who have no problem with Baz and his habits. It’s of no concern to them when Baz wanders away from us to crouch around their legs. Imran and Elias raise their hands and allow Baz to sniff away.

“Who do you think it’ll be today?” I ask Pete.

“Almost always, Grevillea. Maybe Imran and Elias? Some days, when Thalia is not around and I’m totally sure of where I’ve been, I’ll let him do me.”

“What about the rest of the staff?”

“Can’t you see them all, putting on a brave front, but cringing away on the inside. Answer is never. Not even with Grevillea around.”

“It’s okay, Baz,” says Grevillea. “If nobody else is offering, I’m here.”

I clear my throat. If I want to stay here for the next three-and-a-half years I have to earn my keep: win Grevillea’s trust, not only through my work but also through my character.

“Baz!” I call out.

Baz rubs his muscly rump on the ground in what I guess is a sign of pleasure, doesn’t even bother standing, just keeps his butt to the floorboards and paddles over using his hands. Really close this time, his nostrils quiver as he sniffs me all over, drinking me in. A snort indicates he’s finished.

“Showered this morning.” As Baz speaks, his voice warms me and I in turn warm to Baz. Perhaps the inimitable tone, rumbling from the caverns of his belly, speaks to me of something pure, of soil and loam, somehow. “Washed hair with an anti-dandruff shampoo, but it won’t help, actually has a scalp mould infection, common in those who wash too often.”

“Thanks, Sherlock,” I say. The olfactory part of a Womban’s brain is hyper- developed, part of the gene-splicing experiments that produced the new peoples generations ago. I recall a line, think it was from the legendary naturalist Attenborough—I love those old docoes—about hyenas being able to sniff out what occurred at a place over the previous day or two.

“Yi-Yang’s been at the coffee machine almost all day,” Baz says, “ventured out on to the verandah during his morning and afternoon break but didn’t go into the garden itself. He has been to the bathroom three times. And he’s eaten asparagus for breakfast.”

Although most present are horrified of his talent, we applaud. I nod to Baz, hold out my hand, and wince as he grips it too firmly

with his stubby palm. Grevillea rubs his back again and winks at me in approval.

“Should be on The Force,” I say to Pete.

“What with viewers recording our every movement? No need these days.”

Centenarian Ships Update [on The Feed: audio, text, and video AI]

Despite recent unrest in Australia, Wombans will be on The Centenarian Ships. Centenarian Ships have passengers from all over Earth regardless of wealth or status or creed or splice. Your final trip is one of inclusivity.

The Centenarian Journey is the great equaliser.

Happy Travels!

Outside of The Garden

That evening Pete leads me home on a different path; he taps the small protuberance behind his ear. “*The Feed* says marches on Murray and Hay Street malls. Anti-Womban stuff.”

The haze is like nothing I have ever witnessed in the country, not even during the droughts—breathing masks are required on the worst days. The high towers spook me too, though I don’t mind the ones with vines overflowing from the top like emerald

fringes.

People hasten past, some in work suits and others in fluoro vests, and a few, like me, in more casual gear. “Shouldn’t we go back and warn Baz?”

“Too late. We’ll never get through. He’ll be safe with Grevillea.”

“Poor bugger.”

Pete reaches for my arm. “Believe me, Baz can take care of himself—that’s part of people’s bloody fear. Stay close. Could get crazy.”

As he says it crowds emerge from the side streets around us. In the distance, there are more of them, chanting choral-like “Wombans out!” Not a protest to be praised—more like the racist protests of old Australia. I’d read about a few in the 1910s and 1920s. All this lot require is a bugle or two.

More and more spill on to the path, chaotically shouting, whirling about like a swarm.

“What’s going on?”

“They’ve got one,” says Pete. “No avoiding it now. If we get separated, meet me at home.”

Eight Forcemen appear in their navy combat uniforms, stun-guns out. Pete follows them as they run over to the mob. I stride after Pete—I can’t run, not on my joints; cartilage and stem cell tablets and injections can only do so much at my age. As I near the crowd, I catch glimpses of the Womban, gnashing and grunt-

ing and spiraling about as people come at it from all sides. The arrival of the Forcemen splits the pack open, giving me clear sight of three men who have the Womban backed up against a wall of a clothing store. He snarls and snorts, the men dart in and out, kicking and punching him.

Then in a move almost too quick for belief, the Womban pulls the nearest man behind him, grunting as the other two bloody his face. Then he rears in, his muscly rump holding his victim against the wall. When the Womban finally moves forward, the man is broken and still on the paving, dark fluid leaking down his legs, staining his trousers and the footpath. The remaining attackers retreat, spitting. The Forcemen step in. A blast from the stun gun and the Womban is rendered unconscious, hitting the ground like a sack of rocks.

Pete locates me. Squirming and apologising, we fight free of the press of bodies, and I throw a final look over my shoulder: the crowd remain, clouded in the dusty air, shivering in the haze, seeming to float like ghosts. My nasal passages and mouth are bone-dry.

Once home, I slouch at the dining table. Pete brings over two glasses and a bottle of scotch; bit of a change from the usual hot-choc. “Thalia should be home by now.”

I sip my drink, hoping the enjoyable burn will loosen my thoughts. I don’t know who I feel sorrier for, the Womban or the crumpled man. I say as much to Pete.

“Self-defence,” he says. “Can’t blame the Womban can you? But he won’t be in action tomorrow.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those that haven’t left on their own are disappearing—you know the odd type of *disappearing*. Mind if I put on *The Feed*?”

I shrug. “Your home, Pete.”

He touches the The Feed Input gizmo behind his ear, and a big screen on the wall flickers on: the Prime Minister, silver-haired, neatly suited, is announcing new measures to be enacted under emergency law.

“So soon?” I ask.

“Been developing for a while, Yi-Yang.” He taps behind his ear and *The Feed* screen vanished. He refills our glasses. “Bloody populist reactionaries.”

When Thalia finally arrives, you’d never have guessed she’d attended the protest: neat and proper as ever, heels clacking on the tiled floor, honey-blond hair in a tidy bob. As she sits next to me, I detect a light flush in her cheeks. “You should have seen it,” she says, her voice straining to hold in the excitement. “We’re really making a difference. So great to see us united for once. Fighting for our cultural integrity.”

Pete rolls the last caramel drops of liquid around in his glass. He doesn’t bother looking at Thalia. “Night, Yi-Yang.”

“Night,” I reply. I’m desperate to leave too, but Thalia shows no sign of following her husband. She leads off with “Wombans never integrated” and “Danger to others” and “Genetic splicing

just went wrong with those Wombans.” How they “pose a danger to any children she and Pete might have,” although she doesn’t articulate what the danger is. Australia has to be “Completely safe from Wombans.” I let her talk. She assumes, I suppose, that having now seen Baz at work I’d be on her side, the right side, the side of the just. The conundrum is that Thalia can give me the boot anytime—I’m super lucky to find accommodation with her and Pete, super lucky to find The Garden. I require all the stability I can get before my time comes. Having my brain chemistry tampered with unwillingly is a huge fear of mine, perhaps an illogical phobia, but I don’t want to board the ships loaded up on psychotropic medication.

When Thalia eventually pauses for breath I say, “Be careful, Thalia. Got pretty rough today.”

“You frightened?” she asks, surprising me. I assume she’s referring to the wombans again, but before I can reply, she clarifies: “About the ships?”

It confounds me. Such animosity one way, yet she’s still capable of real compassion, of empathy. *Am I frightened?* Like anyone my age, I am terrified. Flying into space on those big luxury liners, looking for new places to colonise or simply flying on until supplies run low after a couple of decades or so, and you slept. Soon Mars will be sending off Centenarian Ships of its own.

“Frightened?” I say, smiling with relief at the change of subject. “Not one bit. Chance for another adventure.”

“Brave. Wish my Dad had thought that way. He was a lot older than Mum, but she went too, took the long-term partner option.” Thalia sounds so different from the woman who’d been spout-

ing hatred moments ago. “Well, I hope you’ll be comfortable with us.”

“Off to a lovely start.” What else can I say?

Thalia grins, staring past me—must have been at something on her *Feed*. She almost shrieks, “Watch!”

The Feed spits onto the wall screen.

New emergency incarceration laws have been passed. Wombans, for their own safety, are to be rounded up and duly *processed*.

Thalia’s bleached symmetrical teeth shine.

Centenarian Ships Update [on The Feed: audio, text, and video]

Ships arriving in your locale will arrive following the Singaporean Boarding. All ships will be equipped with the latest gaming programmes—and there is more great news—for those interested in the weekly dining experience, we have expanded the menu to include an additional thirty thousand recipes from across the globe.

As Centenarian Ship passengers, you will not have communication with Earth. The psychological impact of constant communication with the home planet affects a Centenarian’s well-being and will impact your final journey.

Happy travels!

The Garden

Pete insists on an early arrival to work. We head through a dawn cloud of yellow-grey dust so thick we wear sunglasses along with scarves over our mouths. At The Garden, Grevillea paces the café floor.

“Rounded most up last night,” Pete says grimly. “Celebratory march today. Bet my wife attends.”

“Do you want to talk to the boss alone?” I ask him.

Pete shakes his head. “So long as it remains between the three of us,” he says. “Think you’re a good sort.”

Up close Grevillea is an unhealthy pale, irises pinkish, eyelids puffy; wrinkles seem to have materialised overnight and stand out like etchings. She jerks her chin towards the front door. Imran and Elias enter, arm-in-arm.

Imran reminds me of an older version of Aladdin, temples sprinkled with salt and pepper. He takes in Grevillea’s vexed face. “We came to say that we expect you’ll do right by Baz.”

Elias chimes in, “We’re prepared to hide him, then smuggle him out when we can.” He swallows. “But from the look of you, it’s too late. Poor guy.”

Grevillea can’t find her voice. Elias puts an arm around her. “It’s not your fault, you know,” he says. “Fucken red necks. And in this bloody day and age.” Elias looks at me as if asking for leave for what he says next. “We’re all the bloody same: hit one hundred and you’re on The Centenarian Ships, no matter how you’ve been spliced.”

Imran shakes his head. “Elias and I will set up, Grevillea. You sit and rest. You took care of Baz. Gave him hope—more than most.”

Pete is set to leave for the garden when Grevillea yanks his sleeve. “There’s a boarded area over a hole not far from the pond. Make sure everyone stays away from it, won’t you? And, Pete, we’ve got some handcrafted boats coming in for the pond—arriving early morning, 2 am sharp. I’ll need you around.”

It seemed a ridiculous hour and I say as much.

“The city’s busy with celebrations, so there’s been a delay. Easier to get things through empty streets.”

Still doesn’t make sense, but who am I to question the boss.

Few customers come. Several bookings never arrive. I guess it relates to the celebrations in Forrest Place. The usual warm chatter is replaced by an eerie quiet, broken only by the occasional scattered whisper. Imran and Elias are let off early. It doesn’t look like there’ll be a communal dinner either. And for the first time, and this may be my old eyes playing tricks, I think the city’s dust has infiltrated the café. Grevillea takes up the broom more than once.

“Head off home, you two,” Grevillea says when Pete checks in on us all in the late arvo.

“You’ll be OK?”

“Yeah, Pete. Get some rest. I thought Thalia would be here with

the accounts—but I’ll sort it out tomorrow. She’s never missed a meeting before. I’ll hang around. Don’t think I’ll be able to sleep tonight anyway. But you’ll be back at 2 am, won’t you? Help with the heavy lifting?”

We are halfway along our usual route home when Pete charges off in a new direction, his finger fiddling with the device behind his ear. It takes all my energy to follow him up a slope, through an older part of town. A few precious Victorian-era buildings still stand: a gothic church at the hilltop, an old girls’ school beside it, and then the towering floors of a hospital rear up. Before I know it, I find myself chasing Pete across the custard-coloured vinyl floor of the Emergency Ward entrance, straight to Admissions.

Then we trail an overworked triage nurse with swollen ankles as she meanders through a ward, until at last we stop at a bed, its occupant wrapped tight in starched white sheets.

Although Thalia’s head is heavily bandaged, traces of cherry still ebb through. A saline drip, and what I assume is morphine, are plugged into her arm. Thalia is as dormant as a princess in an enchanted sleep. Rows of occupied beds stretch either side of her. “I’ll have a doctor talk to you as soon as possible,” the nurse says, almost without breaking stride.

Pete holds his wife’s limp hand as his mouth tightens.

Not knowing what to say, I stay silent.

The doctor, when he arrives, is accompanied by a Forceman. “Happened after the celebration,” the Forceman says. “Some-

one's ripped her *Feed Input* straight out. Not even the viewers picked it up. We've searched all over the footage for signs, but she's obscured; we catch her and then it's shady, and then she's obscured again, then she's on the ground, a bloodied mess. Can't be anything else but deliberate. I'm very sorry."

Pete asks the doctor: how far have they dug? Has she lost part of her brain? When will she wake?

"We may need to induce her into a temporary coma if she comes to, I'm afraid. Part of her Uploads will be gone. She'll be changed, but we think we can insert a new *Feed Input*. She's lost plenty of blood. A few years ago, we wouldn't be able to save her. But the tech's better now."

Pete stares at Thalia until long after the doctor and Forceman have left. I go and return with coffees, and Pete is still staring, so I leave again and use the few points I have remaining on energy bars. Pete mumbles thanks and eats and drinks like he doesn't taste anything. Visitors arrive and leave from other beds. Several lights are flicked off. The triage nurse returns and tells us they'll be moving Thalia to a private room soon.

It is well after midnight when Pete rises and kisses Thalia's icy cheek, then he gathers her jacket—smudged with blood and dirt—from the bedside.

The quiet streets are well-lit, parts in chromatic glory, others in white, and others, as we approach The Garden, in a ginger glow.

Grevillea opens the door at the first knock. "Knew you'd come." Grevillea looks as though she hasn't rested at all, shadowy pits

under her eyes, her skin paler.

I wait while Pete tells Grevillea about Thalia—he doesn't say where his wife was when attacked, but I figure he doesn't have to. Wanting to be useful, I give them space and make three coffees; by the third, I see that, without thought, I've finally mastered the frilly flower design. That one, I decide, is for Pete.

I know Pete trusts Grevillea, but I still can't fathom why decorative boats in a pond are so important. Important enough to leave his wife's side.

Their voices hush as I bring over their coffees. Pete has Thalia's jacket out and Grevillea is shaking her head. A stray moth flutters around the light, conjuring shadow puppets dancing on the walls. Pete sips his coffee, ignorantly destroying the intricate flower in the foam.

After a while, he stands, jacket in hand.

"I said no, Pete. This needs to be fast and quiet. What's the good of it anyway?"

"I'm risking things too, Grevillea. I care. I'm here."

"And I'm appreciative, Pete. Truly. But—"

"It could help, a clue or two."

"Don't see the point."

"It's my wife, Grevillea. Surely you understand that."

"I do. I really do ... but there's more at stake. Besides, Thalia

never gave a damn about Baz.”

It is as if I have vanished. Maybe that’s all you are at my age, an invisible witness, before you vanish altogether on The Centenarian Ships.

“Can’t stop me. Fire me if you want, but I’m doing this.” He places the jacket down on a table. Then goes to the back-verandah door, turns the handle, and finds it locked. “The key, Grevillea.”

She shakes her head.

“We’ve only got an hour or so,” he says with a tone as tight as a wire. “Please, give me the bloody key.”

“All you’re doing is risking a lot for little return.”

Like a song on repeat, Pete keeps requesting the keys. Grevillea eventually tosses them to him and he catches them one-handed. “Yi-Yang, lights.”

We step out into the serene, spot-lit garden. The water shimmers, crickets chirp, and frogs call, and there is that fresh green smell. I shadow Pete to where the planks have been put by the pond. Pete motions me to the far side, and although the bending is hard on my knees, I help him lift. Once the second plank is gone, I squint into the pit and catch two oily orbs glinting in the moonlight. I stagger back.

“Baz?” A familiar sniffing-grunt confirms it. Pete and I move three more planks, then Pete slides two at a diagonal angle into the hole.

Baz scrambles up the makeshift ramp.

Baz, left unwashed, has a stronger animal reek than ever, and I feel an unwarranted sense of repulsion (but I remind myself that any unwashed human smells rank). Baz sniffs us before squeezing our hands. Pete gives his scalp a good scratch and Baz makes a throaty noise a bit like a purr. “C’m on, Baz. Boats depart at two. We need to get you sorted.”

So much for ornamental boats.

“Bring in a branch, Yi-Yang.”

“What for?”

And Pete points to his own front teeth, and I look at Baz’s mouth where the incisors have already grown.

Inside, Grevillea has food and a drink ready for him. Baz furiously gnaws through the branch. Don’t know whether he’s lost much in incisor length by the time he’s finished.

“We got his family out,” Grevillea addresses me, “but the hole was the safest place for him. It’s all in the timing. Streets have been full of Forcemen and people are churning out hatred on *The Feed*.”

“They seem to turn a blind eye when they’re on the boats out at these early hours,” adds Pete. “Not their issue anymore. You can’t ever tell Thalia, Yi-Yang.”

“I don’t think Yi-Yang is the gossiping type.” Grevillea faces me. “You understand, Yi-Yang. Even Elias and Imran are unaware—hate keeping secrets, but the fewer who know, the safer this is.”

“Boats at 2 am?”

“We’ll have him on one bound for New Zealand.” She points at Thalia’s jacket. “You still set on this nonsense, Pete?”

“Baz. Got something for you.” Pete brings him the jacket. Baz takes it in his furry hands. “Go on,” says Pete. “Tell us whatever you can.”

Baz sniffs, then moves his rump up and down the chair. “Thalia’s perfume, *Estia No. 4*. Crowds. Town. People brushing by. So many people. Been on the pavement. Her blood. Earlier this evening. Blood, Pete.”

“What else?”

“Lots of blood. Too much,” his gravelly voice quails. “Gloves maybe. Material on her face, like clean tea towels. Then later, sanitised hands, anti-bacterial.”

“Any more, Baz? The gloves?”

“Wish I could tell you more. Wish I could.” And Baz flees over to the wall and rears into it heavily, again and again.

Grevillea puts an arm on Pete’s shoulder. “You need to trust the Forcemen to sort it out. Leave Baz with me for a while now. Got to calm him down. We can’t get him to the boat like this.”

“I’m sorry,” says Pete. “I thought—”

“No time for that now, Pete. We’ll be right. Go have a coffee with Yi-Yang. We’ll get him out together. You and me. I’ll call you out when the time’s right.”

Pete shakes his head as we head into the kitchen. “I shouldn’t

have done that,” he whispers.

I heat the milk. “Anyone would have done the same. Has to be awful to see your wife like that.” I perfect two flowers in the foam.

We don’t sit but lean against the monochrome steel of the kitchen benches, coffees in hand. In the other room we can still hear Baz backing away into the wall. *Thump, thump, thump, thump*. Grevillea is chatting to him, her voice calm.

“Nice,” says Pete, looking down at his cup. “You finally nailed the flower.”

Neither of us sip our coffees though. *Thump, thump, thump*.

“It’s good, Pete. You know, what you’re doing, helping in there.” Only a few days ago, I would have said “helping that *creature*.” That was before I’d heard Baz talk, smelled his family, understood his plight. Great to see you can teach an old dog like me new tricks.

Thump, thump. “Not so good. Shows how easy it is.”

“Pete?” The pendulum thumps slow.

“Wasn’t right putting him in danger just now. Getting him worked up with Thalia’s jacket. What if Grevillea doesn’t weave her magic in time?”

Thump. “I reckon Grevillea could soothe the seas in a cyclone.”

After a while, it grows quiet. Grevillea comes into the kitchen. “He’s better than before, but not nearly good enough to go, too

easily spooked. Don't know what else I can do. We're running out of time."

All along, I've been an onlooker. I hand Grevillea my cup. "Drink up," I tell her. "And give me a minute or two alone with Baz."

She looks perplexed but doesn't object.

I enter the dining room, closing the door behind me.

Baz has stopped thumping his butt against the wall; however, he still rocks back and forth on the spot, biting the air.

Despite his awkward movements, I lean in, trying to ignore his gnashing incisors, and allow him to swallow down my scent. "You know me, Baz?"

Baz nods, still awkwardly rocking.

"OK if I talk?"

He nods again, although his movements remained unchanged.

"You know how old I am? Almost a Centenarian, only a few years to go. We're not the same, I get that, but I reckon we are in a similar situation. For some reason, people think we don't belong, so we're forced off to places where no one can see us."

Baz stops biting and I reach out, put my arms around his stocky frame and rock back and forth with him as one. "We're both forced away from our homes, told we don't fit. It sure as Hell ain't fair. But we've both got to go someplace that'll keep us safe. Someplace else that might care, that might help."

We rock together, our seesaw gradually losing momentum. From the now ajar kitchen door, Grevillea and Pete peek out at us.

And then we stop altogether, and Baz holds me as much as I hold him.

As Baz and I release one another, Grevillea has already arrived and scratches his back.

Pete holds his thumbs up at me from the doorway.

"Stay here, Yi-Yang," Grevillea says softly, kissing my cheek. "We've got to slip him out now, quick. Boats will be departing soon."

* * *

Thalia survived. Both changed and the same. Caring part remained along with her exceedingly efficient and well-kept manner. Yet it was like she'd had a personality overhaul. "Product of *The Feed* uploads," Pete says one day. "Our identity is shaped by it. By what we choose to upload. Most of hers were wiped. But there are signs, perhaps I am paranoid, of her bigotry reemerging. I'll do all I can to avoid those rocky grounds."

Pete took leave to cross the Tasman and visit Baz in New Zealand. Apparently, the botanical garden Baz works at in Dunedin rivals The Garden. Pete tells me Baz's family took turns sniffing him out and telling him where he'd been daily. "You know," Pete says, "I'd gotten used to Baz's odour working alongside him. But when you live with them, after a few trying days, the Wombans' scents become welcoming."

Centenarian Ships Update [on The Feed: audio, text, and video AI]

Centenarian Ships not only allow for meaningful travel, but they also prevent overcrowding of Earth and allow for the gift of longevity. Perhaps there will be other Marses? Other planets to terraform?

Happy travels!

Pete keeps me informed on The Centenarian Ships and my inevitable leaving of the world behind. “Happy travels” riles me. Suppose all Centenarians have few choices at the end—in fact there’s only two: euthanise or embark. I suppose Earth is where we’ve made our choices. Hopefully played our part, a little good if we can, before the penultimate voyage.

* * *

Although colossal, they don’t seem much from the outside—they are not the metallic gleam you imagine as a child. Pete and Grevillea have come to send me off. Thalia would have come too, but since their recent split, they can’t bear the sight of each other.

We enjoyed our final dinner together at The Garden. They’d booked a swankier restaurant for my sendoff, but I told them it

was The Garden with Grevillea, or nowhere at all.

Grevillea steps back to leave me some alone-time with Pete.

“Still frightened?” Pete whispers. He’s kept my fears secret.

“I gave up checking on Mars long ago. We’ll probably jettison off into space for a couple of decades. Trick is not to dwell over it. I’m more blue about leaving you all behind.” I smile. “At least these aren’t the 2 am boats, Pete—we’re all on the same ship this time.”

Pete wraps his arms around me and doesn’t look like letting go.

“It’s a new journey,” I say, granting Pete permission to release me.

Wombans will already be onboard, having arrived via Singapore with the earlier pickups. I am surrounded by all sorts of folks on the travellator that advances us towards the immense Centenarian Ship’s hatch. People wave and yell distant farewells. Every Centenarian faces backwards, every Centenarian except me. I don’t see anybody quite like Pete ahead; still, there is couple nearby, almost an older version of Elias and Imran; and there is a lady with loopy curls like Grevillea, only they’re snowy.

Said the Banshee to the Bogeyman

by James Edward O'Brien

"Don't scare easy, does they?"
said the bogeyman to the banshee.
"Not nowadays." The banshee shrugged.
"Not here, anyways—they're deaf you see, the entire lot of 'em."
"The entire village?" the bogeyman marveled.
"Aye," said the banshee. "You might think it was a curse

that brought it on—some medical anomaly at the very least—
but they *willed* it on themselves. Voluntarily."
"Willed it?" The bogeyman spat in disbelief.
"Voluntarily? For Chrissakes."
"Aye," said the banshee. "Though if I were
entirely honest, it was fear drove them to it.

Found it more convenient than listening."
The banshee chewed her lip.
"No bother. Scaring's not my *modus operandi*.
The wailing's only meant to warn them."
"*Warn them?*" huffed the bogeyman. He ground a square of pool cue chalk
into one of the fuzzy antlers protruding from his temples.

"Aye," said the banshee. "Impending death."
The bogeyman tugged at his forked tail and thought on it.
"You mean to say that with everything in your arsenal—
that wretched howling, those bedraggled locks like seaweed
twined round a lobster pot, the spectral glow emanating off that old shawl—
you're little more than a glorified canary down a well?"

"Of sorts," said the banshee,
"though no one's ever quite put it that way."
"I died down a well," the bogeyman lamented. "Many moons ago.
"And rest assured, there were none of your breed skulking around
to provide any sort of forewarning or legal counsel."
He shrugged. "Perhaps it's better not to know. After all,

death is *a/ways* impending—in one way or another.
I mean, isn't that the nature of it?"
"Suppose so," said the banshee.
"But to rob me of *who* I am—of what I *do*—
it's as if they've rendered me invisible. It's criminal."
"Still, there's other vocations," considered the bogeyman.

"You'd be singing a different tune if it had been their *eyes*
they'd gauged out so as to spare themselves the sight of *you*
creeping out from beneath their beds at night."
"Suppose you have a point," sighed the bogeyman.
"Still, I can't blame them for not wanting to know—
impending death and all. For what it's worth, I quite like your voice."

"That's awfully kind of you," said the banshee,
"but it don't help none, to be honest.
I need to get my mind off work."
The banshee checked the time on her phone.
"It's Friday, isn't it?
Saint Cuthbert's Ladies Auxiliary

does a mean fish fry.
Care to join me?"
"I'd love to," said the bogeyman,
"but I'm a vegetarian."
"Vegetarian?" she cried in disbelief. "You?
I've never heard anything so absurd.

Not even fish?"
"Not even fish,"
said the bogeyman.
"But the children ... don't you—?"
The bogeyman scrunched his nose.
"I'm only meant to frighten them, not eat them.

Perhaps you're thinking of witches."
"No," said the banshee.
"They've gotten a bum rap
over the ages, haven't they?"
"Who's that?" asked the bogeyman.
"*Witches*," she replied, a touch annoyed.

"Oh, aye," said the bogeyman.
"Speaking of *which*,
could I ask you a little favor?"
"Depends," said the banshee.
"They're a timid lot," explained the bogeyman,
"the Saint Cuthbert's Ladies Auxiliary.

Fogies, mainly. Prescription pills.
A dais of lousy tickers. Things could turn south
quick with someone in possession of your unique vocal capacity
among that fold. Could you croon a little ditty
before you set off—a precautionary measure, you see—
just to get it out of your system?"

Ambrose

by Gabriel Shestack

My family lives in the dusty flats of Los Angeles—I live two hours away in Santa Barbara, closer to the slightly elevated edge of the continent. When Joey and I aren't in a room together, we can't communicate—I was unwilling to live farther than a two-hour drive from him.

I live in Santa Barbara instead of Los Angeles because of James Eldridge. His eponymous school of journalism, one of the many philanthropic footprints he's left in his hometown, was the only fully funded journalism program within driving distance of Joey. Foraging for grants in Eldridge's ursine tracks was, and is, the only way to make my career viable, so I stayed in Santa Barbara after college.

My first time in Santa Barbara was as a child—a stop on the way to Santa Cruz Island. As we walked the trail that began where the dock ended, I complained to my dad about having to carry so much. He was walking slowly with Joey, who was already responding badly to the terrain. My mom found a roofless outhouse beside a concrete picnic table and we made camp.

Our camping trip was supposed to be a reward for Joey, who had just completed an intensive round of speech therapy. Joey couldn't talk, but he could type; it was an amazing development, but still, our parents weren't willing to abandon the hope that he might speak one day. Uncomfortable from sitting in a folding camping chair instead of his preferred rocking chair

back home, Joey didn't type once that trip.

I wandered into the brush while my parents argued and set up camp where I spotted a knot of socks intertwined with eucalyptus leaves and dry twigs. Native brown foxes had found them left behind by tourists and had used them to build a nest that betrayed the camouflage the foxes had achieved over millennia. When we got home Joey finally typed, "camping is hell."

Fifteen years later, I received a letter that would take me back to Santa Cruz Island: "Dear Valerie, on behalf of the James Eldridge Institute for Journalistic Excellence, it is our honor to invite you to the inaugural tour of the assisted living facilities at Ambrose."

I began my journey on a sleek ferry named *Veni Redemptor Genium*, named for a hymn by Saint Ambrose. During the research I had done since receiving my invitation, I had learned that as an infant, Saint Ambrose had been swarmed by bees and miraculously left unblemished, except for a drop of honey left on his lips. It was a sign of his future eloquence that would make him a bishop, a senator, and the first real adjudicator of Christianity. He ruled on matters of God and man alike.

The attendant on the *Veni Redemptor Genium* handed me a mezcal spritz and a pamphlet. "Welcome to Ambrose. We are delighted to share our inclusive community with you. With

InVision technology, residents' requests can be realized in seconds; a sunnier room, a French bistro for lunch, a doctor's appointment in a beloved pediatrician's office. Our cutting-edge augmented reality system empowers residents to make choices they are too rarely afforded on the mainland."

The only other time I had encountered the phrase "mainland" was in Hawaii, when a tour guide had used it in reference to the continental US. While we hiked through volcanic tubes, he filled the dark silence with a story about Captain Cook—the first European to discover Hawaii. He was ripped limb from limb for holding King Kamehameha hostage on his ship—a foolish attempt to bend the will of the natives.

After forty minutes, *Veni Redemptor Genium* made port, and I was let off onto an empty dock. I stared absently. I realized my mind was wandering when I found myself deep into a hypothetical; I was wondering where the Santa Cruz foxes lived now that the island was developed, and if they used grippy hospital socks for nests instead of woolen hiking ones.

A solitary cabana stood in the center on the otherwise empty dock. After a few minutes without any sign of reception, I entered. It was dark inside—lit only by the small beams of sunlight streaming through pinholes in the canvas. When my eyes adjusted, I saw a black column with a pair of glasses on top.

I placed them on my face and watched the stripes in the canvas fill with montages of people laughing and talking, running and surfing. The montage concluded and the words "Step into the future" appeared unanchored in midair, floating above the cabana exit. I stared at the floating words until they began emitting short pulses of buttercup yellow light meant to instill a sense of urgency. I stepped outside.

Outside of the cabana, a line of green dots appeared on the dock. They faded to orange when I walked past them. I tried to confuse them with erratic movements, but they remembered where I had come from.

While I played with the dots, a handsome man wearing a loose grin and low-buttoned shirt emerged from the blind curve at the end of the dock. I instinctively lifted my hand to remove my glasses and look more closely and he broke into a jog.

"Please keep them on. It can be dangerous to your optical system to remove InVision glasses suddenly."

He introduced himself as Greg Satterly, Operations Manager. His tanned leathery skin and chipped front tooth suggested he was a native Californian—the type that grew up on the shore, dejected that it was getting too crowded, yet unconcerned with the reality that it was eroding quicker than it could be developed. The type who poured sand into the gas tanks of tourists who dared to park at locals-only surf spots.

"The weather is a lot nicer here than on the mainland," I said.

"It's not simulated," Greg smiled. "We just got lucky today. If you look down, however, you will find a simulation; the green dots will guide your tour. They turn orange after you pass them; that way you don't have to wonder if you've been somewhere before." He was excited and I didn't mention I had already figured them out.

We walked up a chalky path cut into the island's bluffs and I asked if I could expect to meet James Eldridge on my tour.

"He's always on the island in spirit. This project is the closest

he's worked on anything since he was 16 tinkering in his parent's garage. He asked me to tell you that he regrets he couldn't meet you, and to think of your tour as a preview of the world to come." Greg made a round shape with his fingers meant to represent the Earth, then wiggled them to evoke the future.

"Well, not exactly the world to come," I said. "I understand residents don't have internet enabled InVision."

"I know, the internet block seems a little Draconian. But the communication ban is only for the first year, to keep our proprietary tech under wraps. At the end of the year, when the ban is over and InVision gets a wide release, Ambrose residents and the public will be using the exact same product."

While Greg was talking, my eyes wandered to a white sand cove where I got my first glimpse into the uncanny; two people sat talking by the shore—one in a French bistro chair and the other in an Edwardian-looking mobility apparatus hovering several inches above the sand.

"Now would be a good time to explain our continuity schema." Greg had noticed my staring. "Residents customize their personal 'sphere,' which includes their room, their clothing, and any medical assistance devices. Those attributes are then connected to everyone else's glasses to achieve continuity. George down there is a history buff—late 19th century England—that's why he went steampunk for his mobility device. He gave a real laundry list of specs to our visual engineers."

George and the other resident, who I now saw was a woman, were gesticulating hurriedly.

"How do you put in a request for a visual parameter?"

"Just tap the left side of your glasses and ask. There are some limits of course. We adhere to the three Cs: caninness, commonness, and conviviality. If a visual parameter falls under those three descriptions it will appear without a hitch. We all view one another's visual concoctions, so it's useful to have some norms. For instance, several of our common areas' artifices are democratically chosen, such as the Italian renaissance theme you see currently. Residents vote on main themes in town halls once a month. That would fall under the purview of conviviality. Caninness is a set of guidelines to ensure visual parameters gel logically with their environment. You could request to see the statue of David, but unless you were in one of our 'Gallery' rooms, you would see it as an image in your private display rather than an object in public space. Commonness is the most simple rule of the three—our information is scraped from our web-aggregated visual database, so if a resident requests something overly personal or idiosyncratic, it won't appear unless they open a ticket with a visual engineer. Troubleshooting is a hobby for some residents like George, and we welcome it—our backend team has an open office and is constantly updating inputs based on recommendations. InVision has gotten a lot smarter because of our residents."

We arrived at an Italianate castle banded by cloisters and turrets. I found myself more occupied with the beauty before me than the software that supported it. Greg held down a button on his glasses and asked an unseen recipient if they were ready to receive me.

"Selma has nonverbal autism but don't worry, she'll give a great tour. She uses a customized type-to-speech system that she developed with engineers on site—it's turned her into quite the chatterbox."

Greg excused himself and I waited outside until Selma exited

the castle's large wooden doors. She had a single streak of gray in her long brown hair that complimented her resting smirk. Her posture was bad and she hinged forward at the hip. She stood a head shorter than her true height and I assumed that, like her smirk, her stance was also a kind of affectation. When she got closer I realized it was a result of her disability.

She walked toward me with a halting gait; one of her arms was perpetually bent inward, resting on her thigh, where a thin box was affixed—I realized Greg had been making a pun when he called her a chatterbox—and her fingers scurried across the small keyboard and a pleasant voice greeted me from the direction of her closed mouth.

“How does it work?” I asked, then quickly qualified: “My brother is non-verbal. He types to communicate too.” I had a lot of questions, but because of Joey, my first had to be on how someone with non-verbal autism could communicate so fluidly.

“Does he use an analog or electronic keyboard?” Selma asked.

“He can't use electronic keyboards—they're too sensitive.”

Selma led me up the castle's spiral staircase as we talked. She climbed slowly, one hand on the railing and the other typing.

“I used to only be able to use printed out spelling boards too. It was excruciatingly slow. Does he use QWERTY or ABC?” Selma asked.

“QWERTY.”

“Did you know the QWERTY layout was designed for typewriters? The most commonly used letters were placed as far

apart as possible to prevent jamming. If you type to communicate and have motor skill limitations like I do, QWERTY keyboards are about the slowest way to type.”

“Your device accommodates motor skill limitations?”

“Yes. I have trouble with precise digital extension, so the keys adjust towards where my fingers most often land. There's also an auto-complete feature that helps me when I get over-fixated on a specific region of the keyboard. It cycles through probable letters until I find the one I'm looking for.”

I had more questions, but Selma's ability to communicate rapidly afforded her the luxury of brevity, and she prompted me to save my questions for after the tour of the residential wing.

Selma's room was enviable; whitewashed walls, wooden desk, recessed bed, and geraniums on a windowsill overlooking a simulated Mediterranean sea. She explained that she put away her decorative clutter in digital drawers until she wanted them. I was impressed at how lived-in her room was given its minimalism. I told her it reminded me of a monastery I had seen on a semester abroad in Prague. The monastery had housed a scientific order of monks—Gregor Mendel, I think, had lived there.

After touring Selma's room, she led me down a hallway of identical doors.

“Is there a rule against decorating doors?” I asked.

“Just because we live in dorms doesn't mean we have to act like freshmen,” Selma's digital voice intonated in an exasperated affect. “There's no need to loudly broadcast your personality to your peers at Ambrose. We're here for the rest of our lives, not

a few semesters.”

Selma stopped in front of one of the identical doors and asked me to knock for her. A disheveled man in his sixties, clearly not expecting company, opened it.

“Hi Selma.”

His room was a nauseating junkyard of physical and digital detritus. It was unclear what was solid ground and I had to force myself to step inside. Dozens of pop-up screens hovered in the center of the room, multiplied by mirrored walls. A blazing sun hung in the upper corner, casting long shadows across the false infinite space. The room’s architect was wearing what looked like jeweler’s goggles while frantically modulating the virtual screens.

Selma interrupted him, “Herman, would you like to show Valerie what you’re working on?”

“No. Sorry. No time,” he muttered, without taking his eyes off the screen. Lines of code proliferated in front of him, blooming like a decision tree infected with a parasitic fungus.

I noticed his twin bed in the corner of the room. A dirty pillowcase struggled to do its job and rumpled sheets exposed a discolored mattress. It reminded me of some of the worst group homes I’ve toured for Joey. A trash can overflowing with candy wrappers was shoved in the corner next to his bed—it hadn’t occurred to me that some people would choose to live with their trash rather than magic it away.

We left and I asked, “Are residents given more leeway with their rooms? Because that room broke at least two of the three Cs

Greg told me about.”

“Yeah, we get a little more leeway. Most residents have found ways to circumvent the three Cs anyway. Herm, for instance, is able to have a sun illuminate his room by taking the sunrise scene from *Lawrence of Arabia*, turning up the brightness, and looping it. There’re no rules against playing movies.”

We left the residential wing and Selma led me to a stone bench facing the ocean. We sat in silence until I turned to face Selma and saw a floating line of text that read, “I’m switching to text.” I wondered how long she had been waiting for me to notice and whether it was her sense of propriety or limited motor skills that had prevented her from tapping me.

“Is Herman okay?” I asked.

“Yes, Herm is ok,” the floating text responded, “he’s just been having a hard time since he stopped living with his wife. I’m glad he has his coding project at least; it helps him keep his mind off things.”

“Did his wife pass away recently?”

“Esther? No, she’s a resident, she just lives in the self-protection ward now. She’s a friend of mine—you would like her. She was a programmer for an aerospace company before she developed Parkinson’s. She once told me that if you loaded a Boeing 747 with printouts of all its schematics, it would be too heavy to fly.”

“And Herman—what qualified him for Ambrose?”

“Herm was visually impaired, but InVision has given him most of his sight back. Ambrose likes to admit married couples—they

provide a sense of community. Herm and Esther were like our house parents when they still lived together—their apartment felt like the most real place on the island.”

“So why is Esther in self-protection instead of living with Herman?”

“Her Parkinson’s led to early onset dementia. She didn’t know her mind was going when she applied. She only started to develop symptoms after she got here. The dementia diminished her judgment, and she started simulating bizarre stuff—that’s how we first learned something was wrong. She’s been doing better in self-protection I think—I still visit her and she seems happy there. But it does make me sad for Herm. It’s difficult for him to see her like that, especially after they had those beautiful few months together.”

When Selma dropped me off with Greg, I asked him to see the self-protection ward. He quickly acquiesced and explained as we walked.

“There are some residents who have a tough time with the freedom augmented reality offers, so we add some limits. Residents in self-protection still have some access; our therapists, for instance, incorporate InVision into their treatments. I hear they’re seeing fantastic results.”

We arrived at a low-slung, single-story building. Whitewashed walls and stained glass windows looked onto the central adobe courtyard. Greg let me into a sparsely decorated room; French doors, gauzy white curtains, wooden bedside tables, iron floor lamps. I was surprised to find Herman sitting at the bedside of the room’s occupant.

“Esther,” Herman said to the woman propped up in her inclined

hospital bed, “this is my new friend Valerie, I’m so glad you two could meet.” Herman’s hair was neatly pushed back, and his shirt was without stains. Without context, I doubt I would have recognized him as the unkempt man I had met with Selma.

Esther was staring at a corner of the room, entranced by something I suspected was not there—for me at least. I stared at the same spot with sympathetic interest.

“It’s nice to meet you Esther. I met your friend Selma, and your husband, Herman earlier. You have great taste in company.”

Esther looked at me blankly. She pursed her lips and bunched her shoulders before sliding into a well-worn grin.

“Valerie, it is so nice to meet you. Do you live here?”

“I’m just visiting. But I’ve been on the island before—I camped here when I was a kid.”

Esther’s eyes widened. “How fun, you saw Santa Cruz Island when it was a nature preserve. Did you hike to Hi-point when you visited?”

I hadn’t. My parents had fought about it; my Dad wanted to see the view but my Mom was apathetic. Because she was the one primarily taking care of Joey on the trip while my dad went on solo hikes, she won.

“No, my family wasn’t up to it, my brother has mobility limitations,” I lied.

“Oh, I wish he could see it now, it’s become completely acces-

sible. It's the best view on the whole island—it feels like discovering California for the first time.”

“Thank you, I’ll definitely try and see it.”

Esther furrowed her brows and asked more urgently, “Promise me you’ll go?”

I promised I would and asked if there was anything else I should see on my visit, but her eyes had begun to glaze over.

Herman turned to Greg, “You really should take Valerie to Hi-point. I would, but Esther and I have a movie planned this afternoon.” Looking at me, he said, “Esther knows this island better than anyone, and if Greg is too lazy to take you, just remind him that the view at the top of Hi-point gives a better surf report than the weather app.”

Greg filled the fresh, empty air on our hike to Hi-point with admiration for his home state, “Santa Cruz Island is a complete geological anomaly; it resisted tectonic plates for millions of years—literally since Pangea broke up. Hi-point is its highest peak—formed from a dormant volcano, which is also pretty rare for this part of the Pacific.

“The island’s isolation has made it home to scores of endemic species found nowhere else on earth. Luckily, most of them survived the island’s time as a silver mine, before it became a national park. Since the Parks Department allowed Eldridge to develop Ambrose here, he’s had a team working around the clock to preserve the unique ecology. Eldridge kept all of Santa Cruz Island’s peaks as nature preserves, except for Hi-point, which he added a croquet court to, to encourage residents to spend more time up there.”

“It sounds like Herman and Esther were right about it being a special place,” I said, trying to steer the conversation back to the residents. “It makes sense they spoke so fondly of it—they seem like a very special couple. I noticed Herman seemed different from when I had met him earlier. It’s amazing how people can transform when a person they love needs them to.”

Greg stopped walking and looked back at the nestled valley we had come from. “I’m so glad you noticed that. Transformation is exactly the right word. Herman used to visit Esther every day in the early months of her dementia diagnosis, until we noticed his visits were exacerbating her symptoms—he was just too upset to be of any help to her. It took some work, but we managed to find a solution; we gave Esther a new Herman, one who could watch movies with her, tell stories, or just sit and listen calmly. A transformed Herman, as you said.”

“What do you mean you ‘gave her a new Herman’?”

“We used the tools we had. We simulated a simplified version of Herman to suit Esther’s therapeutic needs.”

“Does Esther know it’s not him? Does Herman know what’s going on?”

“To be honest with you Val, it isn’t just Esther that was experiencing cognitive decline—Herm isn’t all there himself either. When Esther’s condition worsened he experienced a major mental breakdown—we’re still working closely with him to get him to accept her condition.”

Greg continued hiking. I spoke to his back, “I am going to want to meet with Herman again, now that I know this. The real Herman that is. Simulating residents for experimental therapies is a

big leap from my understanding of Ambrose as an assisted living facility with high-tech offerings.”

Greg plucked a piece of fennel growing from a water-worn rut and chewed on its tender end. “The public’s understanding of Ambrose is way behind, Val. That’s why you’re here.” He flicked the flimsy stalk dismissively.

“And I’m expected to relay all of this to the public? With no brief from Eldridge, no comprehensive list of services offered, just drop me off to see what I absorb? I can’t imagine you’re eager for me to tell the world that you’ve made the leap into simulating *in situ* clones of people, and that the first people they’re being tested on are severely disabled? That’s too much Greg—what would my angle be? What would *your* angle be when all this comes out?”

As soon as I finished my sentence I knew I had made a misstep. Greg had shown me everything I had asked to see, and if he was hiding anything from me, bringing attention to that fact was poor strategy on my part.

“Val, there is no angle. Anyone could stand to benefit from In-Vision, but Eldridge chose to debut it at Ambrose because he felt people with special needs should be first in line. With any disruptive technology there’s more than meets the eye—that’s why it’s disruptive.”

“But as the first journalist to tour Ambrose, I need to know the full capabilities of the technology you claim will be ubiquitous.”

“Have you considered that maybe it’s not me, but the residents who are keeping you in the dark, Valerie? I’ve encouraged you

to tour every facility, to talk to any resident you please. Think for a second—why has the communication ban been so successful? Information has leaked out of the world’s strictest black sites, yet there hasn’t been one leak from Ambrose so far. Maybe I’m not keeping you in the dark as much as residents don’t care to show an outsider everything Ambrose has to offer.”

We took our last turn on the corkscrew trail and arrived at the top of Hi-point. A strange scene was unfolding at the edge of the croquet field in the distance—I could make out Selma and another resident doing something odd with croquet mallets close to the cliff’s edge. As Greg and I got closer, I recognized the other resident as George, the resident with the floating wheelchair I had seen at the beginning of my tour, arguing with a woman I now realized was Selma. Greg began to run.

Selma was pacing behind a waist high fence of croquet mallets that George was hammering into the ground. The mallets formed a semicircle around her that the cliff’s edge completed on the far end.

“Selma, hi Selma. What’s going on?” Greg yelled as he approached.

Selma turned her back to Greg and faced the cliff’s edge. I saw a cellphone pressed against her ear. I heard her digital voice talking hurriedly; fragments about Esther, Herman, medical regimens. They were complaints.

Greg had closed the space between him and Selma, already aware of what I had just realized.

“Selma, no cellphone use is permitted,” Greg yelled. “Please put down the phone.”

Selma ignored him and continued typing out complaints her text-to-voice apparatus was relaying to the person on the other end of the call: “They trick cognitively impaired patients into thinking they’re talking to people that aren’t there; when you complain they remove simulation privileges ...”

“Selma!” Greg screamed while he thrust his hands over the mallet fence, trying to swipe the cellphone out of Selma’s hand.

“They experiment on patients, make them relive traumatic events in simulations; they erase visible disabilities through simulation even when residents don’t ask for it; they took away my communication device for a week when they caught me trying to call my sister.”

Four feet separated Selma from the cliff. Greg’s extended arm was making her inch backwards, shrinking the gap to a foot.

Greg gave up his grabbing and gathered himself, as if he were going to attempt a leap over the fence. Instead, he raised his hand to his glasses.

“Selma, I am going to turn off your visual field in ten seconds if you do not hand over the phone. One of two things will happen: either you steady yourself on the fence, and I will be able to reach your phone, or you will step blindly towards the edge. I do not want you to get hurt. Please hand over the phone.”

Selma ignored Greg. She kept typing her list of complaints, including Greg’s latest threat. Greg disregarded his ten-second warning and pushed a button on his glasses, opening a virtual drop down menu he flipped through until he found what he was looking for.

Selma lost her visual field and staggered forward. Her hand grazed one of the mallets fencing her in and she recoiled in fear, stepping backwards, inches away from the cliff’s edge. If she took off her glasses to regain sight, she would lose her text to speech functionality; she was more afraid of failing her mission than of falling off a cliff.

“Selma! Step to the left!” I shouted.

Greg turned to me, his eyes nearly pinched shut with disdain. He pulled up another virtual menu and began frantically manipulating subfolders.

“Selma, I am going to neutralize your auditory abilities. Valerie will not be able to guide you anymore. This is getting dangerous—nobody wins if you get hurt.”

Greg swiped a virtual slider and Selma’s glasses began to emit a high-pitched ringing sound. She shrieked in pain and clutched her ears. I could hear the whistle tone over Greg’s yelling and the rushing wind. To Selma, the sound must have been deafeningly loud.

Without my shouted directions, and with the use of only one of her arms—the other still furiously typing away—Selma had no means of orienting herself. She was stumbling in the wrong direction out of pain and confusion, taking too-large steps too close to the edge.

Just as Selma tentatively placed one foot past the cliff’s edge and screamed, George yelled my name. I turned to find him wheeling towards me with a croquet mallet extended in one hand. His eyes locked with mine and his mouth formed the word, “Greg.”

I took the mallet from him and stood paralyzed; my words were no longer of any use to Selma. George looked me in the eyes and repeated, “Greg.”

With two hands wrapped around the base of the mallet, I swung. I swung with the intention of meeting Greg’s head with a force from which no one could recover.

The mallet did not meet Greg’s head. It sailed through empty air until it connected with the ground. It had passed through Greg without resistance because Greg was no longer there.

Selma stopped shrieking. She stood up from her cowering position and walked calmly away from the cliff. George rolled to the enclosure and began plucking out mallets. I fell to the soft, grassy ground.

George continued removing mallets until there was a gap big enough for Selma to fit through. She let herself out of the enclosure and helped me to my feet, offering me the crook of her arm that was formed by her hand resting on her text-to-speech device.

“Are you okay?” I asked Selma.

“My vision and hearing are fine, there’s no need to worry.”

“Where did Greg go?” I was still looking around and couldn’t find him.

“There is no Greg. We made him up.”

“You what?”

“We invited you here to see the community we’ve built, but be-

fore we showed you what Ambrose really is, we had to be sure you were aligned with the work we’ve done. We are so happy with your decision, and we are deeply sorry we were less than truthful with you.”

We walked back down the trail in a line, Selma in the front, George in the middle, and me in the back. I looked behind us periodically, to the nonexistent man I killed. I had a lot of reconciling to do; between what I saw and what was real, between what made me hopeful and what made me despair.

I find it easier to ask questions without making eye contact. I kicked a pebble and asked, “How does it work, how do the staff members stay quiet about your takeover?”

“There aren’t any staff members left. We gradually laid them off. We run the island ourselves,” Selma said.

“What about shipments? The vendors don’t ask why patients are picking up the deliveries? What about medical assistance?”

“We simulate staff to pick up shipments. We ask that anyone making deliveries wear InVision before we go down to meet them. You saw our cabana system. We include directions that claim InVision can’t be taken off without causing eye damage. That safeguards against any peeking. As for medical assistance, we have residents who are doctors, as well as therapists, janitors, cooks, and gardeners. The work gets done.”

“But how has news not gotten out that all the staff have been fired? I haven’t heard anything about layoffs.”

“They were all given very generous severance packages held in escrow on the condition of secrecy. If they break their NDAs the

money stops coming in. That was Esther's idea."

"So Esther doesn't have dementia?"

"She does, but she's still the best coder on the island. Everything you've experienced today more or less happened as you saw it: Esther really was put in the self-protection ward after her dementia diagnosis and Herm really did have a breakdown when they took her from him.

"We didn't know at the time that Herm wasn't not visiting Esther because of his 'breakdown,' but because he was forbidden to; Eldridge had threatened to cut his and Esther's medical treatments if he interfered with the experiment. We assume now that the purpose of all this was to serve as a trial for an AR companionship technology Eldridge was developing for InVision.

"But even with her dementia, Esther knew she was dealing with a simulation—anyone in love would. She hacked her InVision and set up a direct channel with the real Herm. He gained access to his clone, and they were able to maintain contact and exchange information about InVision's backend during that dark period. *In situ* human simulation was so tightly guarded by Eldridge that senior staff didn't even know about it. That lends a lot of credulity to our simulation of Eldridge."

"Eldridge is simulated?"

"I told you, everything you saw is pretty much what happened. I've searched for blind spots in Ambrose's firewall since I arrived. I finally discovered the edge of Hi-point had cell service

and brought George with me to stand guard while I called my sister. Then Eldridge showed up—probably to make a call too—I think he put the hole in the firewall at the edge of Hi-point on purpose, because he assumed handicapped people would be scared of getting that close to the cliff. Anyways, George improvised the mallet fence you saw when Eldridge came after me, and you saw the rest—he almost killed me. George had no choice. Eldridge has been dead for six months.

"After I confided in Esther what George had to do at Hi-point, she told me what she and Herm were up to. We coordinated our coup and have been assuming Eldridge's identity ever since. We know it can't last forever; his stock prices are bleeding, he's missing board meetings, and he's been held in contempt of court twice since we've been simulating him. We needed to know that when the news breaks of what really happened here, we will have someone on our side, someone who saw how it was and made the same choice we did." Selma held George's hand as we descended the final portion of the hike.

When I got back to the mainland I omitted most of what I'd experienced and wrote a flattering exclusive. I wanted Ambrose to continue for as long as it could in its present state. I learned from a later correspondence with Selma that the residents had stopped using InVision entirely. They didn't need it. All they ever wanted was enough money to live, and the autonomy to self-determine—and now they had it. I read in last week's *Santa Barbara Independent* that James Eldridge was creating a trust to fund Ambrose free of cost in perpetuity. I told Joey he should apply—I had a friend on the island who could get him in.

A photograph of a blue mannequin head and neck, wearing a red headscarf with a white circular pattern. The mannequin is positioned against a background of colorful, layered paint strokes in shades of blue, green, yellow, and red. The mannequin is wearing a gold chain necklace and a gold ring. A black bag is visible in the foreground.

A photograph of a blue mannequin head and neck, wearing a red headscarf with a white circular pattern. The mannequin is positioned against a background of colorful, layered paint strokes in shades of blue, green, yellow, and red. The mannequin is wearing a gold chain necklace and a gold ring. A black bag is visible in the foreground.

Blank

by Abby Nicole Yee

It's post-dismissal time when you see it again, although you won't appreciate this one small consolation until later. At the moment, same as any other weekday, the fetching cars are advised to claim their children within ten seconds near the blue school gate. Twenty max, to avoid congesting the two-lane one-way (one lane is used for parking). Other passing cars who find themselves in this suburban clockwork can anticipate no jams, just a bunch of expectant kids (and their *yayas*, plus the occasional bodyguard) being rightly returned to their parents or drivers, ideally still intact—and maybe pleasantly tired from all the work that's designed to foster that bright-eyed, upscale brain development.

Sitting in the waiting area, you gingerly tap around the achy spot down your knee, a slow-growing welt from when you tripped over a child's bag earlier in the day. That's when you notice the tall Mrs. David—perfect makeup, big pearls, high heels—scowling at you as soon as she sees you staring. Naturally, she has become more vigilant, opting to collect her child herself instead of waiting for him. A week ago, Toby, her rosy-cheeked son, was pulled out of your class. You try to apologize with your eyes and look as sorry as you feel for what you did—you really, truly are—and you regret not thinking straight, that you're not a psychotic monster, and you want to make amends, somehow thank her for not getting you fired.

As for how your feelings translate physically, well ... They

don't. Your one-dimensional face just can't manage complex emotions (it's best to look down or away now). But Mrs. David's expression doesn't soften, and you can't help but feel like a de-winged *langaw* of all things. She finally breaks eye contact and gets into her car with Toby in the front seat, and you can see through the window as she lovingly hands him takeout (you don't know what chain it's from, but it's probably not McDo, with the fancy wrapping and all) for the long ride home, Toby gratefully accepting with his left hand because his other arm is in a cast. Eventually, the car leaves your line of sight.

Maybe you're just tired and dehydrated. You might also be moderately anemic. You also consider mild burnout, but you love working with children. Despite that, you fantasize about succumbing to the hugging pressure of your new premium weighted blanket, the package having arrived just this afternoon as indicated in the store's mobile app. It's an investment, you said to yourself when you were still waffling over dropping thirteen thousand pesos (shipping and import fees not included) on something so frivolous, and also because you've been seeing weirder and more frightening things lately. You've had half a mind to make that first appointment, the results of which could take months, then you'd become a healed and functioning member of society. But! You spend a third of your life in bed; might as well turn it into something you can actually look forward to instead of putting it off till 2:00 a.m. Besides, there's nothing a nice cup of warm tea and a good night's rest won't fix. If you're

lucky—as in, finally get the WILD (wake-induced lucid dreaming) technique to work—you can even dream your night away into a different life.

But God, just look at yourself.

You need a real break.

A car honks (it still happens) and you look up from your phone—

One by one, the children climb up their cars with their *yayas* hauling their trolley bags, oblivious to the danger that has now chosen a nearby tree to steady its unnervingly fragile form. The hair on your arms stand on end, but you turn your eyes away and look at the *manong* guard, who is now walking in its direction.

Doesn't he see it?

You breathe in a lungful and exhale slowly. You shut your eyes hard, breathe some more, and then, open.

It's gone.

Finally, you will yourself to stop shaking.

And to think you could have remained calm and lucid enough the first time you saw it. You could have avoided all the pain you caused.

Your feet move mechanically, as if you've disembodied. Your limbs are on autopilot, and before you know it, you're already inside the school building, though you think this is exactly what you shouldn't do—you could have stayed with the *manong*

guard—but by some twisted logic you are absolutely sure it won't follow you. You don't have time to articulate it to yourself, but you've subconsciously worked out that it thrives on terrorizing the most number of people. The children are on their way home. There is really no point for it to show up now.

Unless, of course, you're wrong.

There's the other exit in the building's left wing and you hope it can't smell your own mounting fear. You realize there are no people as you slowly quicken your pace, not in the rooms, not even in the halls ...

You are now full-on power walking. You rationalize the brain is so clever, it can fool itself into believing the absurd, so you distract yourself by thinking of what you'll be having for dinner when you finally get home: the ube cake in the ref. The ceiling and walls seem to stretch higher and wider than they actually are. Is this how a child sees the world? You keep walking.

You've christened the thing it because it doesn't look like anything you might find in specialty shops and Halloween-themed paraphernalia. That is to say, it's very unassuming, so no one cares when you have flashy superhero gear or glow-in-the-dark skeleton onesies. To you, it's a vague concept of a human. Sort of like if a photograph of your friend were superimposed on its negative version by accident. It's still technically them, no doubt, but it only becomes obvious if you look at it too closely and in very specific angles. It's only then that you'd really see the wrongness, the slight blurriness, the edges hiding something underneath.

You can explain your unease, just not clearly enough for others to visualize. But the thing is, it resists description.

You try again, anyway: it's as if it's in camouflage, closing in on the level of just approximately, passably human, but then it blows its carefully constructed cover by lurching in a bizarre series of disorganized jump cuts in a fraction of a second—and this is when the uncanny dread hits you—but before you can process just what the hell, it's in character again, whatever it thinks humans do when they lounge idly in public, barely reining in the unfathomable thing it just did. You can't even remember what you just witnessed, never mind try to capture its exact movements in words.

It's either that, or you're just not perceptive enough to see the distortion in real time. If only you had equipment ...

And to make your situation worse, no one else seems to notice it, so you have no second pair of eyes to provide better insight or the vocabulary to describe its strangeness. This is not so different from a scientific study of a new strain of consciousness—you hesitate to say species; you're not even sure if it's alive—and you don't understand why it has to be you, since you have no training in the sciences or the occult.

Nevertheless, you resort to other illustrations to try and make sense of its behavior. You intuitively know something about it is off—not unlike that amateur's drawing of a famous teen idol with vacant dead eyes. Your father, an artist who gets commissioned by people from all over the world, gave you lessons when you were twelve. You can almost hear him saying if you don't get the eyes right, a portrait won't look like the model no matter what fancy shading technique you use to distract from the error. It's simply not them.

You remember scrolling through his other drawings, realizing your dad was right. But unlike you, that amateur is still at it,

honing his craft, the eyes in his drawings increasingly mimicking depth.

You remember the day it first appeared to you in the dimly lit classroom. Sometime between reading a book and glancing at the children every now and then, fifteen of them napping on the plush carpeted floor before the evening talent show, you saw it stuck on the window and jolted yourself awake. Then you remembered it was early October, relief instantly shooting up your veins, and you wondered which one of your colleagues meant to shorten your life span. It was only a prematurely placed prop, after all, a picture cutout of a young girl's head stretched flat to the size of a small bowl, the eyes cut out like a mask. You stood up to pull it off the window and touched it and then—

The lights went off and on—

And it had a neck and torso...

Off and on—

And it had arms and legs...

It—flat and dimensionless and not made of paper anymore but not flesh either but not nothing and then the lights went off before you could see it unravel into—

By the time you backed away from it and scrambled for the door—the children wakened by your shouting and by the other children, crying because you'd blindly stepped on them in an act of desperate self-preservation—

It had acquired depth and locked its blank gaze on you.

That was your other mistake. You gave it something to see with, a way to perceive depth. You're just not sure how.

You once taught the children color names and ROY G. BIV, and all you can think about is how light and color work. Recall: your eyes perceive the apple as red because it absorbs the light and only emits the red wavelength, the one your eyes accept. You remember a small bright boy asking if there are more colors we haven't discovered yet, and you laugh nervously to yourself because you're now only realizing it doesn't look like any color on the visible spectrum.

See, you may be dull and lacking in some ways, but you can still progress! You feel some kind of weird exhilaration (perhaps a slight dread) from this and, oh my God, what else, what else?

What else have you overlooked?

For now, you decide the new color is called blank. You think blank is a color human eyes ignored collectively from the dawn of man, and you're the first to evolve, a species of one. It's a silly thought.

And as you approach the exit, you can sense that it wants to see you, though it has no eyes.

But you don't walk away this time.

Instead, you dare to meet its caved-in blank holes.

It ... lurches, dragging itself toward you.

Something in you is progressively wilting as it gets nearer, and you feel dizzy. It might give you a quick death if you submit to

it. But then it points to the wall mirror to your right, the foggy one you always find yourself using to see how haggard you get throughout the day (you think the fogginess improves your skin texture, like a beauty filter). What you can call its finger hangs in the air, and you're confused by its calm.

But your proximity to it is so disturbingly familiar that for a moment, you can admit it's oddly enchanting. You don't question the invasiveness, like you're being studied yourself. Somehow, you don't feel delusional when you think, I understand you.

You look for some kind of response.

But the finger tells you all it wants right now is for you to look, and you can't do it. The thing is waiting, and you have a feeling it doesn't mind if you take all night to decide. Its bottomless gaze tells you it, too, understands.

And then you decide. Because instinct tells you not to turn your head or even look out the corner of your eye.

You close your eyes hard.

(It's OK you feel nothing.)

You close your eyes—

You remember closing them, but you can close them again.

You feel so blank.

ROY G. BIV is—

Think!

—A convenient way to remember blank, blank, blank, blank,
blank, blank, and blank, the colors of a rainbow.

You're fine.

Your favorite one is blank, but the muted version, because blank
just hurts to look at.

Exposure to air will ruin the colors. Close what is not closed.

Close, not closed.

Unclose, open.

You blank—

—Unblank.

Immortals

by Nathan Chu

“I love you.”

Quèfēng has shared an apartment with Fènghuáng for two years, and two years before that, they were college dormmates, but it's only now, after she's said it, that she realizes just how true it is.

Fènghuáng stares at her for what seems like an eternity. “I'm sorry.” She stumbles with her words. “I think it's best if we don't become involved with each other like that.”

Quèfēng steps forward and grasps Fènghuáng's hands in her own. “Is that because you don't feel the same way, or is it because ...” she trails off.

“A bit of both,” Fènghuáng admits. Romantic relationships between a mortal and immortal never end well. She is young still, yes, but she has heard her progenitors' warnings and read enough literature to understand that the girl in front of her will disappear like a chrysanthemum bloom in winter. That is normal for mortals. They wither and depart. But for immortals, there is no end. Yes, she has a certain affection for Quèfēng, but immortals love differently.

Quèfēng is silent for a moment. “Then make me like you. Make me immortal, so I can love you the way you need.”

Fènghuáng is dumbfounded, but Quèfēng is adamant and the

immortal is struck by the girl's earnestness. No one, not her progenitors, not her brothers nor her sisters, has ever argued to stay by her. And Fènghuáng is still young, still in her mortal years. She does not understand that by acquiescing to Quèfēng she is sealing her fate.

* * *

Quèfēng's conferment is the first time Fènghuáng has seen so many immortals in the same place. They gather from all corners of the world to acknowledge the girl grasping at eternity. Perhaps they meet only to ogle at this oddity who thinks she knows what she is doing. It is perhaps an amusing distraction from the tedium of forever. As they mutter amongst themselves, Fènghuáng squeezes Quèfēng's hand. She's not sure whether it's for her own or Quèfēng's sake.

Over the last year, Quèfēng has taught Fènghuáng how a mortal loves, and Quèfēng has become someone precious to Fènghuáng. She might be the only person Fènghuáng truly treasures. Her “family” is certainly not on that list of candidates.

“I bet she'll crumble before her first hundred years,” Raven notes from afar, though not far enough for Fènghuáng to mishear him.

“I give her five hundred,” Lugh counters, laying down a Cherry Coke on the table. It is a worthy wager because it is as equally

trivial as the matter before them, or maybe everything is worth an aluminum can of soda. Carbonated beverages have become something of a novelty among the older generations.

“The two of you should be quiet when the little ones are listening,” Ishikara Kamuy chides. She is the oldest immortal in attendance.

Raven snorts. “You think she’s laudable for doing something so foolish?”

“I think she’s laudable for *why* she’s doing this.”

“In that case, then you should be praising the other girl instead.” Fènghuáng feels Raven’s eyes gesture to her. “She’s diving straight into her first heartbreak. She hasn’t learned yet that mortals are meant to be loved sparingly.”

For her part, Quèfēng does not pay her “in-laws” any mind. Instead, she dotes on her niece, Míngyù. Her older brother is quiet while Quèfēng tickles his baby’s tummy. “Who knows, maybe she’ll live long enough to see me on the other end.”

“It’s a thousand years,” Lǐyú whispers. He and his family are Quèfēng’s only relatives who show up to the ceremony. Quèfēng has been written out of the will and the family register. It has been like that for a long time, ever since her second year of college when she brought her girlfriend over for New Years.

Quèfēng nods. “And maybe they will have figured out how to extend human lives that long by then.” After all, the immortals are not the only ones who have been invited to her conferment. At the back of the hall huddles a group of scientists. Quèfēng has decided to loan her body for study until she wakes up again

in a thousand years. Maybe they will have discovered something in the millennium it takes for her to become immortal.

Fènghuáng does not agree with the plan. She believes it degrading and dangerous. She doesn’t want anyone to touch Quèfēng while she is sleeping, but Quèfēng is willing to do it for the medical advancements it might bring. Still, she files all sorts of legal documents and contracts so that Fènghuáng has the final word over all her procedures, at least until she emerges from her slumber. She trusts Fènghuáng.

In the year they have been together fully, Quèfēng has fallen even deeper in love with the immortal. And even in the moments where she tries to grasp a thousand years without her lover, she thinks back to each kiss and hug, whispered I-love-you’s and the moments lying in bed next to each other. They are soft and warm, and worth more than all the fighting and aggravation that now decorates their lives. As her conferment draws ever closer, she’s never been more sure of her decision. Rather than live a lifetime of happiness and leave Fènghuáng to suffer for eternity, Quèfēng is glad to wait a thousand years and spend forever with her lover.

But for now, the chosen moment arrives, and Fènghuáng walks Quèfēng up on stage. It’s almost like a wedding, Quèfēng thinks. When they reach the center of the stage, Fènghuáng turns around and grasps Quèfēng’s other hand. She gazes at her girlfriend, and Quèfēng has never felt more loved.

The scientists crowd around the stage, bumping into each other as the immortals traipse through them, surrounding the couple themselves and blocking the scientists’ view anyway. Lǐyú averts his eyes while Míngyù giggles in his lap. His wife grips his hand and he grips back.

Then Fènghuáng kisses Quèfēng, holding onto her so tightly Quèfēng feels her fingers go cold.

“You’ll wait for me, right?” Quèfēng leans her forehead on Fènghuáng’s and whispers jokingly.

Fènghuáng nods, her throat thick with words. “I love you,” she finally manages.

Quèfēng kisses her. They are the last words she hears before immortality.

* * *

Becoming immortal is not so easy as waving a wand or making an ardent wish. It is a thousand years of cold, dark isolation. No, it is a thousand years of sensory deprivation. Truthfully, there is no cold or darkness to remind Quèfēng that she is alive, and maybe, she isn’t. After all, immortals don’t have the same view of living that mortals do.

The nothing doesn’t bother Quèfēng at first. It is nothing. There’s no other way to describe it, but soon Quèfēng realizes the magnitude of what she’s done. There is no way for her to tell the time. She has no beating heart, no fluttering of her eyelids, no arms to punch, no voice to count with. And as those thoughts settle inside of her, she understands that a thousand years is as meaningful as ten minutes right now, whenever that is.

Meanwhile, Fènghuáng feels Quèfēng go stiff and realizes that her lover is no longer beside her. She pulls back and waits.

The ring of immortals around her loosens and drifts apart, each carrying part of Quèfēng’s mortality, her sight and sound and

self. What remains can hardly be considered more than a shell. There is nothing left in Quèfēng’s body for the scientists to measure.

“Good luck, kid,” Raven mumbles on his way out.

Lugh lays a hand on Fènghuáng’s shoulder and says goodbye.

Ishikara Kamuy merely nods.

Then the scientists gather around Quèfēng’s body and wait for Fènghuáng’s signal to let them move it.

Fènghuáng makes them wait.

They can wait, she thinks bitterly. At least as long as she will. At least as long as Quèfēng.

She makes them wait well into the night, until at least half of them have collapsed from exhaustion.

By then, she’s realized that she isn’t human, that she is very different from the weak animals waiting to pounce on her lover, and she wonders just how much more she will learn about herself in the time it will take for Quèfēng to emerge.

And she will emerge, Fènghuáng says to herself. She will. They promised each other.

When she finally breaks down and lets the scientists cart Quèfēng away, Lǐyú is waiting for her. His wife has already taken Míngyù back home, but he remains deep into the night.

They do not share words.

When Fènghuáng looks into his eyes, she expects to find pity. Instead, she finds a cold understanding. It does not mock her, but it does not comfort her either. He empathizes with her pain, but they both know she is the reason Lǐyú will never see his sister again.

Fènghuáng does not reach out to him like she did with Quèfēng.

She has learned her lesson.

* * *

In the nothing, Quèfēng tries to keep herself sane by reminding herself why she is there in the first place. She gathers her memories of Fènghuáng, weaves them into the brightest tapestries she can. They glimmer in the void, brilliant, but they too fade. It is hard to remember what a kiss feels like when she can't even feel her own lips.

She begins to wonder if she really knew someone named Fènghuáng at all, and Quèfēng panics. She doesn't want to lose Fènghuáng too. She's the only one Quèfēng cares about now, or at least she's sure she *did*, but she can't quite recall, and Fènghuáng's face is always changing in her mind's eye. Soon, she doubts whether or not she'll still be able to see anything when she leaves. She doubts whether she could see in the first place.

It is anyone's guess when she'll be free anyway, and in the end, that means it's just her guess, because she doesn't know if anyone else actually exists. She doesn't know if *she* exists.

Who is Quèfēng?

It sounds like a beautiful name, two clear tones ringing out in

the nothingness that she is.

* * *

Fènghuáng visits the laboratory every day. The scientists can't stop her. For all her shortsightedness in the face of eternity, Quèfēng understood the mortal world's bureaucracy. Fènghuáng waves her paperwork and the guards let her through. Eventually, they stop stopping her and she walks in without pause.

The scientists are uncomfortable with Fènghuáng's presence. Some of them whisper that she's trying to sabotage them. They believe that the immortals want to keep their secrets away from humanity. Fènghuáng doesn't pay them any mind. These men and women don't have even a fraction of Quèfēng's courage. If they really wanted immortality, they would have followed her example and splintered themselves into their barest form. Becoming immortal is not just a physical transformation but an untethering, and only those so determined will ever find their way back.

So Fènghuáng watches Quèfēng and prays, believing, like Quèfēng, that love will be the tether that brings her home.

* * *

In the nothing, something dreams of nothing. To be immortal is to be undone. Time does not touch their bodies nor their minds. They are left behind.

A dream of nothing is not nothing itself. It is a patch of velvet black or a square of plush warmth. It is only nothing because in the void, those words and textures and sights don't have refer-

ence or meaning.

One day, when there is light and sound and feeling, the something will see itself for what it truly is.

But until that day, which the something can only dream of dreaming, the nothing will remain nothing.

* * *

Fènghuáng does not bother keeping track of time. What she notes, however, is that the whispers stop. Or at least, they quell.

Now, she is “the forlorn lady.” Instead of suspicion, pity stalks her.

Towards winter, a few of the scientists invite her over for the holidays, and she politely declines but they refuse her refusal, and so she reluctantly attends the New Year’s festivities. At one scientist’s house, the children fawn over her.

“You’re so pretty!”

“Where is your husband?”

“Are you dating anyone?”

Fènghuáng smiles placidly at them like she does with their parents. This seems to delight them and they crowd ever closer. Soon, she is telling them about her lover and how amazing she is. Even the adults stop to listen. They have never heard the forlorn lady speak so much in the decades they have known her. Perhaps some of them think they can glean something important in her words, some insight or secret to the problem occupying

years of their lives. Others are interested in the woman herself.

The scientists themselves have changed. Many have left the team and few have joined. In the beginning, most were drawn by the prospect of fame and wealth. Pharmaceuticals from all over the globe clamored to fund their research. The thought of being the one to discover the secret to eternal youth was irresistible.

Now, after years of testing and cell samples, diagnostic scans and every method they can devise, immortality’s luster has waned, or at least its pursuit has. The humans now gathered around Fènghuáng are more interested in the problem itself than the solution.

Still, the ones in the back, the ones eavesdropping, wonder about what to do with Quèfēng.

* * *

Sometimes, the nothing hears something, and it *is* sometimes and something. The nothing is sure of it now, because it can hear. Only rarely, but it *can*, and that’s enough for it to understand that something exists.

It doesn’t understand what it hears, and still too is it blind and unfeeling, but it can hear. What is it searching for? The nothing doesn’t know, but how it longs for a sound familiar.

* * *

“Here.” Raven finds Fènghuáng on a side street and tosses an aluminum can at her.

Fènghuáng catches it, perplexed. She has not seen Raven since

Quèfēng's conferment.

"I owe you this. It's been a hundred years."

She glances down at the faded lettering on the can. It's a Cherry Coke. "Where did you get this?" Fènghuáng hasn't seen this design in decades.

Raven shrugs. "You have to plan ahead, dear. We play the long game on this earth."

Fènghuáng frowns. "Did you come to chastise me?" She knows she has not been as discreet as the other immortals are, and she also knows that she has not been paying enough attention to her own welfare, only Quèfēng's, though she needn't worry. Her lover's body is already immortal, she is just waiting for Quèfēng herself.

"I came to pay you back." Raven paws the ground with his boot's toe. "And to give you a warning." He does not wait for her permission to give it. "That girl of yours is stronger stuff than I thought, but don't place your heart on her any more than you have. You're only a tenth of the way there." Then he pauses and looks straight into Fènghuáng's eyes. "And if she does make it, she won't be the same girl you fell in love with, Fènghuáng."

It is the first time Raven has used her name.

"I'll keep that in mind," she replies icily.

* * *

The sounds are sometimes words now. The nothing can tell be-

cause they have a rhythm, a shape. There are pauses and stops, tones and breaths.

Still, it does not know the language. They are too disconnected to piece together or too foreign to place. It is like grasping drops of water. The nothing can hold a few precious notes, but the more it gathers, the more they blend together, and soon they flow back out into the silent void, leaving the nothing as alone as ever.

* * *

Soon, Fènghuáng is talking to more than just children. Now research is a token effort and most of Quèfēng's time is spent on a stage or in a spotlight. The companies have decided that if they cannot turn a profit on medicine perhaps they can turn a profit on a story.

Fènghuáng follows her wherever she goes, an unwilling accomplice. Perhaps Quèfēng didn't understand the mortal world perfectly. Now Fènghuáng grasps the lows humans are willing to delve for their own self interests. But she will never let them have Quèfēng. She attends every exhibition, every showcase, busts on stage if she needs to.

She gives speeches and presentations, tries to paint a picture of who Quèfēng really is.

She plays right into their hands, but what is she to do? She wants people to understand Quèfēng, the woman who gave up a millennium for *her*, who believed that love was strong enough to carry eternity. She wants them to understand that Quèfēng is *human*.

Spectators weep and huddle together, and Fènghuáng feels that

she has lost. Her speeches turn Quèfēng into a hero, and the shows, because that is what they are, grow more popular, her speeches more polished. She despairs. Telling Quèfēng's story has become her job.

She tries to take legal action with all the ill-gotten funds from her speeches but it is no use. Technicality upon technicality prevails, and as the appeals pile up over the years, fewer and fewer mortals are willing to take up her cause. It is made only worse by their sympathizing looks and apologies. There are too many precedents to overturn, and she has become the lead actor of the longest running drama in the world.

* * *

The nothing shivers as something brushes its cheek. Now it knows it has a cheek, just as it knows that it has something called a hand and a toe. It can't tell whether the thing that brushed it was soft or spiky or wet, but it knows it was touched. That is good enough.

One day, it dreams that its whole form will be revealed, and then it will stop being nothing. Perhaps then, it will find its own thing to brush and love.

* * *

“Amazing,” Lugh comments after a tour. Fènghuáng does not recognize him at first. He has a new haircut, no longer a long straight silver but a platinum buzz. It makes him look older, she thinks. At least, from the back. His face still looks the same. She only realizes it's him after she finishes speaking and the rest of the tour group departs.

“Are you applauding her too?” Fènghuáng bites back.

Lugh studies her, a ghost passing over his face. “I suppose I am.” He offers an aluminum can to her. “Though it gives me no pleasure in seeing her alive and well. I had hoped she would die by now. It would save both of you quite the burden.”

Fènghuáng glares at the can, but takes it anyway. It is rude to reject an elder's present.

“Five hundred years,” Lugh muses, watching Quèfēng slumber. “Empires rise and fall in that time.”

“Not Quèfēng.”

Lugh shakes his head. “You don't believe that yourself.” He gestures to her “uniform,” the clothes Fènghuáng has worn countless times trying to appear professional and level-headed. Wearing the same thing every day helps preserve a bit of her sanity, a bit of her willpower to stomach seeing Quèfēng's body over and over again. “What are you going to do when she wakes up?”

“I still have five hundred years.” Fènghuáng cannot tell if her words are an excuse or a bitter retort.

“To get over her or to think of what to tell her?”

Fènghuáng does not meet Lugh's eyes. She knows she will betray Quèfēng again soon. It is simply too much to bear on her own, but she swears that she will return, always.

* * *

The something can see now. It is a weak light, dark orange and fading, but it is different from the nothing that the something used to be. There is a dimension to the void. It came slowly, so slowly the something didn't even realize it was not nothing anymore. Time crept in, and suddenly, there was light.

But the void remains numb, and the something waits for another sign.

* * *

"This is Quèfēng?" Angela asks. Fènghuáng has never looked so old to her before. They are sitting in a museum, maybe three or four meters from the body. All kinds of devices are hooked up to the girl. Heart monitors and brain scans and x-rays. All attest to the undeniable truth that the body in front of them is, in fact, alive. Their screens pulse rainbow, charting the mysteries that scientists still haven't uncovered. Humans live longer now, almost one and a half centuries, but it is no thanks to Quèfēng.

Fènghuáng nods. The two of them are friends, more than friends, and she knows Angela wants to be even more. She wants to be more for Angela too, just as she has wanted to be more for so many other men and women. That's why she has come back to Quèfēng, almost as if she is asking for her blessing.

She doesn't visit Quèfēng nearly as much as she promised she would, but it has been so many years. So many long years, and surely, isn't she entitled to a little bit of happiness? But Fènghuáng feels that nothing will ever work unless her partner understands who she really is, and Quèfēng is so much a part of her. Fènghuáng has come to resent that.

The others accuse her of cheating or of playing with their hearts. They cannot abide that there is another person in her life or they believe that she will eventually forget them when Quèfēng wakes.

How selfish, Fènghuáng thinks, how very mortal. She is just as vulnerable to love as they are, and they will hold her heart forever, even the ones who broke it.

Especially the ones who broke her heart, because now she admires them more than ever. If only she could have been more like them. If only she could have said yes and no clearly. Maybe then, Quèfēng could have remained a bright spot in her memory.

"Are you okay?" Angela squeezes her hand, and Fènghuáng nearly shatters. It is rare that anyone tries to comfort her anymore.

Fènghuáng squeezes her eyes and shakes her head. She is far past the need to lie to anyone, including herself.

Angela draws her in and hugs her. "Don't worry. I won't leave." And Fènghuáng decides then and there that Angela will be the last one. It has been eight hundred and twenty three years. When Angela dies, Fènghuáng will return to Quèfēng's side. She will not love a human who will live to see Quèfēng wake.

* * *

Soon, the something realizes that it has eyes, and that the orange it sees, and the blue and green rivers that span it, are its eyelids. It can't move them, but it knows that it has them. It knows it has things called arms and legs, and it knows that it hears with its

ears. It even occasionally understands the sounds around it.

...

Yes

...

...

She

...

Nine hundred thirty-one

It doesn't know why the last phrase is so terribly exciting. It feels like it is close to remembering why.

* * *

Fènghuáng stands guard over Quèfēng as she did nearly a millennium ago. It is hard to believe that in less than twenty years, Quèfēng will be coming home. Fènghuáng was not old when Quèfēng locked herself in the void for her, and waiting for Quèfēng has consumed almost all of Fènghuáng's life. She does not know if she is anxious or relieved that Quèfēng will be awake soon.

Around the two of them, scientists bustle about, moving equipment and sorting through records. Fènghuáng is not the only one waiting for Quèfēng. Many people have been anticipating this moment. Researchers are hoping for a breakthrough, hypothesizing, hoping, that the waking process will yield more data.

Journalists are crowding for new photos and to report on a project that seems to be shaking itself out of death. Some biographers even knock on Fènghuáng's door, hoping to complete this long chapter of history, the first documented mortal to immortal conversion.

Fènghuáng entertains them with one of her practiced speeches, a "classic" as the visitors call them. She doesn't really care, and when the interviewers leave, she realizes that she is just as ragged as her memories, and the same feeling of anticipation and anxiety fills her. Is Quèfēng even the person she remembers?

* * *

One word sticks out to the something in the void.

Quèfēng

Two tones. One falling, one flat.

It is a beautiful word, one that rings.

Many voices speak it, but only one particular voice matters to the something, a soft one. It is a familiar voice, one the something has heard for a long time, as long as it has been able to hear it realizes. The voice says the word often, and the something likes that. When that one voice says that one word, the something feels safe.

Quèfēng

Quèfēng

Eventually, the something realizes that the soft voice is talking

to it.

And then, it realizes that *she* is Quèfēng.

* * *

The day Quèfēng wakes up, Fènghuáng is the only one within ten meters of her. She will not abide the cameras and reporters, shoves them out of the room herself in some cases. The scientists at the edge of the room are only tolerated as part of Quèfēng's contract. As soon as the day is over, Fènghuáng will sever all ties with them. She has waited long enough, a thousand years, for this moment, and she will not share it with anyone else. As Quèfēng begins to unfreeze, her eyes rolling underneath closed lids, Fènghuáng reaches over and grasps her hands.

Quèfēng shudders, her body trawling in the first real breath it has had in centuries, and her eyes flutter open. For a brief moment, Fènghuáng is reminded of how guilty she really is. Of course, Quèfēng is fragile right now. "Quèfēng," she whispers, "Quèfēng," as if it is a magical spell that will return her lover's consciousness to her more quickly.

* * *

Quèfēng is very confused. She is still holding Fènghuáng's hands, but she is lying down in a bed now. She is sure that a long time has passed, an impossibly long time, but Fènghuáng looks the same. It is only as her eyes wander the room and snag on the scientists peering at her through their glasses that she realizes what has happened.

"Quèfēng."

Quèfēng finally turns back to face Fènghuáng.

"*Are you alright? Are you okay?*" Fènghuáng whispers something to her, clutching her hand as if she might disappear, but Quèfēng does not understand. Her lover's voice is so familiar, and yet she can't understand anything Fènghuáng is trying to say.

"Fènghuáng." Quèfēng's tongue is thick and dry in her mouth. "Fènghuáng, what happened?"

* * *

When the two of them exit the room, they are ambushed by the ravenous flashes of journalists and their cameramen. Fènghuáng growls and kicks her way through them, trying her best to shelter Quèfēng's head as her lover cowers in fear. It is late at night, and the hoard has been waiting the whole day for them to emerge.

Quèfēng clutches Fènghuáng's arms the entire time, wishing she could shut her eyes and ears off again and disappear into the void. Even her clothes scratch at her skin. She doesn't know it yet, but they are replicas of her conferment outfit, made to last decades instead of for casual wear. Walking through the crowd of reporters, she is the perfect subject, a finally living, breathing immortal mortal. It is as if she has stepped off the cover of a biography or the stage of a play. There are a thousand years of mystery to unravel for the media, and Quèfēng's fear only seems to sharpen their appetite.

"*What an amazing gap! I would never have guessed-*"

"*Look how Fènghuáng protects her!*"

The cameras become the most willing villains they can be for these lovers. Bring out the cuteness, the anger, the drama!

By the time the two immortals make it to their escape vehicle, Quèfēng is weeping. Fènghuáng holds her close while the city's lights blur past the windows. Eventually, Quèfēng's shoulders stop shuddering and she drops off into true sleep. They swap cabins two more times, Fènghuáng carrying Quèfēng and paying any transfer fees while they zigzag around the area, just in case anyone else is following Quèfēng.

It is nearly four a.m. when Fènghuáng finally opens her house's door and tucks Quèfēng into bed. As she watches Quèfēng's chest rise and fall, Fènghuáng thinks about all the things she wanted to tell Quèfēng but couldn't. It has been so, so long, and there are so many things she needs to say.

But she has waited a thousand years. She can wait a little more.

Fènghuáng gives Quèfēng one last look and cups her cheek before getting up and closing the bedroom door between them.

* * *

Emerging from sleep is a much more pleasant experience for Quèfēng than regaining her consciousness. It takes her almost an hour to do so, yet even that is a breakneck pace compared to the void. All the while, she relaxes in the warm softness of Fènghuáng's comforter. It is an amazing thing, she feels, to be alive again, to feel things like warmth and softness and smell the savory crack of frying meat in the other room.

Slowly, she opens her eyes and lets the light flow into them. That too is a small miracle. Her memories are a mess, but she

can still recall moments from last night and the void, and the difference scares her. She is not sure if she is ready to be part of this world again.

As Quèfēng props herself up in bed, Fènghuáng opens the bedroom door with their breakfast. "*Good morning.*" She smiles and brings the tray over along with a chair to sit at Quèfēng's side.

Quèfēng shrinks back. The woman in front of her looks like Fènghuáng, but Quèfēng has no idea what she is saying. It sounds like a greeting, and the woman seems friendly, but is she really Fènghuáng?

"*What's wrong?*" The woman leans forward, worry etched on her face.

"Fènghuáng?" Quèfēng asks, scared of the reply she might receive.

"*Yes?*" The woman responds, nodding, which Quèfēng interprets as an affirmative.

"Fènghuáng," Quèfēng shudders. "Is it really you?"

The woman frowns, and Quèfēng's heart stalls. She can see the other woman trying to process her words. Eventually, the other woman nods. Quèfēng isn't sure whether to be comforted or not. "Then, was it a success? Has it been a thousand years?"

Fènghuáng nods. "*Yes.*" She says it slowly, trying to press it into Quèfēng's memory. It will take a long time before Quèfēng is able to speak to other people again, and Fènghuáng knows she will have to teach her lover.

“Then, am I ... ?” Quèfēng trails off, unable to finish the question.

Fènghuáng takes her hand and squeezes it gently, nodding. “Yes.”

Quèfēng closes her eyes, breathing heavily trying to calm herself. *Immortal*. She is immortal. She just never thought that she would be unable to understand Fènghuáng. Tears leak out of her eyes as Quèfēng realizes her idea of immortality was merely a life with Fènghuáng and her family, but the world has moved on without her.

Suddenly, the thought seizes her and she grips Fènghuáng’s hand. “Have you had another woman?”

Fènghuáng stiffens, though Quèfēng already knew the answer before she had asked it. Perhaps she does still understand Fènghuáng. “Many?”

Slowly, Fènghuáng nods, and Quèfēng hates herself. It is not jealousy drowning her, but self-loathing. She remembers her last words to Fènghuáng. How could she have asked something so ridiculous of her? “I’m sorry.” Quèfēng bows her head. “I’ve been a terrible partner.”

“*Don’t say that.*” Fènghuáng whispers. “*It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have known how things would have turned out. We couldn’t have known.*” She brings Quèfēng’s hands closer to her.

Quèfēng hears Fènghuáng’s words, but she doesn’t know what to do with them. Finally, she steels herself and locks eyes with Fènghuáng, asking her the last miserable question in her mind.

“Do you still love me?”

She watches Fènghuáng’s heart shatter in her eyes. “Of course! Of course I still love you!” Fènghuáng’s answer is thick and rough, unpracticed, but it is in their tongue.

* * *

When the two of them share their first kiss in a thousand years, Quèfēng pulls away. Fènghuáng leans forward, biting Quèfēng’s lip lightly, begging for entrance, and Quèfēng is scared.

Fènghuáng is passionate and hungry, and both of those things terrify Quèfēng. “I’m sorry,” Quèfēng whispers, pushing her girlfriend away. “I’m just not ready yet.” It has been three months now and Quèfēng knows she has been making Fènghuáng wait, but she can’t help it.

It is not so much the intimacy that frightens her. Before she became immortal, Quèfēng never shied away from physical contact, and she is happy that Fènghuáng still wants her in that way, but Fènghuáng is simply too intense. Quèfēng is unsure if her girlfriend’s desire is genuine or if it is simply the result of being forced to wait for a millennium. And even if it is genuine, Quèfēng is terrified that it will burn out. If she sates Fènghuáng now, will the other woman eventually tire of her? They have years and years ahead of them, literally an incalculable amount of time, and Quèfēng doesn’t know if she can handle an eternity where Fènghuáng no longer loves her.

Perhaps what she is most afraid of is growing bored herself. Now she is an immortal, and the same stretch of time and tedium is something *she* will have to bear too. Yes, they have

waited a thousand years for each other, but what is a thousand years compared to ten or a hundred thousand, and Quèfēng is so scared of losing her love for Fènghuáng. It is the only thing she has left.

“It’s okay,” Fènghuáng pulls back, thankfully. “We can go as slowly as you need to.” She wraps her arms around Quèfēng and hugs her.

* * *

Most days, Quèfēng wanders outside. She cannot abide staying in Fènghuáng’s house. Standing still or sitting for too long reminds her of the void, and in the deep of night, she will almost invariably wake up heaving, lungs and heart pounding on her chest, trying to startle her back into motion. Fènghuáng does her best trying to guide Quèfēng through her panic, but she is not always around, and when the walls close in around her, Quèfēng cannot help but flee the building. It is a crushing type of fear, and Quèfēng is not keen on reliving her millennium of annihilation no matter how long she lives.

The outside is depressing though, and as Quèfēng drifts, she realizes that almost none of her hopes have been realized. Lǐyú is a footnote in the books discussing her life, and Míngyù has been dead for centuries. Humanity has not gained anything from studying her body, and her family has dissolved over the intervening centuries. Even if it hadn’t, she knows she would not recognize herself in any descendants and they would not know anything about her. Míngyù never even got the chance to meet her properly. Now, how many generations must separate her from her family’s last children?

Sometimes, Quèfēng asks Fènghuáng about the people they

used to know, the friends she made in college and the few scant years she was a working woman. Fènghuáng has not bothered keeping track of them or their families. Secretly, Quèfēng wonders if Fènghuáng ever cared about them. At first the thought is a bitter accusation, but it softens. Quèfēng cannot bring herself to blame Fènghuáng. After all, what she is asking for is a long dead past.

But it is hard for her to accept that she is alone. Alone except for Fènghuáng.

That is perhaps the worst part of her new life.

She resents Fènghuáng for being the only thing she has left. She has no other friends or family. She has no more dreams or aspirations. Her education is horribly antiquated, and she is barely literate after months of studying. The only thing she has left is Fènghuáng, and Fènghuáng is a reminder of the biggest mistake she has ever made. She is Quèfēng’s only comfort and greatest tragedy, and it is not Fènghuáng’s fault.

The only thing she might reasonably pin on Fènghuáng is her newfound stardom, but she does not blame Fènghuáng for it. It is one of the countless things Fènghuáng has apologized for, and Quèfēng knows Fènghuáng was only trying to protect her. If she is being honest with herself, it even gives her a small amount of joy to know that Fènghuáng fought for her as much as she did, but that joy is gently flayed away by the whispers that swirl around her as she walks through the streets.

They call her 千年少女, an infantilizing title, she feels. Somehow, her thousand years of torment has morphed into something romantic and heroic. She is suddenly a young girl in their eyes, an ignorant girl who does not know what she is throwing away

in order to pursue her love, and to be fair, she *was*.

But Quèfēng is no longer that girl.

That maiden died a millennium ago.

Still, she can feel people's words crawling over her, comparing her to the only version of 千年少女 they know.

How Quèfēng wishes she could bark back at them, let them know that she can understand their whispering, but her tongue is unwieldy and cannot form the right words in her mouth. It would be like a duck talking to a chicken, and it is already a cruel enough punishment to be stalked in the streets by drifting eyes and rumors without squawking like an idiot to onlookers, so Quèfēng glues her mouth shut and keeps walking.

* * *

“Hey.” Quèfēng is glaring at her reflection when the stranger's voice reaches her ears. She does not turn around. Instead, she shifts her gaze to catch the black-haired man in the mirror.

“Why are you here?” Quèfēng does not know how he got inside Fènghuáng's house. Fènghuáng herself is out running errands. Still, she doesn't care. Clearly, he is an immortal. She can see it in the way he leans against the bedroom's door frame. Immortals treat everything carefully and callously, with the vague sense that anything could crumble around them in an instant.

“Straight to the point, aren't you?” The man whistles. “No wonder you made it back.”

Quèfēng narrows her eyes. “Who are you?” She has the feeling

that she's seen him before, not recently, but when she was still mortal.

“Your new brother or sibling or uncle,” he shrugs. “Raven.”

Quèfēng turns around to face him. “You were at my conferment, weren't you.” It is not a question.

Raven nods. “That's why I'm here, to apologize.” He lets Quèfēng chew on that before explaining. “If I had known you would survive, I wouldn't have helped you.”

Quèfēng folds her arms and snorts. “Then why did you?”

“I thought it would be a good opportunity for Fènghuáng. I've said it before, mortals should be loved sparingly.”

For Quèfēng, it is just the reverse, immortals should love sparingly. “Have you ever loved a mortal?” she finally asks.

Raven is silent for a full minute. Quèfēng counts the seconds until his reply. “Kid, I used to dance with Iris. We would slice through the sky like a peel of thunder and paint a rainbow for the mortals below. I loved humanity. I even stole the sun for them, like my brother Prometheus.” He sighs and runs a hand through his long black hair. “But there's always a price, isn't there?”

“It didn't stop you from turning me,” Quèfēng growls.

Raven gives her a sad smile. “I said it before, right kid? I'm sorry.” He bows low. “I salute you, Quèfēng, fellow inmate. May your woe melt like honey under rain.”

* * *

Quèfēng turns Raven's words over in her mind as she watches a movie in bed with Fènghuáng, the contents of which aren't terribly interesting. It's there more to fill the void between them than to entertain. Fènghuáng has certainly seen enough movies in her life.

"I think we should break up." Quèfēng says finally. She feels Fènghuáng stiffen beside her. Then her girlfriend backs away, panic lining the edges of her eyes.

"Why?"

"I ... " Quèfēng struggles with her words. She has thought this moment over so many times the words have become thick and muddled. "I don't think this is fair for either of us. I don't think *I'm* being fair to you," she corrects herself.

"Is it, is it because you don't feel the same?" And the way Fènghuáng whispers it breaks Quèfēng. The woman next to her has waited a thousand years for them to be together, has sacrificed her heart and sanity and reputation countless times for their sake, and Quèfēng realizes that she *does* still love Fènghuáng. She doubts if she ever *could* stop loving Fènghuáng. But ...

"A little," Quèfēng admits, and a wave of dǎjā vu washes over her. Perhaps the whole world is a cycle and they are merely repeating their mistakes. "I just ... I need to be on my own." And it's not fair to Fènghuáng, Quèfēng knows this. "I need to figure out who I am now before I can love you the way you deserve."

Fènghuáng's jaw clenches. "So you're leaving me again?"

And Quèfēng feels the same pang of guilt that stabs her every

time she pulls away from Fènghuáng. But even that is less painful than the constant burn of her muscles, reminding her that she is trapped here. It's not that she doesn't love Fènghuáng, it's that Fènghuáng is all she has left. So instead of apologizing, Quèfēng nods her head.

"So you're leaving me?" Fènghuáng echoes. "After all of that? After becoming immortal and waiting a thousand years and all this heartbreak, you're just going to end things like that?" she chokes, breath uneven and ragged.

"I-"

"Do you know how much I sacrificed for you?!" Fènghuáng shouts. "I gave up so much for this! I could have left you! I could have moved on and forgotten about you! But I stayed! I stayed so we could have this and you're just going to throw it away?!"

"I'm doing this for us!" Quèfēng yells back.

"That's your problem!" Fènghuáng is crying. "You're always waiting for things to be perfect! I could have loved you as a mortal! I love you now! Why can't you just appreciate that? What more do you want, Quèfēng?!"

Quèfēng recoils from the hidden accusation. How could Fènghuáng think she doesn't care about her? Then anger overtakes her for the first time since she has awakened, and she lets her emotions wash over her, heedless of if they will burn her out. Instead she shoves Fènghuáng down and kisses her. It is the first time she has taken the initiative in a thousand years, and it is less a display of love and more frenzied desperation.

When they finally pull apart, Quèfēng glares down at

Fènghuáng. “I love you. I will *always* love you,” she pants. “It’s just ...” And it takes her seeing her own tears on Fènghuáng’s face to realize she is crying. “I want to *be* someone you can actually love.”

“I *do* love you.” Fènghuáng’s face is twisted up in pain. “How could I not?”

“*Then wait for me,*” Quèfēng wants to say. “*Wait for me so that I can love you properly.*” But even she is not selfish enough to ask that of Fènghuáng again. “Then don’t wait for me. Don’t take me back until I deserve your love,” she gasps, choking back the slurry of frustration and longing and a dozen other emotions in her throat. “Because I *need* to do this. If not for us, then for *me.*”

And slowly, Fènghuáng nods. “Okay ...” She grips Quèfēng’s arms before the other woman can pull away with that answer though. “But spend tonight with me. Let me have that before you leave.”

And Quèfēng is finally ready to give herself to Fènghuáng. She bends down and kisses Fènghuáng, and a selfish part of her wants to make sure that her lover never forgets tonight. Maybe she does want Fènghuáng to move on, but Quèfēng cannot help but feel unreasonably possessive, and at least a small corner of her heart is determined to leave her memory embedded in Fènghuáng’s flesh.

* * *

Quèfēng is a long way from home, though truthfully, she hasn’t had a real home for many years. Maybe she never had a real home, even as a mortal. She can still remember the violent

shade of red her father’s face turned when she told him that she wasn’t going to bear him grandchildren. “You’re a disgrace,” she mouths as she holds up the scarlet petals that reminded her of his face. They are both a boisterous color crying out in a desperate bid to persist. If only they could enjoy what they already have. Quèfēng smiles. Perhaps Fènghuáng would be proud of her.

Quèfēng stands up and dusts her pants off. This is progress, she thinks. Remembering is difficult for her, at least the emotional parts, but slowly, slowly she is beginning to piece together who she must have been before she became immortal. It is a good feeling, like rediscovering a song she used to love or reuniting with a long lost friend.

“What are you doing here, child?”

Quèfēng turns to face the stranger. She had been wondering when they would come out to greet her. She gives a quick bow of deference to her elder. “Uncle.”

The young man laughs. “Oh, I like you!” It is a light laugh, one unmarked by the weight of years. The immortal tosses his head back, shaking his long locks of hair, and grins, wide. It is a stark motion against the stillness of his body, each black strand quickly replaced by a brother in an afterimage of its motion. “Did Yuè Lǎo send you? He always sends the queers to me, funny old man. It must be his hobby shepherding mortals down their family line. Best to leave the others to little brother Xōchipilli. So,” he lets his head settle back down, hair coming to rest against his dyed robe. “What can this uncle do for you?”

Quèfēng shakes her head. She has not spoken to Yuè Lǎo, and she did not expect to meet another immortal up here in the

mountains. “I don’t know,” she admits. “I was only wandering through here.”

Xōchipilli cocks his head and studies her.

Quèfēng does not like the way his pupils deepen. She feels his eyes take in her form, and it reminds her of the people in the city. He is endlessly curious, and now she is the subject of his curiosity.

Suddenly, Xōchipilli smiles and nods his head. “Okay.” He straightens and turns around, gesturing for Quèfēng to follow. “Would you like something to drink? We’re a long way from any towns.” And then, without waiting for Quèfēng to respond, he walks away.

Quèfēng follows him, of course, and he leads her to a squat hut. It is half exposed and half in the earth, and when Quèfēng enters Xōchipilli’s abode, she is met by a warm breeze. At the opposite end of the room is a lit fireplace, crackling in the half darkness. It is not unwelcome, Quèfēng decides. They are high in the mountains, and while it is no longer early spring, a chill still lingers in the air.

“Here.” Xōchipilli hands her a steaming ceramic mug. Quèfēng can’t see what’s inside, but it smells vaguely sweet. Xōchipilli gestures to the table by the fire, and both of them sit down. “I don’t get many people like you,” Xōchipilli notes.

“Do you mean immortals or something else?” Quèfēng clutches her mugs, pressing her fingers into its warmth. She can hear Xōchipilli’s grin. It is hard to see in the half light, though not nearly as unbearable as the void.

“I guess that too,” Xōchipilli shrugs. “You remind me of the

butterflies in my homeland. Beautiful and diligent, like the flowers they tend.”

Quèfēng does not know what to say and instead drinks from her cup. It is a thick drink, almost starchy in the way it sticks to her mouth.

Xōchipilli nods. “But you’re not as carefree. You have a steel to you, like a hummingbird. My cousin would like you, I think.” He hums and drinks from his own cup.

They sit there, the two of them, finishing their drinks in the hut while the daylight outside dwindles. By the time Quèfēng is done drinking, the sun is setting, and its light fills the room. “How do you do it?” she eventually asks.

“Do what?” Xōchipilli nods, caught between falling asleep and watching Quèfēng, his eyes half lidded but wide and knowing.

“How are you so ...” Quèfēng gestures. The way Xōchipilli sits without his years. He is utterly relaxed.

Xōchipilli chuckles. “I wear my immortality lightly. Humans only have so long on this earth to fret and love, but I think we are not so different. One day the world will end, and then our time will be up too. All the things that we love or hate will disappear, and then what? It has already happened many times, I assure you. Until then, there is little to do but enjoy what we can while we still can. Live freely, love freely, and forget the sad things.” He laughs. “But I think that is not so good an answer for you. You strike me as someone very serious.”

Quèfēng bows her head. “Thank you for telling me regardless.”

“Yes, yes.” Xōchipilli pulls a deep breath in his chest. “But what kind of uncle would I be if I didn’t give you some advice?”

* * *

Fènghuáng’s fingers ghost over her bass’s neck. Once upon a time, when she was still in her mortal years, someone had scoffed and told her to pick up a zither instead. “*Stay in your country, freak.*” And unfortunately, she had listened. Even more unfortunately, she had been good at it. Back then, her fingers would glide over the strings, summoning a forlorn breeze within the halls of the music department. But after graduating, there was little reason for her to keep playing. There weren’t any teachers to push her forward and she couldn’t afford more lessons anyway.

But with Quèfēng gone, Fènghuáng has had to find new ways to occupy herself, or rather old ways. It really is an absence more than anything, Fènghuáng realizes. Even when she was asleep or out of the house, Quèfēng consumed her life. It is ... relieving in a way to be free of Quèfēng. Fènghuáng is lonely, but at least it is a clear loneliness.

A comfortable loneliness, and Fènghuáng has not tried to find anyone else after Quèfēng. Angela *was* her last mortal, and even though Quèfēng has told her not to wait, Fènghuáng has not felt the need to know another person in that way. Perhaps the others were right and she was using them to fill the void in her heart that Quèfēng left. Fènghuáng does not know, but she is content.

She might not always be, but she is learning to forgive herself for that too. Immortals are far from unchanging. And as she rests her right thumb against the pickup, Fènghuáng feels that she is finally allowing herself to be somebody.

* * *

It strikes Quèfēng as she is stepping out of the carriage into the warm winter afternoon. For the first time in a very long time, she feels ... comfortable. It is an alien sensation, one that coils itself around her limbs and settles inside of her marrow, a deep pulse that shields her from the season’s chill. She realizes that it has been beside her for years, but it is only now, in the strangely clear shadows of a short day, that she notices it.

It has been five years since she has moved out to the countryside, a pitiful amount of time, one might think, to an immortal, but Quèfēng already feels like it is time to move on. To her surprise, it is not because she has grown bored with the corn fields and rundown buildings lining the streets. No, in fact the rust-worn streets still bring her a soft smile in the aberrant glow of the winter sun. There is something to the plainness before her, laid bare by afternoon. It is not pretty, but it is perfect in a way.

For these past five years, Quèfēng has been teaching at an elementary school. Nobody knows that she is immortal. She is simply one of the annual contractors assigned to the neighborhood, and her work is rote. The lessons repeat, and the paperwork and grading never cease, but Quèfēng is happy. There is something special to these tiny slices of time where she is suddenly aware of how amazing the world really is, of her students growing and living.

Becoming immortal has been too many things, but stepping down the road, Quèfēng is finally comfortable in her own skin. Instead of heading to her lease, Quèfēng walks to the local park and sits on a worn bench. This is nice, she thinks. The world is beautiful.

Perhaps, it is time to start living herself.

Fènghuáng sighs. The city has been her domain for a long time, and now, she is leaving it. A thousand years of waiting for Quèfēng and who knows how many more without her, Fènghuáng is about to set them all down. She didn't know when it snuck up on her, but now something is telling her to move. Perhaps she has been here too long. Fènghuáng has always thought of herself as a homebody, but now that Quèfēng is gone, she has begun to wonder what else has changed. Now, an impatience scratches at her legs. It burns her shins and thighs, muscles aching to carry her far away from here.

She is scared.

Or maybe excited.

It could be both things too.

All that Fènghuáng knows is that she isn't the same person she thought she was and that the city is no longer where she wants to be. Perhaps it will make things difficult for Quèfēng. After all, Fènghuáng isn't sure when, if ever, she will return to the city, and Quèfēng has no way of contacting her.

"We need a clean split."

Fènghuáng grins and traces the phantom kisses along her neck. How rarely humans act cleanly, and she has come to realize that they are very much human. Immortal, yes, but so very, very weak too.

"Don't wait for me," Fènghuáng whispers. *Okay.*

When Quèfēng returns to the city, it is empty. The few locals still inhabiting the ruins of their old house don't have much to say about Fènghuáng. Immortals rarely leave paper trails or impressions deeper than the eccentric at the end of the road. Quèfēng had expected as much, but that does not make Fènghuáng's absence any less disappointing. She isn't about to give up though. They have all the time in the world to find each other again. She just needs to keep trying.

Funny, Quèfēng thinks. Now she is the one chasing after Fènghuáng's memory. It fills her with a small kind of sadness, but that in turn gives her a small kind of joy. It reminds her of how she used to be, of the queer echoing in her chest when she discovered Fènghuáng was immortal. Maybe that was the reason the woman had been so reserved and not because she didn't feel the same way Quèfēng did. New possibilities and new problems.

Quèfēng turns around and walks away from their old house. She has an immortal to find.

One day, Fènghuáng finds a beautiful sunset. It is in the far aftermath of a cataclysm on the other side of the planet. The world is finally emerging from a small ice age, and Fènghuáng is warming her arms in the bronzed light. A long time ago, she remembers reading a book on disasters. Apparently, chemical explosions enhance the colors of the setting sun. Watching the magenta pinks and blood red oranges dye the horizon, Fènghuáng thinks it might be true.

Behind her, she hears the panicked shuffling of feet. Someone is sprinting up the staircase to join her on the observatory platform, maybe a photographer hoping to capture the sunset. She turns, half-smiling at the human's anxiousness, and a bob of messy black hair emerges from the stairs.

It is Quèfēng.

The two immortals stare at each other, Quèfēng panting and Fènghuáng stunned.

Then Quèfēng straightens and crosses the deck. Her breath is still ragged. Immortality does not confer peak athleticism, and she sprinted here as soon as she heard that a strange woman had been wandering the streets around dusk. "You know, you're a very hard woman to find." She grins, hand on her hips, as she takes in Fènghuáng's silhouette against the setting sun.

Fènghuáng smiles and shrugs. "I thought you told me not to wait."

"Fair enough," Quèfēng laughs.

Their conversation dries up, and Quèfēng has no idea what to say next. She was sure that finally seeing Fènghuáng would give her the words she needed, but now she can only pull on silence. It's not really Fènghuáng in front of her, at least not the Fènghuáng Quèfēng knew, and she isn't the same person herself either. They haven't been those people for millennia.

So it is Fènghuáng who breaks the silence. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Quèfēng sighs. It almost sounds like a chuckle. "Maybe? I don't really know." She takes the last few steps up to Fènghuáng and offers her hand. "I'm not sure if I care anymore either."

"Then how about this?" Fènghuáng places her hand in Quèfēng's. "How do you feel about us?" Her eyes glow with the molten light of the dying sun, searching Quèfēng's face. "Is it the same way that you used to?"

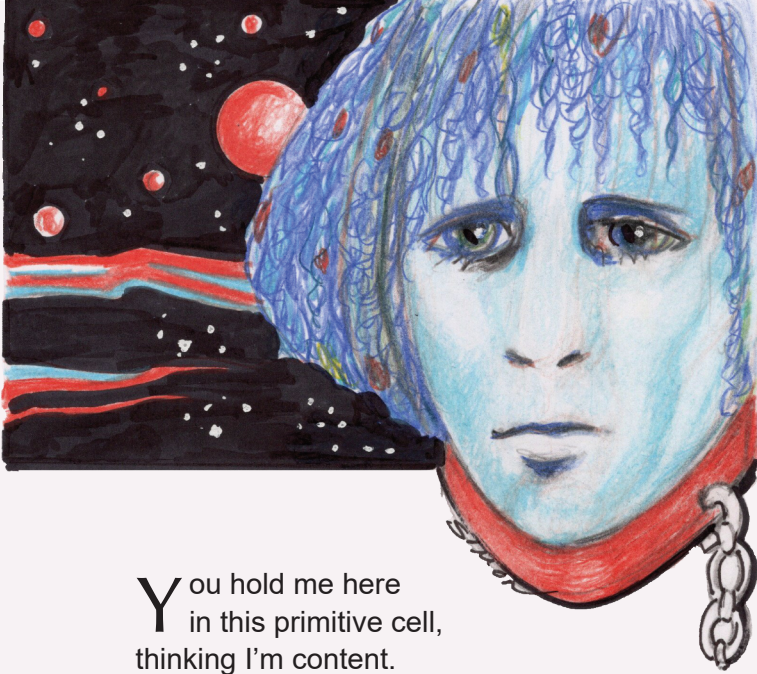
Quèfēng shakes her head, still holding Fènghuáng's hand and eyes. It has taken a long time to get here, too long, but if there is one thing the two of them can afford now, it's time. And perhaps she needed to take this long to understand why she is shaking her head at Fènghuáng's question herself. "Probably not," she smiles, and when neither of them stiffen at her reply, she knows that her next words are the right ones.

"But that doesn't mean I don't love you." Quèfēng holds out another hand and her grin widens as Fènghuáng joins with her other hand as well. "At least, I'm ready to start loving you." It has taken a long time to finally set aside the people she thought they were.

"Idiot," Fènghuáng sighs, chuckling and pulling Quèfēng into a hug. "You kept me waiting long enough."

Quèfēng buries her face in the crook of Fènghuáng's neck and wraps her hands around the other woman. "I love you too, Fènghuáng."

And Quèfēng still doesn't know just how true those words are.



Eidolon

by Marge Simon

You hold me here
in this primitive cell,
thinking I'm content.
You have no idea what I feel,
watching the people pass
beyond my cage.

A teacher brings her children
to observe and learn.
She tells them I'm a homonid,
creation of technicians who
would have the world believe
the Word of Genesis is false.

There is a movement
to have me destroyed;
they say I'm unnatural,
surely not created
by their all-holy God.
They do not understand
I'm bio-engineered.

You don't recognize this face;
you see the pigment of my skin
and will not meet my eyes,
saying they're abnormal,
for I can see in sunlight
as well as infrared,
I can even see through you!
My chest expands
to twice its size,
skin, bone and muscle,
impervious to radiation.

Shame on your imprudence!
I was made a missing link,
as *Oeeoin* or *sapiens idaltu*,
but I am neither; I am the Eve
preceding the new Adam,
forwarding evolution
two steps ahead of time.

I am the blueprint
for your future generations,
when humanity crawls forth
to step into the stars.

Wings of a Celestial

Final Instrumental

by Wormheart, with Z. Xzyruz on guitars

(A musical piece, which, unfortunately, cannot be embedded in a pdf, but can be accessed in the html version of *Penumbra* at <https://www.penumbra.com/currentissue/xzyruzWings.html>.)

Lyrics: None (instrumental)

Contributors



JOEL BISAILLON of Umbra Ludus (shadow play) focuses on illustrating dark, dramatic, bold, and colourful imagery with a flair for the fantastical. With years of tabletop gaming and delving into Hitchcock, Baum, and Lovecraft at an early age, he led his creative focus towards the dark fantasy, cosmic and American gothic horror genres.

His art has graced the pages of *Aurealis Science Fiction & Fantasy Magazine*, BYU's *Leading Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine*, *New Myths E-Zine*, *Electric Spec Magazine*, *Expanded Horizons Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Hyphenpunk*, *Penumbric Speculative Fiction Magazine*, and *The British Fantasy Society's Horizons Magazine*. As well as several renowned roleplaying, tabletop gaming, and publishing companies, including New Comet Games, Vermin Games, Blasphemy Press, Jester's Hand Publishing, Kelestia Games, Lostlorn Games, and Legendary Games.

* * *



A 2015 Nebula finalist, **BETH CATO** is the author of the cozy mystery *Cheddar Luck Next Time* as well as fantasy-like *A Thousand Recipes for Revenge*. She's a Hanford, California native now moored in Red Wing, Minnesota. She usually has one or two cats in close orbit. Find out more at BethCato.com; follow her on BlueSky at [@BethCato](https://bsky.app/profile/@BethCato) and Instagram at [@catocatsandcheese](https://www.instagram.com/catocatsandcheese).

* * *



MUZE (N. CHU) is Co-Chief-in-Editor of the *Portland Review* and a grad student at Portland State University. When not writing, they enjoy cooking, flailing around on the bass, and practicing Japanese. They have words at *Space Wizard Press*, *Zoetic Press*, and the *House of Long Shadows*. You can find them on Bluesky [@muzetrigger.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@muzetrigger.bsky.social) where they post the fantasy flash series #DiaryOfNana.

* * *



Shy and nocturnal, **JENNIFER CROW** has rarely been photographed in the wild, but it's rumored she lives near a waterfall in western New York. In the past quarter-century, her work has appeared in many print and electronic venues, including *Uncanny*, *Analog*, and anthologies like *Along Harrowed Trails* and *Under Her Skin*. A Rhysling Award winner in 2023 for her poem "Harold and the Blood-Red Crayon," she will have work in upcoming issues of *Kaleidotrope* and *Asimov's Science Fiction* as well as her poem in *Penumbric*. Those who'd like to know more about her writing can catch up with her on Bluesky: [@writerjencrow.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@writerjencrow.bsky.social).

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DEBORAH L. DAVITT was raised in Nevada, but currently lives in Houston, Texas with her husband and son. Her award-winning poetry and prose have appeared in over seventy journals, including *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, and *Light-*

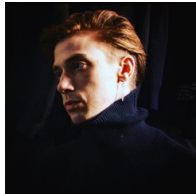
speed. For more about her work, including her poetry collections, *The Gates of Never*, *Bounded by Eternity*, *From Voyages Unreturning*, *Xenofarming*, and *To Love Unquietly*, please see www.deborahldavitt.com.

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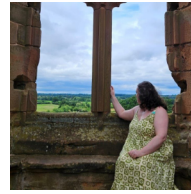
VIVIANA DE CECCO is a writer, translator, and visual artist. She works as a content writer for *Tint Journal*. She was the second-place winner of *Sunlight Press Magazine's* 2024 Photography Contest. Her visual art and photography appeared in *Zoetic Press*, *Newrosis*, *Spellbinder Magazine*, *Pink Hydra*, among others. Her fiction and translations have also appeared in various literary and speculative magazines, including *The Seize Press*, *Grim&Gilded*, *Dark Holme Publishing*, *Poets' Choice*, *Azonal Translation*, among others. Her work can be found at: <https://vivianadececco.altervista.org/>

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CECIL FENN is a writer and transmedia designer. Originally based in New York City, he worked in music studios, theatres, and funeral homes across North America and Europe before settling his creative practice in the UK. Cecil's fiction has been shortlisted for the WEM Aurora Prize and has appeared in *The Dread Machine*, *Gavagai*, *The Colored Lens*, and other literary journals. His debut novel *The Restorative Artist* will be published by Lucent Dreaming in September 2026. You can find more of his work at cecilfenn.com or follow him @cecilfenn.

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JESS GOFTON (she/her) is a British northerner originally from Middlesbrough who writes speculative fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Gwyllion Magazine*, Flame Tree Press's *Shadows on the Water* anthology, and Shacklebound Books' *Wyrms 2: An Anthology of Dragon Drabbles*, and *Haven Spec Magazine*.

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S. L. JOHNSON is a 2025 Aurealis Award finalist whose speculative fiction and poetry appear in *Analog*, *Andromeda Spaceways*, *The Colored Lens*, and elsewhere. A graduate of the Wayward Wormhole Workshop and a former editor at *Novel Slices*, she is originally from the US and now lives in Sydney, Australia. Find her on Instagram @stephaniejohnsonpoetry and Bluesky at @sljohnson.bsky.social.

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ALYCE LOMAX's fiction has appeared in multiple issues of *Gargoyle*, as well as *Maudlin House*, *Dark Horses: The Magazine of Weird Fiction*, *Coffin Bell Journal*, *The MacGuffin*, *Pindeldyboz*, and many others. *Coffin Bell Journal* nominated her short story, "A Good Night in the Neighborhood," for the Pushcart Prize in 2022. She currently has a short story in *Gargoyle Online* #13, as well as pieces upcoming in *34 Orchard* and *Macabre Magazine*. She lives in Alexandria, Va. with her husband and two cats.

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LYRA MEURER is a sentient muscle spasm with a restless hunger for writing. They live in Colorado with their husband, pet rats, and ever-growing stacks of journals and books. They have short fiction published in *Heartlines Spec*, *Tree & Stone*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly* and several anthologies.

Lyra's contemplations on Taco Bell soothsaying, early 2000s television, worldbuilding, and other bizarre phenomena, along with pictures of their doodles, can be found at <https://lyrameurer.blogspot.com/>.

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JAMES EDWARD O'BRIEN grew up in North Jersey in the US and currently resides in Queens, NY. His short fiction and poetry have been featured in *The Deadlands*, *Spunk: Art & Perspectives*, and *Metastellar*, among others. This is Jim's second appearance in *Penumbra*. You can keep tabs on Jim via Instagram @unagi_yojimbo.

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ANTHONY PANEGYRES is a Perth writer of novelettes and short stories, who enjoys both privileging nature and utilising meta-elements within his fiction. His works have appeared in both premier Australian literature journals, such as *Overland* 204 (an Aurealis Award Finalist story), *Overland* 214, and *Meanjin Quarterly*, and also internationally acclaimed 'weird lit' homes, such as *Bourbon Penn* 25 (highlighted by Ellen Datlow in her Year's Best intro and on her Recommended

Reading List) and *Bourbon Penn* 31 (also an Aurealis Award Finalist story). Some of his other story homes include the anthologies *The Best Australian Stories*, *The Year's Best Australian Fantasy & Horror Vol. 2 & 6*, and the award-winning *Bloodlines*, and *At the Edge*. A novelette of Panegyres' was recently written about in *The Conversation*, and *The Times*, as one of five Australian literary works of particular relevance to the national conversation about AI.

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BRIAN MALACHY QUINN uses watercolors, pen and ink, digital media, block prints, and etchings. As an artist he has won 23 international juried awards in last 26 months and sold 45 illustrations to date. He has always created art since early childhood. His style can be surreal for speculative fiction or literary fiction, or realistic for his fallback of lion paintings. He is compelled to create art and does so every day and finds it as a way to put aside his worries and stresses and produce "good brain chemicals".

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REEMA RAJBANSHI is the author of *Sugar, Smoke, Song* (Red Hen Press, 2020), a novel-in-stories exploring the lives of young women and immigrants in the U.S. She is also a literary scholar, currently completing a monograph on caste, and a nonfiction writer, working on an experimental travel memoir. Her most recent essay is the zuihitsu "The Dining Room or Jokes We Tell" in *Nat. Brut*. Born in Miami to parents from Assam, Rajbanshi grew up in the Bronx, then worked for a decade in California. Samples of her

publications and readings may be found at <https://linktr.ee/reemarajbanshi>. “Sirens” is an excerpt from her climate novel manuscript.

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KASIA RUNTÉ is in her third year at the University of Lethbridge in the Indigenous Health program. She loves art, but resists making it her career because she not interested in compromising her art to be commercial. Instead, she wants art to be the passion that keeps her balanced at the end of the workday in a field such as palliative care. She is often drawn to darker themes and images, partly as a form of catharsis, and partly to balance her super-cheerful pieces.

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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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HIBAH SHABKHEZ is a writer and photographer from Lahore, Pakistan. Her work has previously appeared in *Harpur Palate*,



Stirring, Forevermore, Empyrean Literary Magazine, Good River Review, and a number of other literary magazines. Studying life, languages, and literature from a comparative perspective across linguistic and cultural boundaries holds a particular fascination for her.

Linktree: <https://linktr.ee/HibahShabkhez>

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GABRIEL SHESTACK is a writer from Koreatown, Los Angeles. He majored in Political Economy and works as a Set Dresser in Film. This is his first published story.

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MARGE SIMON lives in Ocala, FL. Her works have appeared in *Pedestal Magazine, Asimov's, The Magazine of F and SF, Crannog, Silver Blade, New Myths, Daily Science Fiction, Penumbria*. She attends the ICFA annually as a guest poet/writer. A multiple Bram Stoker award winner, Marge is the second woman to be acknowledged by the SF &F Poetry Association with a Grand Master Award and has won the Elgin, Dwarf Stars and Rhysling in both categories. She also received the HWA Lifetime Achievement award in 2021. MargeSimonWrites@instagram.com

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KATHERINE SOUZA is an illustrator, writer, and game designer living in Maine. Born and raised in the South, she made the slow crawl north until she got as far as she could. While not crafting worlds and stories, she is pestering her three pet gerbils.

Her work can be found in *Cold Signal* magazine, *Hellarkey* vol. IV, and *dogyard mag*.

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GORDON SUN is a surgeon exploring the interstitial spaces within healthcare, science, and technology. His stories have appeared in *If There's Anyone Left*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Dread Machine*, *NewMyths.com*, *Permanent Flux*, *Solstitia*, *After Dinner Conversation*, *TOWER*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *Penumbra*, *Daikaijuzine*, the *Starship Blunder 2: Starship Wonder* and *Consumed* anthologies, and other publications.

* * *



IRINA TALL (NOVIKOVA) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war top-

ics. The first big series she drew was *The Red Book*, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: *Gupsophila*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, *Little Literary Living Room* and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection *The 50 Best Short Stories*, and her poem was published in the collection of poetry *The wonders of winter*.

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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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ABBY NICOLE YEE is a Filipino neurodivergent writer of speculative fiction. Her work has appeared in *Clarkesworld* and *The Philippines Graphic*. Find her online on her website (abbynicoleyee.com).

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Z. XZYRUZ has one goal: To bring you to a place beyond pain and nostalgia where dreams and reality are one. Wormheart is one of their many methods to this madness.

Learn more about Wormheart at: <https://www.metal-archives.com/bands/wormheart/3540411921>



Serpents of the Past

by Katherine Souza

(full image)